**Clarion Review**

Science Fiction

**Three Fugitives**
Nat Howler
BookSurge
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Four Stars (out of Five)

A crop of fantasy writers, apparently inspired by their youthful exposure to Mary Stewart, C.S. Lewis, Lloyd Alexander, Ursula K. Le Guin, and J.R.R. Tolkien, have turned to self-publishing and small presses as an alternative to mainstream publishing, which tends not to take chances on unknown authors. While many of their works are amateurish or poorly written, some authors immediately prove themselves to be professionals and excellent storytellers. Nat Howler sets a good example with his novel, Three Fugitives, the first book in the Six Stones Trilogy. Despite a few typos, Howler delivers a fantasy and adventure tale that will leave readers eager for more.

Thirteen-year-old Orren has spent his entire life living in the pigsties of the merciless Lord Berthus Randolphus. Treated like the swine he cohabitates with, Orren discovers that he is actually the half brother to Lord Berthus. After the dead of Richard, Orren's protector and servant to Lord Berthus, Orren learns that Lord Berthus has ordered his execution. He escapes his executioners and steals from Lord Berthus one of the fabled six Gwellen, a magical stone that controls the properties of water and can only be handled by someone from the House of Randolphus.

While trying to escape his would-be killers, Orren rescues a creature called a Zhiv, "a head shorter than Orren, and lightly built. His skin was leathery and nut brown. His legs were very long in relation to his torso and they were also thin. His equally thin arms were even longer than his legs." Later, he and the Zhiv meet up with a haughty young woman with great knowledge, named Marett. Together these three battle bandits, armies, cults, and magical creatures and become caught up in a war that could destroy their entire world.

Three Fugitives will at first appear to be similar to The Book of Three, the first volume of Alexander's the Chronicles of Prydain. Both feature youthful male main characters who are raised in poverty and are associated with pigs; both characters are accompanied on their

adventures by bizarre creatures; both novels contain the themes of good versus evil. But while Alexander's works are chiefly for children, Howler's novel is darker and oriented toward adults. It contains vivid realism as it deals with subjects like poverty, human sacrifice, and war.

Three Fugitives pulls readers into a fantasy realm with action, adventure, and characters that are easy to love. Even though Howler has created a world full of monsters, mayhem, heroes, and heroines, the novel is also a mirror of our own disturbing reality where the borders of good and evil are not clearly defined.

*Lee Gooden*