

## Percy's Field

**Christopher Brookhouse**

Safe Harbor Books

(164pp)

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*Percy's Field combines great naturalism and regional storytelling with the pleasure of detective fiction ... not to be missed.*

*Percy's Field* by Christopher Brookhouse is an inverted detective story. It is obvious early on in the novel who the guilty parties are. However, this fact does not weaken the down-home potboiler about the secrets that can lurk in any small town.

The novel's central sleuth is Gus Salt, a failed writer who became the sheriff of Harr County, North Carolina, because the department was short-staffed after many young men went off to war following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Now, in 1956, Salt must deal with a small-scale war of his own, following a string of unusual and ostensibly unconnected murders in the town of Levoy Plantation.

Salt's investigation is joined by Blossom Hall, the sheriff's girlfriend and an author of pulpy romance novels, and a hot-shot editor, Kate Shaw. It is Shaw and Hall who discover the remains of Dr. Whittle, a former Confederate soldier guilty of murdering prisoners entrusted to his care. This revelation is followed by the discovery of the corpse of Henry Slack, a local photographer who is shot dead in his car. One more local winds up dead before the novel is over.

Sheriff Gus Salt is a great everyman character with a surprisingly sharp wit hidden behind a laconic facade. Salt is the novel's cynic, while Hall and Shaw, who are sarcastic in their own right, tend to be a little more earnest. The novel's bad guy, Piney Nix, is the archetype of Southern prejudice. Nix's portrayal can be summarized by the pro-Ku Klux Klan message that he proudly displays on the front door of his business.

There is no mystery in this mystery novel, yet Brookhouse's writing is so good and so elegant that it feels like there are actual secrets buried somewhere in this narrative. Unearthing these secrets takes time—this is not a fast-paced thriller that emphasizes action. Rather, this novel moves slowly in the Carolina humidity, and the emphasis is placed on the immaculate prose and the deep characterization given to Harr County and North Carolina's tobacco country.

The plot may move predictably, and some of its characters are more stereotypical than realistic. Yet the book excels at presenting a dark and enjoyable murder story that resonates with the truth that the past is never really over. The history and the sins of the Old South play an active role in the novel, which takes place just as the civil rights movement takes its first breaths south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

*Percy's Field* combines great naturalism and regional storytelling with the pleasure of detective fiction. This is not a novel to be missed.

BENJAMIN WELTON (July 21, 2018)

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