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Beck

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

This at times sad story also has a sad history, with the enormously gifted Mal Peet dying of cancer before he could get to its end. But his close friend, the equally uncompromising Meg Rosoff, accepted his wish that she complete the work. Here now is the result ? a lean, angry story about the Canadian adventures of an early twentieth century orphaned boy of mixed race. Based on an account of young British orphans once sent out to Canada that Peet had read after a trip to Vancouver, no detail is spared of the shocking sexual abuse poor Beck has to suffer at the hands of the infamous Catholic Brothers once he landed in Quebec. He runs away, eventually finding solace with a kindly black couple who take him in and give him a job helping with their bootlegging operation. When that all ends in violence, Beck is on his own again.

At this point, this story takes an abrupt turn. For Beck still in his teens, finds home and love with Grace McCallister, a beautiful half-Scottish, half-native Blackfoot woman in her early thirties. A wealthy landowner, she employs Beck on her estate having fallen in love with him at first sight. The couple continue to deny their feelings for each other which if declared would bring all sorts of problems in their wake. Hopelessly conflicted, Beck runs away again, nearly dies, and is then almost magically transported back to the ranch where an annual sun dance ceremony is in full swing. Joining hands with Grace, he now feels he has genuinely come home for the first and last time.

How much of this is Peet and how much Rosoff is left an open question. What really matters is that this novel definitely comes off, with its softening of tone towards the end balanced by the graphic cruelty that has gone before. Beck himself is a difficult, taciturn character, who has long ?misered the cold coins of disappointment close to his heart.?

Understandably suspicious whenever things seem to be working out for him he is still able to accept his good fortune by the end, and few if any of his readers would wish it otherwise.

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