



Maze of Blood: A Novel

Marly Youmans

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Simultaneously poetic and economic, this is a layered and complex exploration of human existence and the experiences that mold a person.

Maze of Blood reads almost like a poem. Marly Youmans's language is sweeping and grandiose and renders the character of Conall Weaver in broad, even harsh, colors. The novel isn't so much character driven as it is a character study. Conall and all of his many dimensions—his relationships, his thoughts, his successes and failures—are ceaselessly explored and exhausted until Youmans has stripped him bare.

With only the barest bones of a plot, *Maze of Blood* relies almost entirely on Conall's strength as a character and his interactions with the people around him. The novel begins at the end of Conall's short life and spirals backward through his adulthood, concluding with his earliest memories. It's a winding path, and there are sharp twists and turns that leave Conall's mind exposed. A writer down to his core, he suffers from dreams of grandeur and a drowning sense of displacement. Conall's rejection of the small-town Texas lifestyle puts him at odds with the rest of the population of Cross Plains and leaves him untethered in all of his relationships.

Despite the dramatic prose, Youmans's structure is surprisingly economical. Every interaction, every scene is deliberate and heavy with meaning. Although at times the verbose descriptions can become overbearing, the intention behind them is clear. They serve to reflect Conall's poetic mind and act as a contrast to the mundane nature of Cross Plains. The dialogue is similarly economical. The majority of *Maze of Blood* is told through descriptions and Conall's inner narration, so dialogue, when it occurs, becomes one of the only insights into the supporting characters. Although sparse, the language used in the dialogue—in particular because it is rendered in a Texas drawl—reveals the extreme disconnect between the life that Conall has and the grand adventure that he wishes he was living.

Simultaneously poetic and restrained, Youmans's portrait of Conall Weaver is honest and, at times, heartbreaking. *Maze of Blood* is a layered and complex exploration of human existences and the experiences that mold a person.

CLARISSA GOLDSMITH (Winter 2016)

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