

## Off The Well-Lit Path

**M. S. Holm**

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*With its focus on vengeance and other dark human tendencies, Off The Well-Lit Path is captivating.*

In M.S. Holm's bleak thriller *Off The Well-Lit Path*, a desperate father attempts to rescue his daughter.

Bob Rugg and his daughter Rose are on vacation in Mexico when things go horribly wrong. A group of bandits steal their truck and abduct Rose, but not before shooting Rugg and slicing off his toes. Rugg wakes in a hospital with an amputated leg and no money, identification, or way of finding Rose. Scrounging together meager resources and believing that the local law enforcement is corrupt, Rugg dives into the underworld to find his daughter at any cost.

Narrative duties alternate between Rugg and one of the bandits, Rayo. Rayo is a new gunman who walks with a limp and who is eager to prove himself. As Rugg looks for any trace of Rose, Rayo rises through the ranks, earning a desired gun from the crime boss himself. The men's narratives mirror each other's before they collide in a disastrous climax.

Rugg's story is gritty, filled with violence and hopelessness. It begins with his near death and follows as he fights his way back to living. His backstory is sketched in asides. A recurring reference to his pilot license sheds some light, and a mention of his military service becomes more relevant as the story unfolds. His unclear nature implies that he might not be much better than the bandits he pursues. Rayo's story goes deeper, showing how he went from juggling on the street to being recruited by a gang. He is made sympathetic—shown as flawed but trying to survive in a culture that devalues human life.

The writing, especially in Rugg's sections, is bare bones but rhythmic in its flow. Sentences alternate between being short and rough and coming in rapid-fire bursts. Scene settings walk a fine line; they are sometimes vague and sometimes detailed and intense. A desert is evocatively described as a vanished sea, for example, and embellished by a lengthy description of all the painful elements that Rugg must tread across.

The book's dialogue is blunt but effective. Conversations highlight Rugg's tendency to wait things out and think before he speaks. Spoken Spanish is untranslated; contextual clues let meanings unspool without slowing the pacing.

Despite its violence and focus on the dark side of humanity, Rugg and Rayo's story is ultimately one of love and hope, even though it never seems to be headed toward a happy ending.

Captivating and ultimately satisfying, *Off The Well-Lit Path* is a thriller that's focused on vengeance.

JOHN M. MURRAY (April 4, 2019)

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