

Ghost Medicine

Andrew Smith

Reviewed by: Andres Fernandez, 17

Star Teen Book Reviewer of Be the Star You Are! Charity

www.bethestaryouare.org

Recommended for ages 13-18

This book is set somewhere in the western United States and serves as a window into the soul of Troy Stotts, a 16 year old living in the rural town of Holmes. The chronology of the story is not linear, rather is built like a series of recollections as Troy describes the summer that he sees as defining in his maturity, his adventures involve a traditional ranching lifestyle, as he is very attached to his horse and to his friends Tom Buller and Gabe Benavidez; Gabe is the son of the prominent rancher, and Tom is son of the ranch's foreman. The narration starts with a bang, as Troy describes how an incident in the hill led to the death of three teens. Troy's mother died of cancer a few months earlier, and his relationship with his father is very strained. Wanting to get away from the situation and the pain, Troy takes his horse on a long uphill trip. He finds a cabin and settles there for some days. He spends his time fishing, thinking and riding, until Luz, Gabe's sister, goes to get him, describing how people are worried. Troy, who admits to being romantically interested in Luz, opens up to her and the two share a sentimental moment before returning to town. Troy's life during that summer centers around activities with his two friends, his increasingly close relationship with Luz and his attachment to his horse and free lifestyle. They also encounter Rose, a senior woman who lives alone in a hill, surrounded by wild horses. Troy and Tom develop a close friendship with her, share tobacco and alcohol and help her with home improvement chores. During a fire, they help her flee, she dies sitting in her car without any reason and names the two boys as inheritors of her land.

The three boys spend much of their time riding around, talking and experiencing typical teenage activities. Tom, whom Troy reveres, is a relaxed, outgoing guy, he is happy to chew tobacco, work in the ranch and spend time with his friends and seems to have no outward aspirations. Gabe, who is younger, introverted and jittery, is treated like a small sibling by the other two, but he eventually proves his maturity when he saves the other two from an incident with Chase Rutledge, the son of the town sheriff, and the prominent bully and antagonist. There are a variety of encounters between Chase, his cronies and Troy's group, which all add tension to the story, the sheriff's relaxed attitude towards his son's actions also serve to show the interaction with the adult authorities in the town. The notable incident, which takes place after a ride and shoot competition in which Chase narrowly defeats Troy, plays out with the three boys along with Luz chasing Chase, the group gets separated and the boys narrowly save Luz from being raped by Chase, Gabe shoots him. This causes a feud, which eventually ends with Chase and his friend Jack ambushing Troy and Tom with a gun, killing Tom but being in turn ambushed by Gabe with a rock that knocks Chase out, drowns him and causes Jack to dive into the river to save him, also dying. The two boys are troubled by the deaths, but the story is not developed much past this point, with Gabe having nightmares and Troy dropping out of high school.

The largest issue that I had with the novel was the poor portrayal of the adults in the story. With the exception of Rose, none of the adult characters are portrayed as anything more than puppets. Troy's father is slow, willing to be guided by his teenage son and not connected to anyone or anything in the town. The sheriff, as described previously, keeps his son out of trouble and nothing else. Mrs Benavidez, aside from being Italian and having an accent, is given no other description. Mr Benavidez is treated like the typical tough father, who disapproves of Luz seeing Troy, he conducts exactly one business deal during the whole time frame of the novel, and that involves the sale of two horses. The shallow take on the adults might make sense for a young adult novel aficionado, but for me it renders the group of characters weak, the teens are able to do everything that they set their mind on, have no

need for guidance and are able to go impune in a murder that has an obvious motive and timing. Troy, while being well rounded and vulnerable as a character, is not appealing, rather grey and ambiguous due to his actions. There is no resolution to his life, and his romance with Luz is very simple, with Luz only appearing in the story to provide food, talk about feelings and resent her father.

Due to those character faults, the story ends up feeling very bland, something that is augmented by the lack of useful description of Troy's mother, who is limited to unclear inserted flashbacks with stream of consciousness type text.

Despite the emotional power of the killings and the deep relationship between Rose and the boys, the story is shallow and feels incomplete, all of which takes away from a nicely described setting and a protagonist with real potential.

I would not recommend this book.

Recommended Readings:

Funny How Things Change by Melissa Wyatt

The Hollow Ground by Natalie S Harnett

A Separate Peace by John Knowles

Ghost Medicine

Andrew Smith

Reviewed by: Vivien Lee, 15

Star Teen Book Reviewer of Be the Star You Are! Charity

www.bethestaryouare.org

Ghost Medicine, by Andrew Smith, takes the reader into the world of a seventeen year old boy who is still in mourning after losing his mother in a summer fire. Troy Stotts, an unusually skinny boy with tattered sneakers, has been trying to mend his wounds from the night that his mother passed away. He recuperates by spending time with his best friends, Gabey and Tommy, riding in the open field on the back of his horse, Reno. At the same time, he tries to avoid Chase, the sheriff's son, who has been a bully since they were very young. Along the course of this book, he cherishes the moments he shares with his friends and with his love, Luz.

Troy, Gabey, and Tommy skim through many dangers, and they celebrate by getting tattoos and conducting their own rituals, mentioning a force called the ghost medicine. Troy and his friends sit around the campfire one night, and Troy explains that this ghost medicine can keep the friends connected in spirit no matter what happens to their bodies. Around the same time, Chase has been following them, planning his revenge on Gabey—for shooting him slightly along his buttocks—and on Tommy—who had always stood up against Chase. Chase succeeds in fatally wounding Tommy, but pays his price when he is hit with a rock thrown by Gabey. Chase drops into the river in shock, and his body is found a few days later. Nothing is the same for Troy after Tommy dies, but he knows that the inner circle created by their friendship will always be connected by the power of the ghost medicine.

Ghost Medicine is written from the point of Troy; his need of hope and his resulting actions should not be unfamiliar to teenagers. Many of the contents and language would not suit young children, but mature readers above ten should be able to handle the common references to tobacco and alcohol. The story itself lacks the expected qualities of a “good read”, including the complicated twists and the anticipated romance, but that is what makes the novel so different from the others.

The mood of the story itself is very calm with occasional violence, and the author describes every scene with great detail and dialogues. However, there were a few chapters where those details slow down the pace of the book, and may cause the reader to drop his or her attention. Those who do go on with the novel will realize that as the story progresses, the characters evolve into complex and understandable people. This novel will make the reader wish for something like the ghost medicine. It helped Troy and his friends stay invisible and invincible against time even for the briefest moment.