

Jawbone Holler

Mace Thornton

Mascot Books

(305pp)

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A humble farm boy leaves home to become a noble American hero in the moral-minded historical novel Jawbone Holler.

Jawbone Holler is Mace Thornton's gripping historical novel in which decent people build their lives in the American West.

In the antebellum period, Perry, whose drinking destroys his reputation and ambition, steals an overworked mule and an antique spyglass belonging to his pirate great-great-grandfather from his father and leaves their farm in Illinois, heading west. He hopes to build his own life in a country on the brink of war. After battling wolves and thieves on the trail, he makes a home for himself in a Kansas valley near the Missouri border. There, his adventures continue: he wins friends, goes to war, and falls in love.

An adventure tale set in the 1860s on the border between Kansas, a free state, and Missouri, a slaveholding state, the book is flush with gritty, realistic historical details and fascinating anecdotes. These include mentions of the pirate Edward Thatch (known as Blackbeard), the brutal destruction of Lawrence, Kansas, the humble origins of the now-ubiquitous John Deere company, and a Civil War regiment of civilian volunteers called the Kansas Jayhawkers.

Early on, the story focuses on the morality of Perry's unceremonious departure from his father's farm, setting it up as a tale of personal development and adventure. But Perry's evolution begins and ends with drinking and self-determination. By the time he starts his own home in Kansas, he's near to sobriety and working hard. His characterization is defined by his persistence and his love of freedom and equality, expressed in his hatred for slavery.

The book's secondary characters include Moses, a formerly enslaved man, and his son Gabe; through them, it further explores the horrors of slavery in Missouri and Kansas. Moses's wife and two of his children are sold away from him by a cruel and vindictive person. To find freedom, Moses and Gabe escape to Kansas where they develop a friendship with Perry—a connection that rests in expressions of their firm beliefs against slavery without being fleshed out further. And as the novel continues, Perry grows into such an archetypal American hero that his presence is more mythical than believable.

In action-filled chapters, people are quick to tell each other all that they're thinking and feeling. Strangers share their most personal secrets in their first meetings. These characters are layered with secrets and hidden beliefs that often fall along the contemporaneous political divide in the region. They also hide criminal acts including murder, assault, robbery, and intimidation, as well as feelings of love. Some of them, like Moses, hide unimaginable traumas. Without much development or work on the part of the characters, these layers are laid bare in a way that strains belief, and intimacy develops with fantastical ease. In conversation, people's voices evoke a rural style with country sayings, rising-and-falling rhythms, humble bravado, catchphrases, and full-throated confessions that help to burst open their charming inner lives.

In the folksy historical novel *Jawbone Holler*, a farmer makes a life for himself with little more than a mule and courage.

BEN LINDER (August 2, 2024)

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