

The Hidden Treasure of Dutch Buffalo Creek

Jackson Badgenoone

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Otherworldly ghostwriters compose biographies for ordinary people in this playfully metafictional novel.

The Hidden Treasure of Dutch Buffalo Creek is the first novel in a projected series by Jackson Badgenoone. Blending aspects of historical fiction, fantasy, biography, and archival studies, the book pulls together excerpts from the life stories of its characters, as narrated by literal ghostwriters.

The novel opens in present-day North Carolina with an older man named James finding a bayonet dating back to the War for American Independence. James, sometimes nicknamed Traveler or Trav, hears a female spiritual guide named Jackson telling him to look beyond physical relics. Dreams and memories help him relive highlights from his life. Jackson leads him to a hope chest filled with volumes that she and her coterie of “Neverborn” ghostwriters have authored. Each book pinpoints “high water markers” in the “extraordinary ordinary life” stories of the characters, including James’s wife, Mimi, and his father, a military career officer.

The “Neverborn” concept seems to be based on arcane scriptural exegesis. Each never-born soul results from a miscarriage, stillbirth, or abortion. Not quite angels or ghosts, the spirits still have a presence in the physical world. In the novel’s slightly fantastical setup, they function as onlookers who craft the life stories of those they observe. Jackson supervises her nine namesakes, all linked by a common last name, Badgenoone (from “Badge Number One,” but also a play on “no one”).

The figures’ origins and identities remain rather murky, but James is a strong central character whose memories from the 1950s through the present give a sense of history’s sweep. Vivid descriptive language enlivens the settings, whether at home (“Songbirds would provide a perfect serenade under a Carolina blue sky”) or in Europe (“cathedrals and castles inspired awe. Horse-drawn carts announced their travel along cobblestone streets”).

Although well written, the book as a whole is an unusual amalgam of spiritualism, historical nostalgia, and technology. The author aims to turn physical volumes in a treasure chest into an interactive reading experience and virtual archive. The metafictional, intertextual approach—inserting chapters from other books in the series and discussing the composition process—is certainly inventive, but involves tedious lists of books, headlines, and names, as well as bracketed asides that distract from the central story. James’s story might have been better told as a simple coming-of-age novel with flashbacks, thereby avoiding supernatural and narrative complications with more cohesive results.

The mystical aspect may be unconvincing, but this is still a creative mixture of historical fiction and fantasy with potential appeal for fans of David Mitchell and Kate Atkinson.

REBECCA FOSTER (September 9, 2015)

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