

Twentymile

C. Matthew Smith

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In C. Matthew Smith's engrossing novel *Twentymile*, a park service biologist turns up dead in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and discord regarding annexed land fuels a treacherous chase.

Tsula, a special agent with the National Park Service's Investigative Services Branch, investigates what happened to an employee who was shot near Twentymile Creek. Meanwhile, members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians voice concerns about the rediscovery of a cavern tied to their history. And a troubled survivalist, who is accompanied by his sons and an ex-military friend, wrestles with disillusionment about his family's ancestral homestead, which the park service claimed.

At once a gradual portrait of Tsula's patient, incisive methods and a chilling account of a perpetrator's upbringing and experiences, this thriller revels in its isolated, forbidding landscapes. When its brooding, alternating story lines converge, Tsula defends herself against men who track her because of her discoveries, all during an escape through rough weather that brings forth her honed instincts. Characters' intimate knowledge of wild acreage, and their hyper-tuned senses, dial up the dynamics of hunter and quarry, culminating in a standoff in which no one finds easy answers.

Tsula's background is layered. She deals with grief; she is compelled by her loyalties to her Cherokee roots and park service work. Others are similarly tenacious; some express ideals about living off-grid. Amid deeper themes of harsh family legacies, the stories that people tell themselves to shore up their own beliefs, and father-son relationships tinged with malevolence, a dark sense of a subset of woodsmen who view national parks as refuges for their damaged psyches emerges.

A formidable investigator leads *Twentymile*, a disturbing, potent thriller about ownership and trespassing, as well as unrealized dreams and aggression.

KAREN RIGBY (November / December 2021)

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