

The Melancholy Howl

Mark Stevens

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Dabbing and elk hunters make bloody companions in *The Melancholy Howl*, the fifth Allison Coil mystery from Mark Stevens. Legalized retail and recreational marijuana has come to Colorado, but instead of creating a mellow atmosphere, the drug's presence brings violence and death to the Flat Tops Wilderness. Hunting outfitter Allison Coil is thrust into the center of a less-than-groovy conspiracy that spans miles of back country.

Stevens, who was the 2016 Rocky Mountain Writer of the Year, has a deep appreciation for the Colorado landscape and the people who inhabit it. His main character, Allison, is a Colorado woman to her core, and her narration gives a taste of gorgeous, gritty mountain life.

Allison doesn't take well to interlopers, strangers, or troublemakers. That includes the players in Colorado's fastest growing industry: marijuana growers. Her wry sense of humor and flinty observations keep the book tight and focused: "The stinky-sweet smell obliterated the traces of alpine. Allison thought pot smelled like a skunk perfumed-up for a date." Chapters alternate between Allison's perspective and the distinct voices of other characters, including Allison's best friend, Trudy Heath, and a reporter, Duncan Bloom. The novel's pace is extremely quick: blink and you'll miss a key transition or line of dialogue.

The novel builds to more than one dramatic climax. From a strange man roped to a tree to a plane crash to a missing friend, the novel is gritty and unsparing in its gory details. Although some chapters rely excessively on dialogue to do the heavy lifting, the landscape and characters come through clearly.

The Melancholy Howl is a snappy thriller that is one part Colorado, one part conspiracy theory, and one part CBD.

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