

Hollow

Owen Egerton

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Hollow is a work with an animate, vibrant, and awe-inducing core, in which untroubled faith is revealed to be a frequent foil.

While Owen Egerton's *Hollow* begins with a creed—ex-professor Oliver's declaration that he believes the Earth to be hollow—its wry and emotionally raw pages reveal the dangers of absolute belief, even as they reach for understanding, either real or illusory.

Hollow follows Oliver after the dissolution of his life's security. His son dies in infancy; his community suspects that he is culpable; his university job disappears. After his marriage, too, proves to be less a rock than a briefly safe stop, Oliver winds up living in a backyard shack and frequenting homeless shelters for sustenance.

Oliver maintains one treasure from his past life, though—a love of books. They are how he meets his best friend, Lyle, an earnest devotee of the Hollow Earth Theory who convinces Oliver to cultivate a new kind of faith, in a world beneath the Earth's crust. With need, Oliver subscribes to the notion and finds that he may soon be on an expedition the likes of which his previous, rational incarnation would never understand.

Egerton's pages fluctuate between extremes, from Oliver's insurmountable grief and guilt to the calculated wonder of Dr. Horner's Hollow Earth propositions. The polished, academic discussions of faith that precede Oliver's loss serve as a provocative counterpoint to the unhinged atmospheres in which he finds himself afterward: battling seedy characters in hospice settings, stockpiling adventure gear for a trip to the Arctic, and depending on a former student at the shelter for a lifeline. Up becomes down; fiction becomes fact; "crazy" becomes a place of refuge.

Characters on the edge—who wrestle daily with death, criminality, or even madness—wind up seeming more anchored than those who think they've got it all figured out. Rich questions about how and why people construct meaning arise in the wake of the novel's traumas and revelations. Conflagrant developments pave the way for new possibilities. The novel stops short of stripping faith of meaning, but it does reveal it to be a frequent foil.

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MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (Religion 2017)

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