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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

Buck & Jed

William Evans
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The Old West as seen in the Arizona Territory was becoming more like the settled East in the 1890s as the Reservation system took hold. Gunslingers heroic marshals and footloose cowboys were increasingly outnumbered by the starched-collar financial establishment. Author William Evans sees this adjustment as something besides progress writing: “They’d stood their ground and battled till they along with other brave men tamed the land. Now it was swamped by bandits posing as gentlemen in suits ties and spit-shined shoes whose weapons of choice were crooked lawyers forged documents payrolled politicians and hired killers.” *Buck and Jed* examines the shifting challenges of frontier life by means of what looks like a buddy adventure but one of the leads is such a moral sinkhole that real camaraderie is ruled out.

At the outset two similar acts of thoughtless killing leave a white teen named Jed and a Yavapai Indian of mixed ancestry in the care of the former’s grandfather a forward-thinking cattle rancher and physician. The grandfather adopts the talented self-collected Buck as a second grandson and heir setting up lasting conflict. As he reaches adulthood Jed’s warped behavior runs from thieving cheating at gambling and extolling bigotry to animal torture and abandoning pregnant young women who he first seduces with lies. The grandfather hopes Buck’s outstanding work ethic decency and equanimity will rub off on Jed fervently believing that “Those granted a second chance knew the significance of compassion and forgiveness.”

Buck’s father is a former slave who escaped and became a Yavapai warrior. His point of origin is said to have been a Georgia plantation in some passages and Virginia elsewhere. As is common to Westerns women receive scant page time though one notable female presence here is Buck’s college-educated white mother who is captured by the tribe but later becomes an object of respect.

Worked into the narrative are bits of inadvertent education on subjects not covered in schools including the mechanics of milking venomous snakes and sustainable methods of managing large cattle operations. The author has a good handle on rituals such as the sweat lodge ceremony and the Sun Dance. Less impressive is the implausible movie-lot dialogue coming from the Indians. *Buck and Jed* sidesteps overdone plot lines endemic to this form and stakes out substantial positions on racial and religious intolerance. It serves primarily to entertain with color and obstacles rather than firmly pursue the complex arcs of character development one looks for in a drama.
TODD MERCER (July 22, 2008)

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