

Clarion Review ★★★★☆

GENERAL FICTION

## Thomas Clayton

**Randy J. Harvey**

iUniverse (Jan 17, 2013)

Softcover \$26.95 (504pp)

978-1-4759-6923-8

Randy Harvey's first novel, *Thomas Clayton*, is an artfully crafted coming-of-age tale and a riveting read containing all the elements of a suspenseful first-class thriller.

Adversity strikes early and often in Thomas Clayton "T. C." Gurley's life in rural, oil-rich Oklahoma. At fifteen, T. C. loses his father, mother, and sister in a car accident. Then, his father's half-brother, Boats Nichols, the owner of Nichols Casing and Oil Company, boots T. C. out onto the street. Even after family friends take him in and he finds a girlfriend, trouble tracks him at school, on the football field, and under the umbrella of the shady business affairs his uncle Boats and his Oklahoma Combine cronies set up to steal land, defraud investors, and even cover up murder.

In fact, Harvey's novel contains two cleverly integrated stories. The first is told in first person by T. C. and describes his progress from a naive adolescent to a young man with the responsibilities of a husband and father running a business he inherits from his estranged uncle after their reconciliation. The second plot, with the threads of its third-person narrative intricately woven into the first, details the hunt for the murderer of a town blackmailer, the search for the dead man's incriminating files, and the domino effects as others uncover nasty secrets like incest, adultery, and plots for murder.

The predominance of well-paced dialogue in both stories keeps the action moving. Readers will remain interested as events unfold with surprising twists and turns toward unexpected revelations about key characters and the frontier-style justice that Combine members receive from some unexpected sources.

Harvey's characters are credible as well. Even Doc Leftan, who "got himself kilt" but never appears except as a corpse, is memorable because of Harvey's description of him as the town blackmailer. The foul-mouthed sheriff, Lee Bob Whetzel, who is dedicated to bringing murderers to justice but isn't above planting evidence, seducing witnesses, or stealing laundered money, will not be easily forgotten. Nor will the trio of Pike, Snake, and "the Korean Cowboy," with their skills in armed and unarmed combat, which they use to ensure the safety of T. C. and his friends when they are threatened by mobsters hired by the Combine group.

In contrast to the desperadoes and dirty dealers, there are the rock-solid members of T. C.'s adopted family—Buck and Rosie; football team friends; Manny and his girlfriend, Tess; and T. C.'s girlfriend, Marylyn. The evolution of T. C.'s character over the span of the narrative is especially well done.

Although *Thomas Clayton* is praiseworthy, its title and cover could make a better first impression on potential readers. The title, at first glance, could be for a memoir, a biography, or an autobiography. Even adding the identifier "A Novel" as a subtitle would assist busy readers looking for a first-class work of fiction. As well, the colors of the cover art are too dark to immediately attract browsing readers, a regrettable factor when the novel itself is so worthy of wide readership.

WAYNE CUNNINGHAM (June 4, 2013)

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