



Smoke Dreams

Donald L. Willerton

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A haunted mansion with an intelligent personality propels this eerie tale set in New Mexico.

In *Smoke Dreams*, Donald Willerton teeters on the brink of historical and horror fiction, creating an eye-opening escapade for the uninitiated. The Comanche kidnapping of a ten-year-old boy in 1870 is the catalyst for this terrifying yet strangely poignant story of a family's undying zest for living.

A contemporary setting alternates with scenes from the past as bits of this frightening plot build to a shocking and infinitely heartbreaking revelation. Tucker, an experienced home renovator with a tragic history of his own—the loss of his wife in an accident and the murder of his daughter—combats inner demons as a seemingly possessed house communicates in bizarre ways. Special effects, many of which are elaborate enough for a movie set, elicit childlike excitement, but the too obvious aftereffects only serve to detract from credibility. Inexplicable wind, banging, clanging, breathing, and even a heartbeat enhance the anticipated moaning.

High on entertainment value, Willerton's inventive novel succumbs to a common temptation in fiction. The story stretches the boundaries of believability to a degree that may trigger unintended amusement rather than fear. The haunting action would have benefited from a dash of subtlety.

The lonely mansion itself is depicted as a character with introspective pondering and descriptive passages. Abandoned and deprived of human companionship, filled with emotion, this neglected (though unusually preserved) structure emits a presence—a threat to intruders and a protection to inhabitants:

I was first built out of optimism and pride, but I was soon invaded by evil. Terrible things happened within my doors. My story spoke of pain, misery, sadness, and shame. My rooms were soaked in tragedy and tears had etched themselves into my floors.

Tucker turns the home into a shelter for a pregnant teenager and her boyfriend while offering employment to adolescent twin boys seeking temporary work. Even his unorthodox household fails to ground him as paranormal events take him on a psychological journey into a spiritual realm few would want to traverse. The minor players in this disturbing drama add interest to every scene, but they are only foils to the protagonist. Tucker is developed to a high degree, pinpointing the underlying cause of what appears, at least at first, to be the manifestation of post-traumatic stress disorder. Yet the loss of his family cannot explain the many supernatural occurrences that terrify visitors and residents alike.

For decades, Donald Willerton has immersed himself in the myths and legends of the Southwest. In the mountains high above Santa Fe, he writes fiction for children and adults.

Smoke Dreams draws one into an experience similar to falling into an old-time chasm. Good luck getting out, for this well-written novel accomplishes exactly what it intends. The book will scare any willing participant seeking the end.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (July 14, 2014)

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