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GENERAL

The Yankee Doctor
R. Harper Mason
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Five Stars (out of Five)

Adventure is everywhere when it comes to young boys and a deceitful Yankee doctor invading a small Arkansas town. R. Harper Mason's *The Yankee Doctor* is one-part *Huckleberry Finn*, one-part *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and one-part *Stand By Me*.

Twelve-year-old Richard Mason and his best friend John Clayton Reed get themselves into one adventure after another. However, things turn darker when they realize that a new doctor is possibly dealing drugs, inviting less-than-reputable women to town, and dabbling in some shady business practices. Soon, the boys try to expose this doctor for who he is.

The language in this novel is pitch-perfect. Mason nails the voices of young boys on the brink of puberty. The author also captures the culturally rich dialect and way of living in Norphlet, Arkansas. Mason writes, "Heck, in my whole, entire life I ain't never had nothing upset me as much. Dang. Just upset? Naw, it was a heck of a lot more than upset." From here, the plot unfolds, bit by bit, and the unique voice of this narrator pushes the story along. The Arkansas surroundings of Mason, his family, and friends is perfectly captured through such specific language.

The smallest of descriptions contribute to shaping this rich Southern world. When Richard leaps out of bed to meet Doc Rollinson, the doctor is described as "zipping around in his wheelchair like some big wind-up toy." Subplots, like Richard trying to finish his paper route in less than 45 minutes in exchange for a candy bar, are realistic and as engaging as the central plot involving the doctor and his dark activities.

If there's one blip in this novel, it's that the scenes are a whirlwind: they come and go too fast. Much could be fleshed out with such rich characters and a narrator as interesting as Richard Mason. Still, the pace of such scenes matches the eagerness of a 12-year-old boy, so it makes sense that some sections would be told through summary, or retrospectively.

The wide-open-ended eagerness of *The Yankee Doctor*'s narrator makes for an exhilarating read. It's like watching Dennis the Menace race around an Arkansas town. Mason

closes the novel with Richard eating a Baby Ruth for breakfast and thinking that “nothing in this whole, wide world can upset me now.” This sweet declaration is undercut by the fact that it’s clear that this young man will continue to fall into one adventure after another. The thought of future escapades is as delicious as following this young boy as he takes on an evil doctor and lives his own version of a Tom and Huck adventure.

Lisa Bower