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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

Lyin' Like a Dog

R. Harper Mason
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Unknown $9.95 (176pp)
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In Lyin' Like a Dog, the sequel to The Red Scarf, R. Harper Mason takes readers to 1940s' America and the village of Norphlet, Arkansas. Richard, the story's protagonist, relives his twelfth birthday and a year of adventure shared with his best friend, John Clayton Reed. The two boys traverse the rural landscape, which bears similarities to the author's home in El Dorado, Arkansas. They collect funny books, play tricks on their neighbors, and spend several dark nights uneasily camping in the woods after listening to old Uncle Hugh's ghost stories. On one of their escapades, the boys trespass onto an isolated property. Shots ring out and they race for safety. When the curious boys return, the adventure turns serious.

The story is told in a folksy voice. "Shoot, birthdays," Mason writes, "they ain't no big deal. Ya know why? Well, let me tell you just what I think about birthdays—they's just for rich kids." Words such as "heck," "shoot," and "whoa" pepper the dialogue at an annoying rate. When the author drops the affected speech and allows his own voice to shine through, the storytelling rises to rival the best. The author has a knack for hooking the reader by setting a pace, laying the groundwork, adding suspense, and then telling a good story. For example, Richard explains:

> *…Just about that time Momma spilled just a couple of drops of the red food coloring she was using to make the frosting pink into the sink, and, wow, all the water in the whole entire sink turned red. I guess nothing would've come of it except that Daddy walked back in the kitchen, and he…mentioned stupid Homer Ray was gonna be baptized that night. Heck, red food coloring, a bunch of water, and sorry Homer Ray just seemed to light up my mind, and I started smiling.*

The book never lacks for humor, childish pranks, and the pastoral innocence of a couple of country boys coming of age. Mixed in with the comic happenstances, the chores, the daily life, and the childhood memories are wise words, deep emotions, and memorable characters, such as Uncle Hugh. This old hermit is the vehicle by which the author introduces the underlying theme of the novel based on scripture: "When ye have done it to the least of these, ye have done it unto me."

The yarns and stories of the two boys' adventures, the colloquial phrases, and the small town setting may remind readers of Mark Twain's characters Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer. Richard and John Clayton fall short of these classic characters, but they are likeable and resourceful and convey the innocence and integrity of an era just before World War II ended and life and the economy changed drastically.

This is a story that readers of all ages can enjoy, and a good book to read aloud—if readers can overlook the annoying dialogue tics. *Lyin' Like a Dog* evokes nostalgic smiles and a sense of wellbeing.
DAWN GOLDSMITH (July 27, 2010)

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