

Ghosts of Wyoming: Stories

Alyson Hagy

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In this fine new collection, Alyson Hagy reminds us that not all of America has been tamed. There are places still untouched, wild spaces dotted by tiny towns that haven't divorced their pioneer roots. Hagy digs deep into the soul of Wyoming, seeking out the people who live on the borders of civilization: cowboys, outlaws, madmen, thieves, and laborers. Her stories, evocative of Annie Proulx or Bonnie Jo Campbell, give voice to the citizens of this rough territory. This is a side of life rarely seen in contemporary fiction, and rarely done justice.

Hagy's strength is her willingness to grapple with the uncomfortable facts of back-country life. Her characters all wear their flaws like badges. They murder, lie, swear. They drink and drive. However, rather than err on the side of caricature, Hagy treats her characters with dignity. A bullrider drops a puppy onto the highway, only to offer money for the veterinarian. A journalist with questionable morals tries to trace an acquaintance, learning that he is both more and less than the sum of his stories. At each turn, *Ghosts of Wyoming* defies expectation as Hagy deftly spins the thread in unforeseen directions.

If there is a weakness in *Ghosts*, it's the absence of female voices. Hagy errs on the side of gruff masculinity, choosing male narrators. It's a man's world, the frontier, and Hagy pushes its roughness to the believable limit, her grizzled, denim-coated men doing all the talking. This fits with the reader's expectation of Wyoming—it is Marlboro Country, after all. But the female narration comes secondhand, and aside from a few examples, feels limited in scope.

The women, when they do speak, are as rough as men. In "The Little Saint of Hoodoo Mountain," Livia, learning that she may have lost her father, is gripped by the elemental senses that flow through *Ghosts*. She speaks, "her tongue fat with spit."

'He'll come back, Ma,' Livia said, lullabying her words. 'It's just one day. He'll be back.'

'Oh, I don't think so. That part of our lives is over.' Livia tried not to hear the pitch of naked pleading in her mother's voice. Connie's eyes were as hot and floating as her candles. Livia's heart twisted, then drummed.

Woven together, all of these voices create a vibrant, realistic landscape. *Ghosts of Wyoming* is a fine example of honest, gritty fiction. Without flinching, it shows the reader the imperfections of a place and its history, and the rare places in the human heart. (February) Claire Rudy Foster
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