

Jesse James and the Secret Legend of Captain Coytus

Alex Mueck

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Madcap hijinks in the Wild West make this irreverent historical comedy a must-read.

One of the most celebrated villains of the Wild West rides again in *Jesse James and the Secret Legend of Captain Coytus*, an irreverent historical comedy from Alex Mueck featuring smoke and mirrors, romance, revenge, second chances, and one Mexican treasure heist.

As the newly appointed chairman of the history department, Harvard's Professor Gladstone has read and graded numerous thesis papers, but none quite like the novel submitted by party boy and jokester Ulysses Hercules Baxter. Convinced that his sources are impeccable and groundbreaking, Baxter defends his work as he relates the unbelievable tale of Captain Coytus and the "truth" behind the many exploits of the James brothers.

The hallowed halls of Harvard and Professor Gladstone's dusty rare book collection give way to the turmoil of the Civil War in 1864 Missouri, where the infamous outlaws are gaining strength. In a satire of sorts, "the Bushwhackers were like a band of land pirates minus the parrot and cool accents." Nothing is safe from the biting wit and commentary of the mysterious vigilante Captain Coytus, including the explosive political climate, attitudes regarding slavery, and the treatment of women.

Colorful characters crop up throughout, and while it's safe to assume that Butch Dyke and Rod Ryder are fictional, when thrown next to the likes of known historical figures Dick Liddil and Wood Hite, it makes the possibility of cowardly Deputy Richard Less and Willy Small all the more believable. The mash-up of facts and tongue-in-cheek fiction creates a fun alternate truth behind the "soon-to-be most famous outlaw in America."

Baxter, the author of the questionable thesis, claims to reveal the true story not only of Jesse James, but also of the disappearance of American satirist Ambrose Bierce and the whereabouts of Maximillian's gold, both of Mexican lore: "I'm like Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and Shaggy, Scooby, and the rest of the meddling kids all rolled into one." The plot is full of madcap hijinks as well as some surprisingly serious and tender moments, but loses focus a few times, as Captain Coytus is easily distracted and tends to repeat his favorite jokes and pranks wherever he goes.

History buffs, particularly those focused on the Civil War era, will want to experience the alternate reality of *Jesse James and the Legend of Captain Coytus*. An appreciation for cheeky humor and sexual innuendo is a must, as Captain Coytus seems to be directly channeling Van Wilder and Monty Python at times. If only more history books and thesis papers were written with such liveliness and fun.

PALLAS GATES MCCORQUODALE (April 21, 2016)

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