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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ GENERAL FICTION

Ghost Dancing

William Wesley
BookSurge
Unknown $0.00 (pp)
978-1-4392-7107-0

Health care is on the minds of most Americans this year, as the debate about who should pay for what ebbs and flows across the country. Physician William Wesley addresses the human side of the dilemma in his novel about a two-year-old Paiute girl who arrives at a poorly staffed emergency room in rural California.

Dr. Hunter Liddell isn't trained in emergency medicine. Nor has he worked in any other emergency rooms where he might have found support and advice. But as the sole doctor at Inyo District Hospital, he does his best and follows the sage advice of Dr. Albert Mendel, a convicted felon who acts as an EMT in a county desperate for decent medical care.

When tragedy strikes, Dr. Liddell finds himself at the heart of a lawsuit that exposes how badly the health insurance and legal systems fail many of the people they're supposed to protect. As part of the attorney general's personal political agenda, Dr. Liddell is accused of murder; his potential conviction could scare away other doctors from coming to work in such a rural area, leaving the poor community even more miles away from good health care.

Wesley writes with obvious knowledge about, and passion for, the inner workings of the health care system. The scenes that take place in the emergency room are gripping and authentic, and that same narrative drive continues in the courtroom. His characters are thoroughly imagined and well balanced, and only rarely does the dialogue slip into clichéd platitudes that are the danger when writing an earnest plot based on well-known, heated topics.

Two areas stand out as failing to reach the high standards of the rest of the book. The book is narrated by the convicted doctor, who spends the bulk of the action behind bars with no easy access to the other main characters. Therefore, when the narrative is interrupted with a first-person observation, the result is jarring instead of illuminating. How could Dr. Mendel know obscure details from scenes in the courtroom, Dr. Liddell's private meetings with his lawyers, or events atop a mountain?

Wesley also loses momentum towards the end of the book when Dr. Liddell suffers yet another catastrophe. Wesley might do better to practice moderation in the torture of his main character; readers will struggle to swallow such obvious celestial punishment.

Overall, *Ghost Dancing* is an entertaining, smart book about an issue that touches us all.

ANDI DIEHN (November 9, 2010)

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