Clarion Review

Young Adult Fiction

Prey of the Spirit Bear
William Hill
Otter Creek Press
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Three Stars (out of Five)

Among the picturesque national parks of the American Southwest, an ancient evil force is wreaking havoc. Slaughtered ravens and a possessed bear are only the beginning of this clever adventure by William Hill.

After a spiritual moment of clarity where he sees Soqomhonaw, the great Spirit Bear of Hopi mythology, Colt Swiftfoot begins to feel his anger and frustration rise at the world fading. His peace is short lived, however. Following his encounter, he sees an evil demon possess the Spirit Bear. The demon bear wounds Colt and sets into motion Colt's destiny: to face his fears and free the Spirit Bear.

Alexandra Walker, a junior ranger, also becomes inexorably linked to a spiritual being when she and the High Raven of Native American legend are cursed. Together Alex and Colt, along with Alex's Boy Scout friend, Jimmy Lee, must face dangerous thunderbirds, trickster coyotes, and a sorceress as they work to lift the curse and save the Spirit Bear.

Hill's book is filled with creatures and ideas rooted in Native American mythology and religious beliefs. These concepts are naturally woven into the story in ways that usually make logical sense despite their fantastic nature. Similar to the ways other popular series have spurred interest in ancient Greek and Egyptian mythology, *Prey of the Spirit Bear* could very well spark the curiosity of young readers.

What may be a deterrent for some is the size and length of the book. A large trim size and heavy binding give the book a weighty feel. At times, the volume's content also becomes overwhelming. Hill clearly has much to share, but occasionally there is simply too much going on. A plethora of fantasy elements (magical transport, animal transformation, miraculous berries, life-giving seeds, other worlds, etc.) sometimes feels overbearing. Similarly, the constant action—wildfires, chases, tumbling rocks, wild river rides, and more—can get tiresome

and actually slows down the plot's forward progression. Hill's descriptions convey the deep significance and majesty of the national parks, but with so many locations mentioned, young readers could become confused.

Such numerous components create an imbalance between Alex's story and Colt's, though the pair are often together. Colt is much more fully developed, and his insecurities and difficulties are more realistic. Hill really takes the time to give Colt a backstory, and readers will absolutely become invested in his mission. Alex does grow a bit more toward the middle and end of the book. It is rewarding to see her fight through the obstacles to help everyone in the end.

While there may be some content that could be trimmed, the rich aspects of the Native American cultures explored here combined with the excitement, intrigue, and mystery of Hill's plot outweigh any negatives. Hill clearly has the creativity to write more stories that would also be unique and welcome additions to the genre.

Alicia Sondhi