

★ **Smoke City**

Keith Rosson

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Keith Rosson's *Smoke City* is a brilliantly haunting tale of forgiveness and redemption even in the face of abject failure.

Marvin Deitz has lived many lives since his original incarnation as Geoffroy Thérage, executioner of Joan of Arc. The Curse, as he calls it, refuses him the luxury of forgiveness, always finding ways to kill him before he reaches the age of fifty-seven and then reincarnating him somewhere else as someone else to suffer anew.

His skeptical therapist and his storefront landlord with mob ties only make matters worse. But when he sees a woman on a talk show in Los Angeles claiming to house the spirit of Joan within herself, Marvin determines to seek her out and perhaps finally lay centuries of ghosts to rest.

Mike Vale—an alcoholic, once-prolific painter—picks up the hitchhiking Marvin. Mike comes with his own set of baggage—a broken marriage, the loss of all rights to his previous work, a dead-end job in a fast-food restaurant, and self-destructive tendencies. Their journey from Oregon through California and their encounters with the “smokes,” mysterious apparitions that flicker into existence all over the southwestern United States, gradually reverse their respective downward spirals.

The novel highlights the interconnectedness of people, not only in the present but also across space and time. It insists there is something mystical that binds us all together, though the context of that bond is left ambiguous. A warmly spiritual experience is achieved here, free from the crutches of both religious propaganda and New Age inanity.

Moments of poetic loveliness in the prose are counterbalanced with a gruffness befitting the novel's main characters. Marvin's journal entries chronicle his time as Geoffroy; they are brutal in their renderings of torture and the squalid living conditions of the French poor in the 1400s. Mike's struggles with alcoholism and inadequacy are equally agonizing. But the pages grow brighter as the novel rushes toward a dawn that is both surprising in its wandering path and deeply emotional.

In *Smoke City*, depravity and grace meet in a powerful, profound, and lavish banquet for the soul.

MEAGAN LOGSDON (January/February 2018)

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