Clarion Review

General

The Ruin
Kenneth Fenter
Arborwood Press
978-1-4536-5992-2
Four Stars (out of Five)

Kenneth Fenter's *The Ruin* is part coming-of-age novel, part *Robinson Crusoe*, part history lesson, and wholly deserving of an audience of both adults and teenagers.

The novel follows Clifton Kelly, as an eighth-grade farm boy living in the southwest corner of Colorado in the early 1950's, as well as an adult celebrating his last day of teaching. Cliff's retirement day turns tragic when a fellow teacher is murdered by her own son, who then goes to Cliff's sister school and kills students there. The boy's bloody response to bullying triggers Cliff's memories of being bullied during school.

Cliff didn't shoot his nemesis, Hector Rodriquez, even though he had his rifle in hand after a violent encounter. Instead, he sought refuge in a cave dwelling of ancient Puebloans, the Anasazi. There he learns to survive in the fashion of the First People – making fire from flint, fiber from plants, clothes from pelts, and food from cattails, dandelions, and the game he could bring down with his *atlatl*, a spear-thrower. From an ancient hunter, who appears in a dream, he learns "Adversity presents unique opportunity, a moment of time in God's wilderness, use the time wisely."

The Ruin encompasses ninety-one chapters, most dealing with Cliff's year in the cave dwelling. Within that narrative there are flashbacks to his school years, his farm life, and to his relationship with his hard-working, highly religious, and overly strict father. Interspersed are short chapters dealing with the adult Cliff's reactions to the school shooting.

Fenter's research, the breadth of his knowledge about the ancient Puebloans, and his familiarity with farm life are superb. But Fenter's exposition does slow the story. For example, in his narration of Cliff's initial explorations of the cave, Fenter uses several hundred words to describe the youngster's search to find a bee hive. The novel, in fact, is filled with such mini-essays, with Fenter providing lessons about Native American life, bee-keeping, farming, and

assorted other subjects. While interesting in its own right, the information sometimes buries the drama of Cliff's saga, including the most emotionally powerful element, Cliff's reconciliation with his father: "Dad, when I left, I was very angry at everyone. I had to get away and figure out how to control that. I also needed time to figure out just who I was and how I wanted to live my life."

Additionally, Fenter fails to tie up completely loose ends in the lives of some characters. For example, readers never learn what happens to George Williamson, a neighbor and Cliff's mentor. And there are only hints of the later successes of Hector Rodriguez, the bully who learns his lesson and reconciles with young Cliff.

The author of the *An American Family in Japan* series, Fenter is a retired schoolteacher who served in the Springfield, Oregon community, the location of a tragic 1998 school shooting. *The Ruin* requires patience, but it is both satisfying and interesting, and well worth recommending to a teen reader.

Gary Presley