

Vermilion: The Adventures of Lou Merriwether, Psychopomp

Molly Tanzer

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Genre-bending, gender-bending, dialect-filled, and fascinating, this steampunk novel handles old West racism with humor and grit.

Lou Merriwether is a “psychopomp”—she has the ability to help spirits stuck in the land of the living cross over to the land of the dead. A well-wrought character, she dresses androgynously and often passes as a man; and as an Asian American, she handles Old West racism with humor and grit. Molly Tanzer’s steampunk world layers the rough Old West of gold-rush San Francisco with the influx of Chinese immigrants and the Victorian propriety and technology attendant with the genre.

The dialogue in *Vermilion* is vibrant and playful, with a hard edge, and offers a strong rooting of place somewhere between Victorian English and rough-and-tumble western American dialects. It is here that perhaps one weakness surfaces: much of the slang and cursing feels anachronistic. But what is perhaps best done in the novel is the paranormal world building, shown as Lou does her work amongst spirits, from the gadgets and potions she uses to her means of communication—for Lou “the dead were so much easier to manage,” than the living. Sentence for sentence, Tanzer demonstrates a strong sense of language and place, and as a whole, the world is a place which definitely demonstrates influences (anthropomorphic bears call to mind *The Golden Compass*; Lou’s duster and shotgun, *Pretty Deadly*), but is wholly unique and pleasurable to become enveloped by.

The crux of the novel comes when Lou, accustomed to her tried-and-true methods for spiring ghosts to their proper places, becomes embroiled in a mystery, and the novel gains an element of noir: Chinese railroad workers have begun to disappear, and Lou must alter her skills to search for ghosts rather than go directly to them to do her work. The novel grapples with issues of race (the white authorities don’t express much concern for the disappearing Chinese workers), and gender and sexuality (one important character is gay, while another shifts genders), keeping the book modern and relevant while also firmly entrenched within its own complicated history.

NATASHA GILMORE (Summer 2015)

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