

The Thresher Ghost

Spencer Compton

Amazon KDP (Nov 11, 2021)

Softcover \$10.99 (204pp)

979-874278577-4

*In the intriguing historical thriller *The Thresher Ghost*, a disgraced doctor enters a feverish, experimental world that sends his moral compass spinning.*

In Spencer Compton's fantastical historical novel *The Thresher Ghost*, a disgraced doctor joins a morally corrupt man of medicine and magic to search for eternal life and power.

Wiley McCoy, a surgeon to the rich and famous, has gotten used to living a life of luxury. But while performing routine surgery on his girlfriend, McCoy's hand slips; she dies on his operating table. Ousted from his job, under investigation, and feeling crazy for suspecting foul play and dark magic, McCoy has few options left.

But then Howard Hughes, the eccentric businessman and billionaire, presents McCoy with a strange proposition. Hughes is accompanied by an even stranger man who claims that he can bring people back from the dead. Incapable of facing his own mortality, Hughes funds every manner of related conspiracy, and McCoy finds himself in the middle of history.

McCoy's tone is resigned; he makes questionable decisions, and his dreams are haunted by his girlfriend. Throughout the novel, he grieves the loss of his perfect life. He experiences culture shock in his new workspace—a submarine turned laboratory run by Romulo, a gifted, twisted man who combines science with Voodoo to achieve frightening and fantastic results.

Romulo's violent outbursts combine with compelling, gruesome descriptions of his experiments on animals and humans, resulting in a disturbing tone. He and McCoy epitomize opposite ends of the medical spectrum, resulting in discussions about ethics. However, Romulo's religious practices are villainized and stereotyped to excess.

Romulo's half-sister, Aurora, is a secondary point of focus, though she's one whose story line is abandoned for long stretches. Still, she is a compelling addition: while the novel's men enjoy seeking power, Aurora's opportunities are more limited. She faces sexism across the decades, and is stunted when it comes to employment and romantic opportunities.

McCoy's tale runs into the 1960s, but its treatment of historical figures and events is unpredictable; often, it's even humorous, emphasizing people's odd and curious behaviors. John F. Kennedy plays a significant role, and his charm is ably captured in his breezy speech patterns. But as McCoy finds himself in the midst of, or witnessing, significant moments, like the Moon landing and the discovery of HIV, the novel's treatments of the past become discombobulating. The abrupt ending proffers little satisfaction, either.

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DELIA STANLEY (January 26, 2022)

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