



These Latter Days

Laura Kalpakian

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“Every rainstorm, every one is different, but the feeling is the same. There’s glory in it. There’s victory,” proclaims Hank Beecham, professional rainmaker. The protagonist’s obsessive quest for victory on his own dark, vengeful terms drives the plot of *Caveat*, Laura Kalpakian’s sixth novel and her third set in the fictional town of St. Elmo, Calif.

Caveat opens in 1916, with city fathers reluctantly welcoming the long-absent Beecham back to his drought-stricken hometown. Hank’s father, Jeremiah, was a drunken lout whose sole talent was recounting (and embellishing) his adventures as a warrior for the doomed Confederacy. The ramblings pay off handsomely for Hank, who discovers that by simulating battlefield conditions as described by his father, he can produce rain. Forsaking the village that despised his ne’er-do-well family, Hank becomes a savior to settlements across the parched West.

Now, with St. Elmo on its knees, Beecham demands a hefty fee. Town leaders counter with a wager that Hank wins all too convincingly: He touches off a deadly, devastating flood. When the city refuses to pay up, Beecham departs again, vowing revenge. Eight years later, he returns to the abandoned family homestead and locals scramble desperately to head off another catastrophe.

Despite a jarring tendency to shift from third-person to first-person narration, the latter emanating from iconoclastic physician Lucius Tipton, Kalpakian has crafted an absorbing tale of rage and retribution. Her characters are complex, the cast richly diverse. Her language is wonderfully descriptive; one can almost smell the acrid smoke and feel the ground convulsing underfoot as Beecham unleashes the fury of his artificial battle. The likeable Tipton’s frantic effort to convince Beecham that true victory means choosing peace over Armageddon keeps the reader engaged to the end.

JOHN FLESHER (May / June 1998)

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