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Mineral Spirits
Heather Sharfeddin
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While playing on the banks of the Clark Fork River in Montana, ten-year-old Gray Dausman uncovers a rotting skeleton, sparking a murder investigation by Kip Edelson, Mineral County's new sheriff. As he searches to identify the victim and its killer, Edelson sniffs out a drug operation and struggles in his marriage along the way. Although he is challenged both professionally and personally before the mystery is solved, Edelson's bond with the young boy Gray only grows stronger.

The author is especially qualified to write about the West, since she was raised in a remote region of Idaho and was educated in Missoula, Montana. Like her main character, she is the child of a forester. The Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association chose her earlier novel, *Blackbelly*, as one of the "Best of the Northwest," and New Hampshire's *Portsmouth Herald* called it one of the five best novels of 2005. In addition, it was "highly recommended" by *Library Journal* and was a winner of the annual *Writers Notes Magazine* Book Award for general fiction.

Fans of *Blackbelly* will recognize Sharfeddin's exquisite use of language and detail, as, for example, when she describes Mineral County as "a vastly vertical county," considering its ratio of people to pine trees. Local saloon owner Randy McHugh's foot calluses are "round and flat, like lozenges. He gripped his stiffly curled toes and pulled them back until the calluses stood in high relief, then took up his knife and began slicing them away … until he'd carved them down to divots."

Not only does the saloon owner struggle with his physical foot deformities, he also battles personal demons with his feelings for his sister. All of Sharfeddin's characters, in fact, deepen and develop over the course of the book, not just Edelson and Gray. Edelson's wife, for example, leaves their home, moving to Missoula to continue her education. In addition, the elderly Mrs. Sherwood, whom Edelson encounters in his search for the murder victim's identity, becomes an increasingly steady and reliable presence in the sheriff's life, as well as in Gray's. The isolated Mineral County scenery provides a timeless backdrop for these individuals, who

are presented straightforwardly.

Readers looking for action will have to wait until the book's conclusion when the lives of both sheriff and boy are at stake. Neither a typical mystery nor a standard Western, this book examines themes of love, hope, and aloneness-versus-loneliness, as Edelson travels along his investigative path. With its strong characters and its exploration of many topics, as well as its good story line, the book will appeal to a wide variety of readers.

Beth Hemke Shapiro