

The Hope We Seek

Rich Shapero

Outside Reading (Mar 15, 2014)

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Good and evil are questioned, violence is confronted as part of the human experience, and characters' motives blur lines.

Rich Shapero's novel, *The Hope We Seek*, takes place in a remote, unnamed place more than a century in the past. Zachary Knox, a former sharpshooter in a Wild West show, is pursuing wealth and a new life through gold mining. A storm sinks the rickety boat Zach is on, and he and his fellow travelers are deposited by the angry sea on a beach near the gold-mining community they seek. Trevillian, a cruel boss and self-proclaimed high priest of the goddess, runs the place with a bullwhip. The men toil tirelessly in the pits and party at The Wheel, a large spinning platform used to reveal which whore a miner will lie with. All in all, it is a depressing and dark place. Ultimately, Zach foments a violent revolt to overthrow Trevillian.

At times, it is difficult to pick out the good guys from the bad guys in this book. Zach and Sephy, the woman he meets on the boat, are clearly searching for a better life while, at the same time, they are approaching the trials and tribulations of life in the mining camp with self-absorbed drive, like every other inhabitant of this isolated community.

The Hope We Seek has a fair amount of sex and violence scattered throughout. Sex is just one of the benefits provided for the workers, like food and a place to sleep. And violence, whether caused by one individual or by the circumstances of being in a dangerous job, is just part of the landscape.

The artwork on the cover of the book is reminiscent of a painting depicting Dante's Inferno, accurately depicting the netherworld quality of the novel. The CD included with the book contains "music from The Wheel," a clever idea that adds depth to the story, as there are musicians referred to in the book. The songs are originals by Rich Shapero, who plays guitar with an accompanying female singer. Shapero's guitar playing is evocative and precise and is the better part of the music. The overall effect is funereal.

As is so often the case, in the end, good triumphs over evil ... or does it? There is a substantial amount of uncertainty. This is no Walt Disney version of the real world. Life is not sugarcoated but presented in all of its flavors from way too bitter to sweet.

JOHN SENGER (Spring 2014)

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