

Coyote: A Jessica James Mystery

Kelly Oliver

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Coyote is an entertaining, fast, and refreshing mix of murder, greed, philosophy, mystery, and woman power.

Coyote: A Jessica James Mystery is the very funny yet profoundly dark second novel in Kelly Oliver's series about the "cowgirl philosopher."

Jessica (Jesse) James, a Nietzsche-quoting doctoral student of philosophy, is home in Whitefish, Montana, for her summer job at Glacier National Park. At a picnic, James's cousin Mike hints that a fatal accident at the local mill wasn't so accidental. The next day, before James has a chance to quiz him about his suspicions, an accident involving a debarking machine claims Mike's life. James concludes that two deadly accidents in as many weeks cannot be a coincidence and sets out to solve the mystery of the deaths, unearthing clues to familial secrets long buried along the way.

During her search, she encounters oil company Knight Industries' corporate rapacity; Blackfeet from the local reservation—both activists who want to protect the land and a councilman who refers to fracking as "sovereignty by the barrel"; the Earth Liberation Front (ELF); human trafficking of underage girls; governmental corruption; forest fire; and a cult called Church Complete and Victorious. There's a lot going on in *Coyote*, but Oliver makes it work.

Coyote is fast off the blocks and never slows down. Oliver conjures a dark, atmospheric picture of Whitefish, a small, down-at-the-heels town of lumberjacks, sawmills, and trailer parks, caught between a need for jobs and the desire to reject logging and tourism to protect its natural charms.

James is a fascinating character. She is a blend of velvet and buckskin, like her outfit. Ambitious and bold, curious and thoughtful, James is Harriet the Spy all grown up. A "nerdy alien among the shaggy old hippies, neo-Nazi skinheads, redneck cattle ranchers, and gun-toting Libertarians," James still loves her hometown, even though she must use yogic breathing exercises to deal with the place.

The large cast of supporting characters is diverse and complex, especially Lolita Durchenko, an Amazonian Russian biker nicknamed the Tsarina of Poker ("think Megan Fox meets Bruce Lee"), and prickly political activist Kimi Redfox, a Blackfeet woman out to rescue her sisters from the traffickers. The many antagonists of *Coyote* are not as well developed as the protagonists, and their dialogue is often that of cartoon villains from the late 1960s. Some of them carry the name Dalton, evoking the Old West outlaws Jesse James and the Dalton Gang.

Oliver's writing is witty. She describes cousin Mike as "usually so laid-back he was prone." James rolls off the couch after a bad night's sleep and catches her image in the glass coffee table. "She tousled her dirty blonde hair to increase the bedhead effect, administered Visine drops to decrease the redeye effect," Oliver writes, "and pinched her pale cheeks to counteract the corpse effect."

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MICHELLE NEWBY (October 13, 2016)

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