

Graveyard of the Gods

Richard Newman

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Richard Newman's *Graveyard of the Gods* is an atmospheric modern version of a classic noir, with a protagonist drawn into investigating a crime and uncovering a far larger story. Newman creates a compelling narrative with memorable characters, legitimate mystery, and kinetic action sequences.

That protagonist is Gene Barnes, a Gulf War veteran raising pigs on his poor family's land in southern Illinois. To earn extra money, he has a deal with an old army buddy to dispose of dead bodies, feeding them to his pigs and never asking where they came from. The story kicks into gear when he recognizes one of those bodies as that of his estranged older brother, Miller, a journalist in the nearby town of Metropolis, and rides his motorcycle there to find some answers.

This is Newman's first novel, but he has published many poems and short stories, and his descriptive language stands out throughout. He infuses Metropolis, a small downstate town best known for its Superman statue and its spot on the Ohio River, with a convincingly seedy underbelly and the kind of corporate intrigue worth killing over to keep quiet. The novel is short and lean, building a full world without ever losing the story's momentum, and all the subplots effectively serve either character or action.

Gene's investigation features suspicious characters hanging out in dusty bars, hired goons seeking to shut him up, and revelations about the big story his brother was trying to uncover before meeting his demise. At the same time, Gene forges a kind of posthumous relationship with him, meeting Miller's girlfriend and learning about his noble work.

There's a strong story about family running throughout the book, in which Gene's inability to have children, his hospitalized mother's creeping dementia, and the plot of land where he raises his hogs combine to make *Graveyard of the Gods* as much a story about lost family legacy as it is a high-stakes mystery. There is no possible reward for Gene's efforts other than learning what really happened. It's enough to keep him going, and more than enough to keep the book compelling.

JEFF FLEISCHER (Winter 2017)

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