

The Deadening

Jim Beane

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In Jim Beane's thrilling novel *The Deadening*, two scarred World War I veterans clash on the home front.

Hickman and Redd are damaged after the war, though they handle with their wounds in different ways. Hickman works as an itinerant on a ranch and copes with shell shock by using drugs and alcohol; he ends up responsible for two murders. Redd, who lost an arm and an eye in the war, became a family man and the town's mercantile owner and sheriff; he investigates the killings, bringing him into conflict with Hickman.

The book evokes its 1920s setting with details of laudanum addiction, riding the rails, and restless nightmares of trench warfare on the rough prairie landscape, where people are fast discarded. Hickman's flashbacks to machine gun fire, commands to attack, and battle buddies' deaths are emotive too. Indeed, the prose is sensory throughout, as with the sound of nickels dropping on lunch counters, the hardness of the frozen ground while men try to dig posts, and the wide view of the open land from a boxcar. Such details reveal the characters' states of mind well: Hickman stares inside his coffee cup, avoiding looking at "the man [with] a belly to match his big mouth."

After Hickman shows up outside his store, Redd feeds the drifter, finds him odd jobs, and helps him service his laudanum addiction, respecting his need for silence but remaining wary of him. The two men are presented as a study of contrasts united by a deep, unspoken wartime bond before circumstances pit them against each other in the book's climactic battle, which is written with real gravitas.

In the gripping historical novel *The Deadening*, two World War I veterans suffer major wounds, veer off on different paths, and find they cannot escape violence back home.

JOSEPH S. PETE (November / December 2024)

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