

BROOKE WONDERS &
ANNAH BROWNING

Have-Nots Haunt the Haves across the Desert: A Review of *Haints Stay* by Colin Winnette

Haints Stay, by Colin Winnette. Columbus, Ohio: Two Dollar Radio, 2015.

Colin Winnette's second novel, *Haints Stay*, haunts the Western, plotting its way transparently through every genre expectation, and yet its consequences are consistently unpredictable.

Brothers Sugar and Brooke, hired killers riding high from a completed job, return to find their employer gone, presumed dead. She's been replaced by a new boss, and when Brooke impulsively breaks the nose of one of the boss's goons, the brothers are run out of town. From the outset it's made clear that Sugar is a trans man carrying an unwanted child. The brothers will be haunted and hunted for these two facts—the literal violence of the thrown punch and the perceived violence Sugar's gender identity wreaks on rigid masculinity—for the remainder of the book.

The outlaw brothers hide in the woods and awaken to find a naked boy asleep between them. The boy has no history or memory, but they name him Bird and accustom him to their way of life, teaching Bird to hunt, butcher meat, kill with bare hands, and bury the teeth of the dead. Sugar visits a forest prophet who insists that he keep "the baby" ("I'm not a baby!" says Bird), arguing that the forest is already too full with the ghosts of other murdered children.

In *Eyewitness to the West*, David Colbert's anthology of firsthand accounts of how the West was won, he lists the primary reasons why settlers went west: After they'd gone bust. To escape the past. For sanctuary. For quick money. To be their own boss. Colbert argues that the West has historically been at the bleeding edge of social crises and the cultural shifts that follow. As characters, Sugar and Brooke are overdetermined: all these motivations are available interpretations of

their brutal past and bloody present. Too, the Western as a genre concerns itself with white masculinity, especially the way in which its dominance is maintained via the subjugation of the twin Othernesses of indigenous persons and women. From Clint Eastwood's *Man with No Name* to Cormac McCarthy's *The Judge*, the Western tells us what makes a(n American) man in a given time period.

This makes the figure of Sugar a compelling intervention at this moment in time, as America rassesles with social justice issues arising from the Black Lives Matter movement and the fight for transgender rights. If Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* and McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* were at least partially attempts to work through the legacy of U.S. genocide of Native peoples, then Winnette here uses Sugar, a transgender bounty hunter, in a similar manner, but as a way to consider gender rather than ethnicity.

Sugar has endured hardship and survived. He is his brother's equal in their murderous work, and he fears the thing growing in his belly. He is also an effective killing instrument and the brains of the operation, speaking philosophically on a range of topics, from money—"power is like a gold coin. Some men squander it . . . Others lose it to a world much hungrier for it than they are" (7)—to survival: "You're imagining what's happening out there's got anything to do with you . . . it's got nothing to do with you really. It's out of your hands" (37).

The trouble with *Haints Stay*, however, is that Sugar is not always effectively wrought. A backstory involving incest and murder is heavy-handed and offensive, implying a causal relationship between child abuse in Sugar's past and Sugar's feelings of mismatch between his assigned sex and his gender expression. Prior to this unfortunate revelation, however, Sugar electrified every scene in which he appeared, and we were genuinely saddened at his end.

Though the mystery of Sugar's history drives much of the first half of the book, to focus only on this character would be to ignore Winnette's successful stylistic commitment to the acid Western. One particularly compelling example of Winnette's take on this surrealist genre: the plot features a series of unstable wounds. Some injuries seem catastrophic but prove minor—Brooke is stabbed in the foot in an early knife fight but walks away—while others appear minor, if agonizing—Bird's arm is skinned by a cannibal for later consumption—only to prove deadly (Bird loses the arm to infection). The language is sensory and arresting; we are given little rumination, no exposition, and dialogue reminiscent of Jarmusch's humor crossed with the rhapsodizing of *True Detective*. This technique leaves us

trapped in an eternal present, much as *Dead Man's* ending, with William Blake floating off into the sunset, suggests that the violence of the West is still with us and has its own inescapably circular logic. Add to this Winnette's penchant for narrative circularity—characters shuck off their names and roles with abandon and take on the names and lives of the deceased, often those they've killed—and *Haints Stay* has an accurate bead on the anxiety and stasis produced by repeated exposure to trauma.

The title, *Haints Stay*, speaks multiply to the commitments of the book. *Haint* is defined as both a haunting spirit and a contraction of "have not." This book tells us where the have-nots stay: at the edges of towns, in the wilderness, fighting to survive. They stay "where and as they please" (179), without forward progress, remaining trapped in narrative cycles of trauma and deprivation. The West has long been full of have-nots—who goes West but those who have been wronged (implicit in Colbert's rubric) by a culture, an economy, or a people? Those have-nots then haunt the haves, remaining on the fringes of civilization, both suffering from increased violence and erupting into violence at the hopelessness of their circumstances.

This permits an alternate reading of Sugar's ineffective backstory. We are given his history from Brooke's point of view: Brooke narrates Sugar's childhood. Speaking from the hegemonic perspective of the white male bounty hunter, it's unsurprising that Brooke would see a causal link between their father's abuse and Sugar's identity. It's possible that Winnette wants this to read as irony: Brooke commits an act of violence in narrating Sugar's story. If so, then *Haints Stay* makes the act of narrating someone else's story, especially when the narrator's experiences are distant from his subject's, legible only as violence—which is a convincing critique of race and gender as they've historically been represented in the Western.

In the end, *Haints Stay* is bleak in the way that only the best Westerns can be, forcing us to acknowledge the violence we are always capable of by holding up a cracked, soot-stained saloon mirror.