



Elmwood

Ian Karraker

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Detailed, atmospheric, and eerie, Elmwood is a psychologically intriguing horror novel about a string of cold case murders.

In Ian Karraker's chilling horror novel *Elmwood*, a detective is told a tale of trauma, brutality, and the emotional hauntings that monsters are made of.

David is used to cold case investigations going nowhere. When he arrives at a facility for the criminally insane, he is sure his interview with Tom, a witness to a string of murders twenty years prior, will be futile. Tom has told the same story countless times before—not often to people who believe him. Nevertheless, David needs information about the serial killer dubbed the Highwayman. Thus, Tom takes David into the depths of his memory, through the terror of what happened to him, Will, and Elise.

The story is told in a nonlinear fashion, switching back and forth between different characters and time periods. Tom hints from the beginning that he knows much that he should not be able to know. This leads to some credibility issues, including around how he knows the pieces of the story from Will's and Elise's points of view and is able to relay them to David.

The prose is detailed, atmospheric, and eerie, following along as David takes in the twisted trees and dilapidated grounds of the facility and interviews his witness in 1999; as a young soldier makes life-or-death decisions in the war fields of Vietnam in 1968; and as Tom, Will, and Elise try to survive whatever is responsible for savage attacks in Elmwood in 1978. The imagery, especially in the scenes depicting the woods of Vermont, is compelling, though some of the book's winding sentences stall. Still, the plot is active and enthralling, and the climax delivers in terms of its action, though the ending is also left open to interpretation and some questions remain unanswered.

The multiple points of view reveal people's quirks and histories well: Will has a childlike propensity to imagine himself as a superhero; as a child, Tom is quiet, strange, and desperate for friends, driving his actions as the creepiness in Elmwood unfolds; and as an adult, Tom is slippery. Questions arise as to why he wants to share more than he has in the past. David, however, functions most as a vehicle for Tom's story to be delivered; he is less fleshed out on his own merits. Still, the theme of trauma is prevalent throughout: each person experiences their own, and as Tom notes to David before beginning his tale, "A lot of messed up stuff happened there. It's no wonder some of it followed people home."

A detective interviews a key witness in an attempt to solve a brutal cold case in the gory horror novel *Elmwood*.

LEAH WEBSTER (April 29, 2023)

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