

The Sons of Silas McCracken

Dudley James Podbury

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Dudley James Podbury's *The Sons of Silas McCracken* is an accomplished and highly readable saga that traces the ambitions, fortunes, and destinies of three distinctly different brothers from youth to old age.

Hardscrabble Scottish farmer Silas McCracken has plans for his sons—at least for two of them. Robust, cunning Rob and handsome, genial Harry are sent to boarding school to make something of themselves and elevate the family's status. Young Angus, deemed weak in body, mind, and spirit by his father, will remain at home in rural Kinross.

This is a character-driven tale, one which takes the time to reveal main characters through their actions, as when the supposedly weak and cowardly young Angus risks his own safety to save a mare's life. Minor characters—like the headmaster who inwardly sneers at the uneducated McCrackens while groveling for their tuition money—are presented in deft sketches that add interest and round out the book's interior world.

Shaped by Silas's succeed-or-else mandate, Rob learns to get what he wants through cheating and manipulation, while the more intellectual Harry finds that charm and a bit of studying go a long way. It is the seemingly left behind Angus who finds his heart's desire early on, in his unwavering love for childhood sweetheart Maggie and his evolution from apprentice carpenter to master builder.

Angus's quiet and unassuming rise plays in counterpoint to his brothers' less happy fates: Rob's youthful amorality leads him to rise in the ranks of organized crime at the cost of personal tragedy; Harry's ability to charm and manipulate women brings wealth and business success but moral decay and lingering self-disgust.

Though the book is long, clocking in at over 600 pages, it never lags. This is storytelling in the tradition of Irwin Shaw or Howard Fast, full of vivid characters and rich detail. As the focus moves from brother to brother, the scope broadens to London and the United States and the time frame widens to include decades rather than days, with enough personal drama in each brother's life to keep the pages turning.

One of the book's great virtues, very refreshing in the current era of chick-lit and lad-lit, is the reunification of the sexes. The women in the brothers' lives are not stereotypes but distinct, well-developed, and completely believable personalities whose presence makes the book all the more enjoyable.

In the current climate of rising paper costs and decreasing attention spans, when the 325-360 page book has become the norm, it's nice to see the prevailing standard challenged so successfully. Readers looking for a well-written and engrossing story will thrive on *The Sons of Silas McCracken*, a satisfying read indeed.

SUSAN WAGGONER (June 13, 2016)

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