

The Phantom of Witch's Tree

Mark Lunde

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The Phantom of Witch's Tree is an over-the-top work of weird western storytelling.

In Mark Lunde's easy-to-love, genre-bending western *The Phantom of Witch's Tree*, the last true town of the Wild West proves to be a place of high weirdness.

Set in October 1912 on the lawless border region between the US and Canada, this novel does not focus on one story arc, but rather on several story arcs that intersect. Each story within a story is headlined by a bizarre character. These include a haunted deputy, Matt, whose grip on reality starts to fragment after the simple job of serving a warrant becomes a blood-drenched mess, and Jody, another professional gunman whose life goes haywire during what should have been a routine prisoner escort. When Jody tells his dangerous prisoner a big, dirty secret, the job goes belly-up. The story also includes Rachel, a well-heeled Canadian and former asylum inmate who runs afoul of a demonic man on her journey out west.

Riddled with overlapping narratives, this novel is hard to follow and hard to define in terms of its central story. Baby-faced monster Jody uses Widow Tree to indulge in all of his base and coarse fantasies; Rachel wants to live in the US West in order to experience the "real" frontier; and Matt tries to outrun the supernatural evil of Corporal Justin Augustus of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Jody and Justin both want the town to remain a lawless playground for their lust, while Matt has some desire to see the town pacified. A battle between Justin and Matt is the only subnarrative that has a clear beginning, middle, and end. Jody and Rachel's stories are aimless by comparison, but are rich because their leads are entertaining.

Fleshed out and fun to read about, each of the three main characters has fatal flaws and lovable eccentricities. All are action-first individualists who enjoy a well-turned phrase. None could ever exist in the real world, but that is what makes them so entertaining.

The novel is sharp, each sentence brimming with black humor, buckets of blood, and delicious action. Surrealistic and crass, its opening scene sees a male appendage boiled, while scenes of rape and scatology are common. It runs long and is divided into sections that follow specific themes or actions. When extraneous details, like information about a simpleton's love of chicken gizzards or the intricacies of Old West firearms, are given space, the momentum slows. Such deviations are most galling when they're paired with scenes hogged by unimportant characters. When Matt, Rachel, and Jody are the focus, the book moves at a better speed.

Supporting characters, digressions, and the book's overextension distract from the central characters' tales. The final third of the book becomes ridiculous, with inclusions like UFOs and Czech submachine guns. Outlandish jokes, gothic visions, and omens wear thin before the book's conclusion.

The Phantom of Witch's Tree sets fire to the genre formulas and expectations. It is an over-the-top work of weird western storytelling.

BENJAMIN WELTON (July 8, 2019)

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