

Marvel and a Wonder

Joe Meno

Akashic Books (Sep 1, 2015)

Hardcover \$29.95 (336pp)

978-1-61775-393-0

Meno has written a book that honors the values of old men and exposes their prejudices, where the young transcend their apathy to claim a fractured future.

Marvel and a Wonder, the compelling new novel by Joe Meno, is a character-driven story of loss in America's heartland. It's a story of flawed characters and a landscape that, despite occasional beauty, has been used up and passed over.

Jim Falls, age seventy-one, and his grandson Quentin, a childish sixteen, uneasily coexist on the family chicken farm in Indiana. The grandfather's wife has died; the boy's mother has abandoned him. The farm is in debt and the local town is failing. Even Jim's attempt to do the right thing by helping a neighbor widow—and soften the taciturn bleakness with female companionship—ends in failure. Then a beautiful white racehorse is mysteriously delivered to the farm. Has their luck changed? But this is not a feel-good, come-from-behind story. The horse is stolen one evening by two brothers, and Jim and Quentin set chase, determined not to lose their chance at a fresh start.

Once Jim and Quentin are on the road, a handful of other characters are introduced, all involved with the horse, and the point of view shifts rapidly within chapters. The main antagonist is Rick West, the violent ranch hand who has been tasked with collecting both the horse and his employer's runaway granddaughter. The most touching scenes are the one-sided dialogues where Quentin talks to his grandfather, struggling to maintain a connection and overcome his fear.

As with other quest narratives, the magnificent horse, now confined to a trailer with its physical needs largely ignored, focuses the plot and serves as a symbol. Quentin wonders if the horse is God; Jim believes it was sent by his dead wife. For everyone, it offers the possibility of escape.

Joe Meno is the editor of *Chicago Noir: The Classics* and the author of best-selling novels including *Office Girl*, *Hairstyles of the Damned*, and *The Boy Detective Fails*. With *Marvel and a Wonder*, he has written a book that honors the values of old men and exposes their prejudices, where the young transcend their apathy to claim a fractured future. It's a book that despite its damaged characters consistently reaches for excellence: a wonder.

KAREN ACKLAND (Winter 2016)

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