

Heaven's Crooked Finger

Hank Early

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With his surprising new work of hillbilly noir, Hank Early has established a solid foundation for a new crime series.

With *Heaven's Crooked Finger*, Hank Early uses a mystery as a vehicle to dissect fundamentalist religiosity and explore themes of familial love, patriarchal oppression, racial tension, and systematic violence.

Earl Marcus is a private detective in Charlotte, North Carolina, who has refused to go home to the Georgia mountains for three decades. He even missed his father's funeral. Then he receives a photograph of his father, time-stamped after the date of his supposed death.

The photograph arrives courtesy of local sheriff's deputy Mary, whose dying grandmother once gave Earl refuge after his father kicked him out. Back in Georgia, Earl is confronted by deaths, disappearances, and beliefs that his father, the snake-handling pastor of the Church of the Holy Flame, "ascended" after his death.

This seamless yet complex narrative employs incidents from Earl's youth, including the seminal event of Earl being bitten by a poisonous cottonmouth snake. To his father, the bite marked Earl as an unrepentant sinner.

Earl's father, RJ, proves to be the strongest, most nuanced character in the strong cast. Elsewhere, the malevolence of fundamentalism is represented by a Holy Flame member who is "taller than a tree" and whose "eyes look like glass." Earl is a cynical observer, damaged emotionally by his upbringing. Mary is half white and stands on uncertain ground in the racist backcountry. She and Earl uncover mysteries surrounding local young women—some who have gone missing, some who returned home brutalized, all who are silent.

Laced with cringe-inspiring descriptions of deadly reptiles—"a living wall of the creatures, so entwined they pulsed as one great heart, an organ whose arteries had wrapped it in a blood-black knot"—the novel's rapid pace hurries toward a conclusion that is surprisingly unexpected, one perhaps at the edge of believability.

While *Heaven's Crooked Finger* is more hillbilly noir than classic Southern literature, Hank Early has established a solid foundation for a new crime series.

GARY PRESLEY (November/December 2017)

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