

Rufus Steele 1940

Susan C. Turner

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Rufus Steele is a country doctor in the small farming community of Friendsville, Maryland. He is a good man who cares for his neighbors, often going far beyond the call of duty to help them. He has a bit of a troubled past, however, and when an old adversary shows up and starts causing trouble for the townsfolk, Rufus knows he will have to confront the memories that haunt him.

*Rufus Steele 1940** is the second book in a series about a rural doctor living in early-twentieth-century America. Intended for young adults, the book offers an interesting and informative glimpse into the precarious lives of small-town farmers in the 1930's and 40's. Susan Turner does an excellent job of describing the active lives of her characters, the dangers they faced, and the ways in which they depended on one another for survival. Whether she is describing a barn raising or the slaughtering of pigs, the author's descriptions are particularly well written, and readers will have no trouble immersing their imaginations in the lushness of her words. For example, Turner describes a pine grove that is a favorite spot of her title character as follows: "In summer, the serene stillness of the sixty-foot pines, tall and slender, captured the richness of the whip-poor-wills' call. In fall, twigs and needles snapped under his feet as blackbirds and flycatchers flapped and squawked overhead. In winter, when the snow rested shallow on the ground, his face felt the snowflakes' falling mist, and he watched his breath freeze in the dappled light of the rising sun."

Regrettably, the beauty with which she writes is not enough to carry the book. There are two large problems: The town of Friendsville is overly utopic. The townsmen are honorable, caring and hard working. Even the young boys get along remarkably well, working hard to support one another and quickly apologizing when they make mistakes. Though this represents a lovely ideal, most readers will not find it believable. Even a small amount of conflict or disagreement between the characters would add depth and interest to the story. More significantly, the central plot is little more than an afterthought. The nefarious stranger who has come to town to cause trouble is rarely seen. The reader is told that he means to harm Rufus Steele but no more information on his plans is provided. Ultimately, the story arc is underdeveloped and unsatisfying.

*Rufus Steele 1940** has a great deal of unrealized potential. Turner's obvious enthusiasm for historical details and her fantastic descriptive abilities have laid the groundwork for a series that could be both informative and entertaining. Unfortunately, the book's lack of plot and inadequate characterization hold it back.

CATHERINE THURESON (October 6, 2010)

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