

Dark South: And Other Strange Tales

William T. Stewart

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The theme of disenfranchisement in the American South runs through this ghoulish short story collection featuring ghosts and gore.

Mystics, mummies, ghostly apparitions, and an array of unhinged characters up to assorted no good deliciously color *Dark South and Other Strange Tales*, William T. Stewart's collection of fifty-six disturbing and splendidly engaging short stories.

All fifty-six stories are set in the South, and the action often, but not always, occurs on hot summer nights. This lends a breathless, sweaty fervor that further ratchets up the often twisted suspense. Each story is quite short, typically eight to twelve pages long, making this a perfect summer vacation or backyard hammock read.

Though there are definite themes throughout the collection—the protagonists are typically young males with strong moral character, and the antagonists are often people or spirits whose deeds stem from their being disenfranchised or deeply wronged—the tales are set broadly across time from the nineteenth century to the present day. Each story differs enough in plot and character that similarities don't grow tiresome. The plot arcs are well constructed, sometimes ending with rational conclusions, sometimes left hanging with unexplained phenomena.

Stewart's writing is clean, crisp, and fast paced, with a good infusion of humor despite the otherwise dark content, and the author displays a good command of Southern dialect and mannerisms. Stewart also successfully brings in just the right amount of gore; violence and bloodshed often significantly contribute to the plot tension, but not at an overly unsettling level. Because this is the South, racial divides figure in; mention of lynchings, slaves, Klansmen, the Civil War, and segregation all add depth.

There are distinguished places—such as the Hotel Le Grande in New Orleans—as well as undistinguished swamps, remote bayou bridges, and dark forest trails. The stories span a host of states, from Mississippi to Louisiana to Texas. The various settings, from river bottoms to New Orleans's French Quarter to crumbling antebellum mansions, speak distinctively of both the modern and the old South.

Situations, meanwhile, run the gamut from long-ago disappearances to recent unsolved murders, frightening nightmares, ghostly visits, premonitions, black cat crossings, sudden strings of deaths, robbed graves, perilous chases and shootouts, double-crossings, century-old secrets, hidden treasure, poisonings, séances, and general madness.

Protagonists turn to old newspaper clippings, local historians, and elderly nursing home residents to find explanations; some answers, in the end, remain elusive.

Some, but not all, of the stories have a moralistic bent, with villains receiving their due for crimes, or simply for bad behavior. Motivations for bad deeds range from economic despair to love triangles to simple greed.

With its rich cultural and historical heritage and distinct rural and urban places, the South has near-bottomless potential for weird and disturbing fiction. Stewart successfully taps into that with this collection that is both disquieting and thoroughly entertaining.

KARYN SAEMANN (July 22, 2014)

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