

## Iniquities of Gulch Fork

**Bob Smith**

**Sara Rhodes**

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*Realistic depictions of Ozark life and surviving memories of war make this novel compelling.*

Sara Rhodes and Bob Smith's *Iniquities of Gulch Fork* is the believable story of vulnerable people falling prey to a con man, addiction, and illness in a seemingly quiet Arkansas town that, under the surface, harbors plenty of hate.

Although he suffers from PTSD and debilitating neuropathy caused by exposure to Agent Orange, Vietnam veteran Rob Dean is not easily silenced. He is determined to fight back against Smokey Jones, a drug dealer who props himself up as a preacher and Good Samaritan to bilk Rob and other ill and elderly neighbors out of their savings. With the help of his tenacious certified nursing assistant Samantha, Rob learns more about Jones's dark dealings, which include connections to a dangerous Mexican meth cartel.

According to back cover copy, the novel is autobiographical in nature. The writers' experience with the subject matter is evident in their authentic descriptions of disability, war, the medical profession, and life in a small Ozark mountain town rocked by the ravages of methamphetamine addiction. Rob Dean's character is developed through detailed flashbacks of his days in Vietnam and present-day accounts of deceptive doctors that make it easy to understand why his most trusted friend these days is a cat. Dialogue is also pitch perfect at times, helping to depict realistic relationships between Sam and her husband, mother, and father, who is also a haunted war veteran relying on alcohol and prescription pain medication to keep his memories in check.

This authenticity is somewhat compromised by the unnecessary use of obviously fictional names for real Arkansas towns, like Stone City, which is clearly a stand-in for Little Rock, the state's capital. Likewise, essentially solid writing is sometimes weighed down by an overabundance of superfluous modifiers and literary devices more often associated with poetry. For example, passages don't always mesh well with the overall tone of the novel's prose, as with "This year the Ozark Mountain autumn waited patiently as summer lingered... . Even the sumacs, whose scarlet costumes first announce summer's departure, remained unchanged."

Brief forays into issues including child sexual abuse and Veteran's Affairs doctors taking bribes from chemical companies also slow the plot's pace while barely brushing over the complexities of such problems. The last chapters of the novel, while they reveal the fate of Smokey Jones, leave many unanswered questions about both his victims and his partners in crime.

*Iniquities of Gulch Fork* offers a realistic look at life in a small mountain town and a closeup of the trials and tribulations of a Vietnam veteran seeking justice.

CHARLENE OLDHAM (October 4, 2016)

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