



Honey from the Lion

Matthew Neill Null

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Well-drawn characters and a rich prose style make this a strong historical debut.

With his debut novel, *Honey from the Lion*, Matthew Neill Null crafts a rich narrative about a team of timber workers who plan a violent general strike amid the deadly working conditions of the early twentieth century. The story is memorable because Null establishes himself as a writer with a rich prose style and a flair for world building worthy of a genre novelist.

Cur, the protagonist, begins the story still in the army, and the novel tracks his attempts to make a life for himself afterward, mostly through his relationship with his fellow “timberwolves.” What really makes the book work is the supporting cast and the interesting backstories they include: the shifting loyalties, the world weariness, the loss of faith in institutions.

Null deftly touches on many aspects of his chosen historical period, from the role of the church in a rural town to the clash between labor and capital. The people involved, from a preacher trying to make his flock leave church to a woman living under an assumed name and questioning the fate of her long-missing husband, are well drawn. Most are introduced through their relationship with Cur, but their stories do not always depend on him, as the book checks in on them separately. All the characters and themes interact naturally, creating a meaningful sense of time and place.

Null has a knack for descriptive prose, with sentences like “The cold kept him through the night, his face gone the color of candles—the skin looked as if it would take a thumbprint.” A good amount of research was clearly involved in crafting the novel; the little details of daily life enhance the work. The final chapters are particularly strong, including a beautiful sequence involving Cur and other men stuck in a snowstorm while their loyalties are questioned, and while a mountain lion hunts nearby.

Honey from the Lion is a genuine work of literary fiction with a variety of characters and strong writing. The combined depth and breadth of the story makes it memorable.

JEFF FLEISCHER (Winter 2016)

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