

Zuni Stew

Kent Jacobs

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The setting of a reservation in New Mexico, paired with otherworldly forces, creates a mystical mood in this suspenseful novel.

A skillful blend of Native American folklore and supernatural forces, this frightening murder mystery integrates elements from multiple genres. *Zuni Stew* by Kent Jacobs crosses boundaries in an innovative twist on the traditional suspense novel.

Jack D'Amico, a young doctor, faces a baffling nightmare when his family members are murdered for no apparent reason. He's out of his comfort zone, a killer is stalking him, and the FBI is pursuing him, too. A Zuni medicine man steps in and sequesters Jack to keep him safe; safety, however, is no longer possible unless he relies on otherworldly guidance he does not fully understand.

The book takes place primarily on a Zuni reservation in New Mexico. The location establishes an ideal setting for creating the mystical mood, which is enhanced by riveting symbolism and paranormal events. This southwestern tale takes much of its flavor from the region, maximizing its spooky atmosphere with authenticity:

The extremely surreal experience began in a kiva, a big round gathering house, painted floor-to-ceiling with god figures, winged monsters, mythical animals with grotesque masks. All the images in the murals were winding in and out of giant corn plants in iconographic chaos. Men were singing. Loud and harmonious.

A complicated scenario, mixing trauma and myth, propels the unusual assortment of characters. Confusing at times yet undeniably arresting, the book veers in many directions, creating a labyrinth that's complicated to traverse. The short, tight novel is overpowered by a plot suitable for a longer story. Fans of fast-paced, action-packed trips into unfamiliar realms will enjoy the loaded itinerary. Deep character development takes a backseat, leaving involved motivations to the imagination.

Jacobs, a medical doctor, infuses his writing with knowledge and expertise. He worked at a Zuni reservation hospital, and backs his work with a specialized bibliography. The author also demonstrates a strong command of language; concise, direct, carefully edited prose boosts the quality of the narrative. Every word enriches the text with an underlying subtle meaning, inviting contemplative scrutiny: "He didn't mind the rattlesnakes draped around his neck, their exposed fangs inches from his face and bare chest. All he felt was the intense chill of the subterranean chamber and the pounding of his heart."

Zuni Stew might be compared to a desert mirage. Like walking across the sand under intense midday sun—the heat is real, the ground is real, the snake is real ... yet the mind wanders into a dreamlike state. Eerie perceptions are subject to emotion while the gritty reality of a harsh environment and a treacherous situation override the temptation to turn inward. Vision blurs, then clears again—intriguing, but not for the faint of heart.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (March 4, 2015)

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