

Skunks Dance

St. John Karp

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Skunks Dance is solid, sarcastic, and bombastic young adult fare.

As highfalutin and entertaining as any tall tale told around a prospector's fire, St. John Karp's *Skunks Dance* is a young adult mystery with its roots in California's gold rush days, and with a resolution as elusive as a glimmer in the pan.

At the height of the gold rush, Southern farmer Spivey Spillane leaves home in hot pursuit of a "demon Bible" that he stole from a dead man's hands—and that was soon spirited away by the darkly enigmatic Alabama Sam. He's driven by an undefinable need, and believes that his new archenemy Sam is all that stands between him and grand fortune. Sam may be more than a mere rival, though; hints of the supernatural whirl around him, and he leaves awful destruction in his wake.

The narrative switches between Spivey's search on the dusty streets of a young Skunks Dance, California, and a story in the town's present—where Amanda Spillane and Jet Allan-Ashwood are working on a rivalry of their own, though it's rooted in more standard teenage angst than Sam and Spivey's showdown. Amanda craves the gold that she's sure her ancestor uncovered before he met his untimely end; Jet craves normalcy, and dislikes straightlaced Amanda enormously for her centeredness. Their mutual teasing awakens ancestral tangles, though, and soon there's more at stake than just their high school reputations.

Skunks Dance is rollicking from the first, driven by quips and ostentatious characters, from a gun-slinging heroine who watches Spivey's back, to Jet's circus-act-for-hire parents. Historians drop snappy lines; inept mayors wobble around town talking heritage while sheriffs itch for a hanging. But while cleverness drives the story forward, it also undermines the narrative's cohesion. Metaphors sometimes run a bit too long, and the story buckles under the weight of its own inventiveness. Silly scenes, like Jet's family courtroom showdown, are enjoyable, but prove to be distractions that do not operate in service of the mystery at the novel's core.

Characters are all vivacious, complex, and amusing, if some sometimes veer toward stereotypes, especially Jet's buxom girlfriend. Flirtations with the occult lead to skin-crawling scenes, and the thrills that result are considerable, though such creepiness dissipates toward the novel's end, and the winking conclusion is almost sterile in comparison to earlier scenes.

Though the treasure beyond the Calaveras Ridge is strikingly absent by the novel's conclusion, *Skunks Dance* is rife with entertaining developments, and contains enough prospectors' verve to hold attention. Gruesome scenes are alleviated with raucous dialogue, and unrealistic developments are made palatable by the persistent good nature of the narrative. Whether one is satisfied by the last reveal or not, it is certain that all readers will have fun arriving there, no matter how haphazardly-marked the path sometimes seems to be.

Skunks Dance is solid, sarcastic, and bombastic young adult fare, certain to satisfy the appetites of all youngsters who

have a taste for adventure.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (November 7, 2016)

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