

## The Vendetta of Felipe Espinosa

**Adam James Jones**

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*Poignant passages describing both the setting and Espinosa's rich and heartbreaking backstory strengthen the power of this historical novel.*

Felipe Espinosa was a vicious man. But what about his early years led him to torture and murder dozens of people in the 1860s American West? In *The Vendetta of Felipe Espinosa*, first-time novelist Adam James Jones fictionally speculates on that which the real-life historical record is silent. The result is a masterful debut, unflinchingly violent in its tracking of Espinosa from his childhood killing of baby birds to his final, psychopathic rampage.

The story begins as Espinosa's father returns from the Mexican-American War in the 1840s. It then tracks him through a long succession of life events that tip him toward murder, including betrayed love; grief; forced, penitent religious fanaticism; and the need to steal to support his family that spirals into pillaging and killing. There's a growing realization by those who know him that something inside has permanently snapped, and then comes the federal manhunt to take him out.

It is a story rich in its characterizations; inspired in its use of inanimate objects, such as a sword and a dragoon that figure from the first chapter to the last in some surprising ways; rare in its overall quality of writing, with passages so poignant as to bring repeated pause; and breathtaking in its natural scene-setting from interior Mexico northward into New Mexico, Texas, and Colorado.

An intermountain basin is described as "a sweeping caramel-colored grassland rippling under a throttling headwind that lifted their sombreros and whipped their serapes open revealing the flashing steel on their hips." And on a midnight ride, Espinosa and an accomplice travel "for miles, the moon and the stars casting the aspens around them in alkaline white; long parched bones thrusting upward from the earth."

Ultimately, Espinosa's backstory takes up far more of the novel than the actual serial murders. But it's that deeply emotive backstory that sinks its teeth, that will leave readers reviling but also profoundly saddened for a man who was both brutal and brutalized.

Magnificently cruel and unforgettable, Espinosa is a new American legend in the making.

KARYN SAEMANN (Spring 2015)

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