Clarion Review

Thriller

The Searcher
Ray Dacolias
CreateSpace
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Joaquin Bridger isn't much to look at. In fact, most townspeople try to avoid looking at the bedraggled homeless man standing on the street corner in a catatonic stupor. Few would expect him to spring into hero mode during a bank robbery, when a young girl is suddenly taken hostage and kidnapped. Joaquin, however, instantly sets out on a quest to find the girl, never resting until his mission is complete. That is the complex character Ray Dacolias creates in *The Searcher*, a tale of renunciation, reconciliation, and renewal.

Joaquin's search for little Sylvia takes him into a harsh wilderness that would stymie the most intrepid outdoorsman. Extreme cold, snow, and avalanches threaten his progress with each step. The Searcher, however, has two unusual advantages. First, he's highly skilled, with an elite police and military background. Second, he has a debt to settle: it's been five years since Joaquin lost his own daughter and wife in a hostage showdown, perhaps involving the very same kidnapper he now seeks.

While Dacolias writes a convincing thriller—the charged standoffs with double-crossing criminals will keep readers on their toes—he also pens a lyrical ode to nature. "It was early January," he writes, "and the snowflakes, unique and beautiful, only weeks before denied permanent residency on the leaves of firs and sloping green hills and tender green shoots of grass, now fell to the soil and kept their fine Winter shape." Dacolias returns to environmental themes throughout the story; in fact, Joaquin's personal quest depends heavily on his ability to resolve the question of man's role in nature.

Along the way, Joaquin meets a variety of iconic characters who personify man's struggle to find a peaceful part to play in the earth's story. People are known more by type than personality. There's The Giant, who has learned compassion the hard way, and there's The Master, who has never known or practiced compassion a day in his life. And there are The Girls,

enduring psychological torture on their forced march through the Oregon hills.

Joaquin's journey is a long one, spanning several years, and sometimes his introspective musings on the meaning of his life impede the forward movement of the story. The pace slows when many consecutive paragraphs are devoted to Joaquin's inner monologue or The Master's grand proclamations. Dacolias always picks up speed again, though, whether through Joaquin's confrontational meeting with would-be assassins on the trail or the whispered escape plans of Sylvia and her friends. The authentic dialogue in these interludes returns readers to the world at hand.

An ambitious novel, *The Searcher* includes elements of thrillers, frontier stories, and fantasy. Joaquin is a seeker on many levels, and Dacolias makes it possible for us to join him in the search.

Sheila M. Trask