

Prairie Crossing

David Pershing Hull

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On the edge of the desolate Staked Plain of west Texas around 1880 a preternaturally precocious toddler named Maggie Teague “could do what a lot of them still hadn’t mastered.” Two-year-old Maggie can read an amazing fact that attracts a deluge of attention from far and wide. Before long the celebrated Buffalo Bill Cody catches word and invites Maggie to join his Wild West show. This opportunity of a lifetime doesn’t have much appeal to the young orphan who values stability and the tie to her teenage guardian-brother Caleb above all else.

The hard-laboring Caleb struggles as Maggie’s de facto father (and to some extent her mother too). He works a marginal farm and feels the chance to marry his sweetheart threaten to slip away. For each overwhelming challenge or threat that Caleb encounters though he’s blessed with tremendous community support. The altruistic decency of neighbors surprises him but his mentor the banker Ravenwood (who is the beneficiary of the author’s best lines) frames their selflessness as a cultural imperative saying “helpin’ people is our way of life out here.” Cal is sixteen as the book begins coming of age along with the land around him. A disastrous cattle drive across the parched flatlands of the Llano Estacado gives him an awareness of his capabilities and is also the source of bitter enmity with deranged outlaws who vow to bring him down one day.

The latter part of Hull’s story reflects historical changes in the regional economy as barbed wire fencing closes the open ranges and cotton farming makes its first appearance. Hull’s townspeople are anything but Old West caricatures. Secondary characters make substantial contributions to the quality of the story like a schoolteacher wanted for murder or an Apache Army scout who plays up his Indianness to meet stereotyped expectations. Well-known figures like Charles Goodnight and of course a gallant incarnation of Cody himself enrich the canvas with their cameo turns.

Maggie’s unerring sixth sense (which is never fully explained) gradually gains believers and her ingenious strategy when under a physical threat is something to behold. The author’s decision to gift Maggie with extra-sensory abilities in an otherwise realistic tale actually helps to differentiate *Prairie Crossing* from other books of the subgenre. Complaints about the ravages of Texas winters surface a few times sounding as sensible as gripes about scorching Alaskan summers. The flash-forward wrap-up which jumps ahead seems a bit forced.

David Pershing Hull grew up during the Great Depression in the same stretch of north Texas without the conveniences of plumbing or electricity. He served as a naval pilot and a flight instructor during and after WWII before settling into a Houston-based career in securities exchange. His family-based epic adventure is a promising kickoff to a trilogy. It’s a fine read for all ages.

TODD MERCER (January 22, 2009)

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