



Bulwark

Brit Lunden

Radish Fiction (Aug 9, 2017)

eBook

978-1-947188-27-3

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Brit Lunden's supernatural thriller *Bulwark* lifts the veil on eerie happenings in a small town.

A year after the mysterious kidnapping of his daughter, Sheriff Clay Finnes is investigating an accident involving an ever-growing puddle. A gingerbread house materializes at a site that everyone in town claims has been abandoned for a century; his chief deputy has his throat ripped out; there's talk of hellhounds running loose. He keeps bumping into two cousins, Bobby Ray and Trout, who may be doing more than just hunting rabbits. Meanwhile, he is going through a painful divorce from a woman he still loves, and a local reporter is meddling in his affairs.

The book is well-plotted, telegraphing some of its developments and letting others be a surprise. As the narrative unfurls, the town's unearthly secrets are plumbed, and more and more of the backstory is revealed. A mix of romantic intrigue and paranormal action propels *Bulwark* forward at a riveting pace.

Natural dialogue employs regional dialects and advances the story, carrying a lot of emotional freight and containing the right amount of exposition, as when the sheriff claims that "duty calls" and his estranged wife, Jenna, responds that "it always does." Such lines are telling but also evocative, leaving the imagination to fill in the blanks. The book is at its most effective and intriguing when it hints at troubled pasts, dark mysteries and an eldritch otherworldliness.

The prose is often workmanlike, but occasionally contains unexpected flair ("once Jenna saw Dayna wrapped around him like a boa constrictor"), and even reaches poetic heights from time to time. Scenes are effectively set and develop the characters. Minor errors in punctuation and grammar are an occasional distraction.

In this brief, plot-driven work, many characters are underdeveloped. They are introduced and typically stay true to form to keep the narrative moving forward. Some of the ancillary characters are clichéd—a blockheaded sheriff's deputy, a dimwitted cousin, a Lothario doctor. Main characters are more fully sketched out—Finnes's motivations, for example, are always clear—and are interesting and relatable.

The novel is very effective at creating atmosphere, conjuring a Gothic world populated by monsters and the stuff of fairy tales. An air of paranormal mystery hangs over the small Southern town throughout the book, but the police protagonist and other identifiable characters keep it anchored with a degree of verisimilitude as events become increasingly crazier and more supernatural.

Bulwark is a spooky thriller—a melodrama with horrors and chills. It's a tale of the fearsome and fantastical that succeeds as a light diversion.

JOSEPH S. PETE (September 26, 2017)

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