

Growing up Dead in Texas

Stephen Graham Jones

M P Publishing (Jun 12, 2012)

Softcover \$14.95 (254pp)

978-1-84982-154-4

Fires that start in harvested and packaged modules of cotton behave quite differently than the fires that consume other types of crops; it takes the slightest ember from a cigarette butt that isn't entirely stamped out to light a strand of cotton, which can smolder for hours or days before burning the cotton from the inside out. Stephen Graham Jones explains this to his readers early on in his new novel, and that is no accident. The slow burn that starts from within, and which goes unnoticed until far too late is an apt metaphor for the story he has to tell.

Jones concerns himself with a small-town community in West Texas. While much of the product in this area is oil, which has made many of their fellow Texans wealthy, Jones's characters are cotton farmers, depending on a good crop from year to year in order to get by. As with any farming community, a crop fire would be disastrous, and when, in fact, the cotton does burn, a tragic chain of events is set in motion.

Jones's conceit in this novel is that he is the narrator and is vacillating between writing a novel or a work of nonfiction to explain the events that occurred in his youth in West Texas. The savvy reader is always kept on their toes by the question of the extent to which the novel is entirely fiction—is Jones really interviewing all these people from his “past” to get at what happened, or is it a clever conceit? While this may sound irritating, it does in fact provide a light-hearted counterpoint to the overarching pathos in the book.

And there is pathos, and brutality, and violence aplenty in this book. Though never gratuitous, the sheer amount of horrific accidents that take place do call for a suspension of disbelief slightly beyond what a novel normally requires. Jones paints a sobering picture of the dangers of cotton farming, the fallout from mistakes people make in crucial moments, and the ways in which revenge is exacted in a community that is on the edge of losing its sole means of subsistence. It is Jones's capacity to show how compassion and the longing for redemption are as primal as the desire for vengeance that puts this book above the standard “I'm going to go back and figure out what really happened” type of novel, although the intrigue and careful revealing of secrets also adds to the book's appeal.

DANIEL COFFEY (July 10, 2012)

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