

Jasper Spring

James T. Hughes

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This novel reaffirms that, although bad things happen, ultimately goodness shines through.

James T. Hughes's *Jasper Spring* portrays the enduring strength of relationships, though a pallor of gloom also hangs over this story like the smoke from the forest fire that consumes much of the focus of the main characters.

Alice and Tucker are high school classmates in the rural West. Tucker inherits his family ranch, and he and Alice are married. The two begin to build their life together, aided by their trusted, talented, and indispensable border collie, Tommie—truly a principal character in the novel. Alice's miscarriages are set in deep contrast to the life all around the couple, until, as if by divine intervention, a young boy, Ray, comes into their lives.

Tucker and Alice are shown to be the salt of the earth: hard working and honest. Their marriage is a practical choice, but they make a strong and resilient team. In contrast, Ray's mother, April, is abusive, shiftless, and irresponsible. In Tucker's eyes, April is but a child. She is on the periphery of Ray's life and plays out that part on the edge of the story. She appears sporadically before disappearing altogether, and she remains an enigma throughout.

Ray is a character at a crossroads—aware of his mother's shortcomings, and attracted to Tucker and Alice's way of life. Ray risks his own safety while helping Alice and Tucker, a sign of his devotion to them.

These characters are, by and large, decent folks shown to try their best. They work hard, love and help each other, and contribute to the community. This is a story without a conclusive end, though. A dramatic fire is put out; there are details of a later resolution, but there no closure is provided.

A lengthy novel, *Jasper Spring* is almost an epic. Every nuance in the story is minutely examined, including pages on the way one should go about picking out a dog, from driving to the place where the breeder is to evaluating the various aspects of the tiny pups. The story moves slowly and makes use of a passive voice, a style that encourages pondering over meanings. The presentation of the book is greatly enhanced by line drawings interspersed throughout.

Jasper Spring is a story that honors traditional family values in a positive, feel-good way. It is a reaffirmation that, although bad things happen, ultimately goodness shines through.

JOHN SENGER (April 20, 2017)

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