

Brigham's Day

John Gates

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With his law license in jeopardy, his marriage of twenty-seven years finished, and age and weariness crowding in on him, Brigham "Brig" Bybee is patently ill-suited to defend a murder suspect that the entire power structure of Kanab, Utah, has already judged guilty. He realizes, however, that taking the job might be a step toward recovery. Besides, what better does he have to do?

The genesis of this richly textured thriller is the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857, the actual slaughter of 120 California-bound settlers by Mormons. So barbaric was the offense and so unsatisfactory the official explanation that tormenting and potentially disruptive questions continue to fester. In Bybee's quest to clear his client, he runs head-on into these questions and finds his professional, emotional, and physical survival all in peril. Although he has finally broken with the Mormon Church, Bybee is not even close to breaking its hold on his psyche.

Bybee's hopeless assignment is further aggravated by the fact that the presiding judge has appointed a much younger and less experienced trial lawyer, Ronnie Watters, as lead counsel for the two-man defense team. Relentlessly brash and annoying, Watters is somewhat redeemed in Bybee's eyes by his hunting-dog tenacity.

Although Kanab was once a popular location for shooting western movies, it has now degenerated into a case study of small-town smugness, intrigue, and squalor. Somehow, the people who inhabit these wide open spaces have constructed lives that are suffocatingly closed in. Little wonder, then, that Bybee finds himself becoming obsessed with beautiful and elusive Zolene Swapp, the granddaughter of the man his client is charged with murdering.

Gates weaves this complicated tale with amazing clarity. He is, however, even better at creating fully fleshed characters for readers to care about or recoil from. It is a testimony to his skill that the same character can sometimes inspire both these contradictory impulses.

EDWARD MORRIS (July / August 2000)

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