



Review of *Snake Mountain* a novel by Jerry Craven

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Mahatma Ghandi Meets Annie Oakley and Who Wins

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Snake Mountain is everything a “western” novel is supposed to be, but it’s a lot more. It has all the gun-play, sinister bad guys, beautiful women and beautiful (and sometimes pitiful) horses and fist-fights one expects in the genre, but it transcends the genre in so many ways that merely assigning it to the western genre is an injustice.

The main character, Jason White, is a complicated character from the git-go. He’s the son of a Texan, born in Texas himself, with a mother from India. He’s been raised in the Far East and returns to Texas (west Texas Panhandle to be precise) a half-breed, at the age of 22 to attend college. When he arrives he’s a vegetarian, sometime Muslim, who speaks with a British expatriate accent, and has the mind set of a pacifist. His first encounter with the United States is witnessing a murder at the Los Angeles airport. Although the encounter seems at first to be extraneous to the story that follows, it’s not for a couple of reasons. The first and most obvious is that the experience reaffirms the opinion he has that the U.S. is a violent country, very alien to the way he believes himself to be. The second is more subtle and easily missed because the story moves on quickly to his arrival in Texas. What’s also important about the encounter in the Los Angeles airport is that although he prevents the murderer from escaping by tripping him with his cane (he’s nursing a broken leg from a tennis accident suffered before the story begins.) he has a brief fantasy in which he envisions himself as having prevented the murder by being more aggressive. Although it may seem to be a flaw in Jerry Craven’s constructing the Jason character by including Jason’s fantasy of being more aggressive, it’s not at all. It foreshadows what is to come in the arc of Jason’s character from the beginning of the tale to its conclusion.

The story takes lots of twists and turns. What’s coming next is never totally predictable, but predictable enough to make it believable. Jason gets mixed up with two women, and entangled in the lives of both, including the hostility of the estranged husband of one (a really mean, ornery character) and the Lesbian pursuer of the other (another mean and very devious character).

Befriended by a Texas-style “uncle”—who’s actually an old college chum of his father’s—and a crusty cowboy or two, Jason learns to navigate and adapt to the strange ways and language of cowboy culture (like the culture of a “tribe” as his “uncle” describes it.)

Some may take offense at the comic, crude, and offensive mannerisms of this particular “tribe” as being demeaning and unflattering for Texas and Texans. Perhaps Craven’s description of cowboy culture seems a bit over-the-top at times (Think Urban Cowboy.) But it’s true to life. Craven never strays far from the truth as this reviewer knows it, and he’s a native born Texan himself with experience in living during his early adolescence (very like Jason’s *Sitz im Leben*) among the very tribe Craven describes, and growing up in Pasadena, Texas, the setting of *Urban Cowboy*.

The particular genius and meaning of Craven’s story is not found in its plot nor the superficial setting of West Texas—a modern version of the “old west.” The real importance of the book is the anthropology--what it tells about human beings; the way in which human culture adapts and thrives in the challenge of surviving in the land where it lives.

The west Texas part of the planet is a savage, unforgiving, semi-arid region filled with natural danger, unpredictable changes of weather, and hazards that spring up without warning, such as being surprised by a rattle snake on the trail and the sudden danger of wild fires (some natural and some the result of human contrivance.) It’s not a land for sissies or those governed by altruistic notions of fairness or preset ideas about good and evil. Both are sure-fired ways of getting hurt real bad—or killed in west Texas.

Human survival in such a place has its own rules of behavior—some subtle and some outright. Sentimentality about love and the appreciation of the beauty of nature are present as part of human nature, and Craven shows us examples, but in doing so, he shows us why in west Texas they have to be cloaked by a veneer of hardness and spoken in a particular “code” as Craven describes it. The crude, tasteless limericks of dirty songs cloak what are in truth expressions of love, and spiritual

connections with nature are literally hidden in darkness and performed in secret. This is all very true: “I been there” and I know.

Human beings are adaptable creatures; that’s why we can survive and thrive in hostile environments--even in space--but the essential qualities of what makes us human are always present--both the goodness and the inherent evil, which we pass on from generation to generation in our genes.

A minor character (who Jason meets as a child long before he goes to Texas) is his first encounter with gratuitous violence and because the character is an Australian (a tribe of people who have learned to survive in a hostile land) the incident foreshadows Jason’s encounter with violence in Texas among the Texas tribe. Human beings must adapt to the land in which they live if they are to survive, or they have to leave. Perhaps much of our trouble as a nation when we try to impose our own, northern and western culture on others stems from our lack of understanding for the tribes in other regions, such as desert nomads (think Lawrence of Arabia for an example) and the native tribes of Somalia and other parts of Africa, as well as in South and Central America--and of course, Iraq and Iran. They’re like they are in part because of the nature of the land in which they live.

Craven’s west Texas tale, at its heart, is a study in how Texans through crassness, crudeness, and their seemingly arbitrary judgments of right and wrong--law and order--live and let live--shows us a great deal about human beings and the human condition. There is an old story about how a no-nonsense (female) Texas judge explained something to another judge from a more “civilized” part of the country. He asked her why in Texas a man can go scot-free after killing a man he caught in bed with his wife--exonerated because it was justifiable homicide--while a man would always be strung up for stealing a horse. Her reply was: “Well, some men need killing, but there was never a horse that needed stealing.” In west Texas there are places a cowboy has to go that you can’t get to, even today, on an ATV, in a pickup truck, or on foot. Steal his horse and you endanger his livelihood as well as his life. For a west Texan, a horse thief needs killing.

That little antidote explains Craven’s Texas and the Texans in Snake Mountain. He’s written a great book that ought to be considered literature and certainly not dismissed as just another shoot-em-up story about the west. Buy it, read it, and appreciate it for what it teaches about our survival as human beings in hostile country.



Glenn Harper wrote this review during his tenure as rector of Christ Church in San Augustine, Texas.