

The Underwater Panthers: The Shallcross Series

Charles Porter

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The Underwater Panthers is an imaginative novel that is directed by the strange adventures of dedicated allies.

In Charles Porter's novel *The Underwater Panthers*, the fourth volume in the Shallcross series, a voice-hearer, his family, and other ecowarriors leave Florida for Massachusetts, where they put themselves at risk to protect an ocean rarity.

The book opens with two pivotal scenes highlighting fifteen-year-old Yuchee, whose mother died in a bizarre accident. Yuchee and his father Freddie meet medicine man Billie in the swamp. Through Billie, Yuchee learns about his connection to the alligator clan and meets two massive gators, the Dragon and Two-toed Tom, who help Freddie and a voice-hearer, Aubrey, escape the authorities after sinking a tugboat to prevent the release of dirty lake water into an estuary. Later, Aubrey and Freddie return the favor by escorting the alligators north, where a whale expert whose daughter has albinism is helping to protect a rare white humpback calf.

These wild experiences are reflective of the text as a whole, which twines mythic creatures with Indigenous lore and themes of family dynamics, spirituality, ecoactivism, and "voice hearing" (or schizophrenia). In the Shallcross world, heard voices belong to slippers—spirits who "slip" into humans or animals, speak with their hosts, and direct their actions.

Mixing instances of introspection with action, storytelling tone, and colorful secondary characters—including Roberta, a legless snake charmer; Triple Suiter, Aubrey's slipper; and Aubrey himself—this is an inventive, slang-filled book. Audiences will have to acclimate to its unique language: herein, *doo lang doo lang* are existential issues, to *carburet* means to understand something, and if something is *mansion*, it is really great. Fresh, even poetic, images arise as the novel progresses: Yuchee describes someone as "a beautiful girl, white as the heart of a Florida palm," and the moon appears "big as a piece of butcher's ice." References to lyrics and bands further embellish the prose.

But some flourishes are more indulgent: when the Dragon and Two-toed Tom attack poachers and thieves, the symbols ~& ~ repeat in the text describing the scene, for example. Further, the book's casual descriptions of bloody killings are off-putting in a book that otherwise evinces great care for the environment and for values like loyalty and the bonds of family and friendships.

The book's layout is diverse: some chapters begin with diary entries from Yuchee set in display type. Other visual aspects include maps and detailed sketches illustrating the book's events. Though it is part of a series, this volume works to stand on its own. Its narrative includes frequent recapitulations of earlier series adventures, and a list of significant characters appears in the front matter to assist with understanding.

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LYNNE JENSEN LAMPE (October 22, 2023)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book and paid a small fee to

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