ForeWord Reviews

HISTORICAL

Rattlesnakes, Ghosts, and Murderers: Volume 1, McKenna and Barnett
Len Francis Monahan
Greta Fox Publishing
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Misunderstandings and disease result in much heartbreak for the McKenna family.

Set in the 1890s in the American West, Volume 1 in this series from Len Francis Monahan focuses on ranch owner Henry McKenna and Colter Barnett, or more precisely, McKenna's widow, Helen, and Barnett's teenage son, Colt. After Henry and Colter both die unexpectedly, the narrative follows the aftermath for the two people closest to them.

The title, *Rattlesnakes, Ghosts and Murderers*, suggests a menacing tone, and while the named subjects all play a role in the story, they are not prominent.. Although tragic and avoidable events lead to the two men's deaths, the tone is not at all somber or stark. Monahan's quirky characters provide many entertaining moments, including a hard-drinking and poetry-writing veterinarian, and a sheriff enamored with Helen, whom he has known since their childhood. Set more than one hundred years ago, historical events are also referenced in a light-hearted way (such as when Colt assures Helen it is worthless to invest in the new automobile on the market as it will never replace the efficiency of a horse).

But there are also very tender moments, particularly in the warm relationship that develops between Helen and Colt as they become a family and experience hardships while struggling to manage Henry's large cattle ranch after his death.

Recurrent themes throughout include the notion that no person is all good or all bad; whether acts are good or evil is also presented as subjective. Monahan captures the vernacular speaking style of the time, lending an authenticity to the narrative. And because Monahan focuses on only a few key characters, readers quickly become invested in them, root for the well-being of Helen and Colt and also experiencing their anguish.

The story is simple and straightforward but engaging throughout, primarily because the characters are so likable.

The book will appeal most to those who enjoy historical fiction about the Old West, although Monahan does not offer the extensive level of factual details often found in the genre. This story is character-driven, and the time period, while realistic, is a backdrop to the daily

events of the main characters.

Monahan creates much intrigue—and fun—and will have readers looking forward to spending more time with the characters in the next installment, *Volume 2: The Curse Continues*.

Maria Siano