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Clarion Review ★★★★☆ FANTASY

Watt O'Hugh Underground: Being the Second Part of the Strange and Astounding Memoirs of Watt O'Hugh the Third

Steven S. Drachman
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Well-researched historical scenes of nineteenth-century San Francisco and New York bring a dime novel atmosphere to this humorous adventure.

Watt O'Hugh Underground, the sequel to Steven S. Drachman's 2011 debut, *The Ghosts of Watt O'Hugh*, features a strong and amusing lead character with a distinctive narrative voice. The self-named Watt, once a nameless urchin of New York's notorious Five Points slum, has become a feared gunslinger, a dime novel hero, and an occasional time traveler, or "roamer." He's also a relentlessly sardonic raconteur whose wry commentary about the shortcomings of the world and the people in it—not least of all himself—call to mind Mark Twain's dryly hilarious sketches of the characters he encountered on the American frontier.

As the present volume begins, Watt is a washed-up drunk living in a dilapidated cabin on an abandoned mining claim when his alcoholic reveries of lost love and other disasters are interrupted by a laconic damsel in distress whose mule dies at his doorstep. No properly self-disrespecting picaresque rogue can resist such an opportunity, of course, and soon Watt is engaged in yet another rambling adventure through time and space.

Watt evades fantastical monsters with the same self-reported aplomb he uses to confront demonic gunfighters, rob trains, and comfort distressed maidens (both living and otherwise). Through it all, he fights the nefarious schemes of the Sidonians, the misguided magic-wielding Utopians who caused the death of Watt's first love in Drachman's first book, and who now seek to establish a permanent kingdom on the western American frontier.

Scenes are set with well-researched historical vignettes depicting San Francisco and New York in the mid-nineteenth century, two worlds that have long vanished from the ken of modern man—one lost to the great 1906 earthquake and the other to the ever-busy forces of urban change and renewal. The story is populated with historically apt characters ranging from great tycoons like J. P. Morgan to the less well-known denizens of San Francisco's Chinatown and the lone survivors of lost Indian tribes.

Drachman's writing style is both amusingly discursive and rollickingly energetic, perfectly reflecting the personality of his picaresque protagonist. Unfortunately, despite the strong characters and the intriguing settings, the plot of *Watt O'Hugh Underground* is difficult to follow if one has not read the previous volume. The nature of Watt's time-traveling gift and the background and motives of the sinister Sidonians are frequently hinted at in an oblique fashion but remain difficult for readers new to the series to understand.

Watt O'Hugh Underground is an exciting and tumultuous tale, but readers should begin Drachman's series with the first book in order to fully enjoy the world he has created.

BRADLEY A. SCOTT (March 7, 2014)

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