

Bones author Marlowe: Underdog with feral voice

Author(s): PHILIP MARTIN

ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Date: June 7, 2015

Section: Style

There's a fairy tale that we like to believe about how cream always rises to the top and talent always will out. But that's not true; there are all sorts of things that contribute to whether something gets noticed. The son of the boss has a better chance of being boss than the kid aging out of the foster care system, and it seems probable that our next president will be one who has already spent considerable time in the White House.

I'll admit I give more attention to the boxes from Knopf, Pantheon or Algonquin than I do the hand-addressed envelopes that cross my desk. There are a lot of slim little paperbacks that never get read because I feel obligated to check out the newest Judy Blume or Paulo Coelho. And no, it's not fair, but time is a nonrenewable resource and they're not giving out gold stars for working late these days. So it's easier to do what most everyone else does, and completely defensible too. I can't do anything about the best-seller lists any more than I can make the Grammys smarter.

It's for purely selfish reasons that I pick up a book like Dale **Marlowe's** Digging Up the **Bones** (Roundabout Press, \$15.95). I just do it to make myself feel better, to pretend that I at least give the underdog a shot. It shows up unsolicited from a fairly new press I don't know much about. I think maybe I'll read the first chapter just to reassure myself that it's ordinary enough to skip. I don't have to pan it, I don't have to step on some aspiring novelist's neck - I can just pass on it.

But I couldn't pass on Digging Up the **Bones** and I couldn't put it down. I don't want to say it's the best book I've read all year because I always suspect that kind of hyperbole; after all, I've only read a tiny fraction of what's available anyway. Still, it's the best book I've read all year.

It's a brief (128 pages) suite of connected stories about cursed members of the meth trash Nash family, originally of Ebb Holler, Ky., that take place over the course of a few decades, from 1969 to 2003. In these stories we meet all manner of scarred and stunted folks, from would-be presidential assassins to disillusioned white supremacists. They are all fantastic creatures, yet they seem very much like people I have known, or might have known. Or might have been.

But more importantly than these characters or what happens to them is the author's voice - a ferocious, low-to-the-ground animal with yellow eyes. The easy reference points are Daniel Woodrell (Winter's Bone) and Larry Brown, but there's an economical mania to **Marlowe's** prose that occasionally puts me in mind of Denis Johnson (The Laughing Monsters: A Novel):

Lies and false reasons and make-believe swirl around him like dithering leaves. Kyle decides he will not allow them to settle or pile up and cover this day, these truths, that kiss, not again, nevermore. He pounds the roof of his Pontiac with the side of his fist, and it rumbles like a timpani. He raises his head to the light. No sense in fighting it. He will go back and knock on Marion's door. When it opens he will enter, and once inside, he will stay.

That paragraph is the end of a story, but it can stand as a story itself, a clot of clocked words, all rhythm and echoes, a resolving chord. **Marlowe's** voice snarls and snaps - he can unwind it

into a **feral** howl. It's not always pretty music, but it's surprisingly tight. It is as disciplined as it is dark. There's a precision to his licks, and a stubborn insistence on the residual humanity of even the most thwarted and beaten down.

It's almost always a mistake to confuse an artist with his work. I've stalked **Marlowe** on the Internet and satisfied myself he's not some backwoods wizard transcribing his hallucinations, but a reasonably comfortably fixed family dude living near Dayton, Ohio. He teaches at a community college and practices law. He's a graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop. Pays his taxes. Quiet and normal as a serial killer.

I didn't expect that. But then I didn't expect this. Don't ask me to lend you my copy of Digging Up the **Bones**. I've already pressed it into the hands of a friend with the assurance that it's the genuine article, the good stuff, the work of an original and fierce intelligence to which attention must be paid. I hope he sells a few books. I hope he writes a few more.

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