



Massacre at Pilgrim's Pass

Tim Lister

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Tim Lister takes on the Wild American West in his novel *Massacre at Pilgrims' Pass*. The piece begins as Sylvester a Harvard-educated surgeon accompanies his sister Mimi to her betrothed. On the way their wagon is attacked by Cheyenne warriors and Sylvester is left for dead while his sister is captured. In his search for Mimi Sylvester collides with people from vastly different backgrounds. He is befriended by an old gunfighter named Luke and his partner Josh and the three men work together to not only find Mimi but to understand one another.

The novel's structure amplifies its effects: the chapters are bite-sized and similar to a film's montage or quick cuts from scene to scene. This technique is a smart one: with condensed sections the reader is constantly moving from moment to moment perspective to perspective. The structure creates a strong momentum for the novel.

The relationships between the characters and the fast-paced plot will bring readers the most joy. Lister does a nice job of showing how unlikely characters can not only meet but form bonds. The true love of this book seems not between romantic counterparts but between the old gunfighter Luke and his partner Joshua a black man. Their relationship rings true because it is flawed: their loyalty is gruff and tender but complicated.

This book falters only when it takes itself too seriously. For example when Sylvester's sister is taken captive and he wakes up to coyotes eating the dead around him Lister starts off strong: the portrayed scene is rife with tension and chaos. However instead of allowing the plot to carry the piece Lister moves into the mental state of Sylvester and writes that the protagonist "slips into the abyss of despair." Such obvious pronouncements or overstatements are too common and Lister seems so focused on driving the plot that he forgets the art of subtlety.

Additionally the novel seems slightly dated with regard to its portrayal of the American Indians. Lister tries to diversify the warriors (some are kind some are not) and uses Mimi's fiancée as an image of ignorance but the Indians are still exoticized and fall into familiar territory.

The American West was wild but Lister delves into the bonds of loyalty that kept people alive. The novel's action will keep readers on the edge of their seats and the clarity with which the author writes is refreshing: he doesn't overdescribe or dwell on images. Instead like many confrontations these characters find themselves in things happen as fast as they can and if you're lucky you can anticipate or notice them as they come.

LISA BOWER (May 7, 2008)

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