

## Lord of California

**Andrew Valencia**

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*This dystopian novel is poetic even in its austerity.*

Andrew Valencia's dystopian *Lord of California* is set in rural, isolated California a few decades after it disbands from the United States. When Elliot Temple dies, each of his five wives learn of his deep duplicity. They and their many children must band together to protect their land and livelihoods.

The book is organized into three narratives, each from a different child of Elliot's. It begins with thirteen-year-old Ellie's astute and blunt perspective. Her brother Anthony's section is punctuated by stream-of-consciousness rants with inspired lyrical lines, like "Forgive me for being invigorated by unclean things. Forgive the rifle strap, forgive the kill" that touch on his spiritual struggle.

This storytelling method succeeds thanks to the novel's plain eloquence and the complex vulnerability of its characters. Simple moments of camaraderie with Ellie and Anthony seem ordinary, but they are poignantly momentous for the siblings. At a school dance, the two quiet outsiders skip out to eat Chinese takeout and watch their favorite show together.

Another portion is told through Elliot Jr.'s perspective. It is marked by dark humor, as the younger Elliot's bleak world of aging prostitutes and vodka binges is offset by his cleverness and perceptive recognition that performance is everything.

But Elliot's narrative also quickly devolves into a delivery of his father's deplorable philosophy. He sees himself as a lord burdened with reigning over his lesser serfs, reaping the benefits while they till the land. Elliot Sr. is an unforgivable narcissist, and it is at once riveting and uncomfortable to watch his descent until his death.

The implications of a disbanded United States are the backdrop for the novel, but beyond a broad-strokes condemnation of Elliot's greed, it all feels rather politically tone deaf, though real-life secession talk was revived following the 2016 presidential election. This dystopia does not overtly criticize current society, despite connections to it.

An understated dissection of the intersections of familial ties and morality, *Lord of California* is poetic even in its austerity.

PAIGE VAN DE WINKLE (January/February 2018)

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