

The Cannibal Owl

Aaron Gwyn

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The spirit of perseverance is given wings in Aaron Gwyn's touching coming-of-age novella, *The Cannibal Owl*.

Levi was raised in the rough-and-tumble Arkansas territory in the first decades of the nineteenth century. His unexpected orphaning veers his path to Texas, where his uncle's abuse precipitates him fleeing again. He's out on his own by the age of eleven.

Levi's lonesome travels take him across slave fields; he encounters a Comanche band that shelters and feeds him. Despite the trepidation of the braves and chieftains of the tribe, Levi is taken in by an elder, Poe-paya, whose security over Levi helps to hone his resolve and his survival skills. Poe-paya also helps to define the scope of Levi's worldview and drive. And when the tribe faces disharmony and violence, Levi is imbued with the spirit of Pia Mupitsi, the Cannibal Owl, who haunts the night for disobedient children. Pia Mupitsi also gives Levi invincible determination, guiding him toward vengeance.

While it's a hard task to impart a sense of finality within the nebulous confines of its space, *The Cannibal Owl* is a deep and thoughtful story, packing a series' worth of allegory and early American history into its short pages. Powerful prose guides Levi's ascent from the despair of a tragic upbringing to the precipice of eternal hereafter; he moves through a gamut of heartbreaking lessons toward stoic maturity. The arc of Levi's losses and hard-fought gains is vivid even in moments of profound darkness, with the backdrop of territory-starved American naivety appearing between the cracks.

Despite its brevity, *The Cannibal Owl* is a beautiful, dramatic patchwork story about what it means to want to survive, to become accepted, and to thrive and contribute despite the hurdles and forfeitures along the way.

RYAN PRADO (January / February 2025)

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