

Inouye shows her intelligence, spirituality, and genuineness in *Crossings*, and these qualities made a lasting impression on me. This is a five-star book, feeding me the knowledge for which I didn't know I hungered. I highly recommend it. Ask your book club to read and discuss it. For birthday, Mother's Day, Father's Day, or Christmas, give *Crossings* to your spouse, parents, friends, or anyone else who already has everything. Happy reading!



“Is this the Promised End?”¹

Steven L. Peck. *The Tragedy of King Leere, Goatherd of the La Sals*. Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2019. 250 pp. Paperback. \$12.95. ISBN: 978-1948218016.

Reviewed by Kylie Nielson Turley

Steven L. Peck's *The Tragedy of King Leere, Goatherd of the La Sals* is, like many of Peck's works, almost impossible to categorize. Is it a modern-day ecological interpretation of the famous Shakespearian familial tragedy? A dystopian novel that will haunt the reader with visions of a post-apocalyptic future in which greed reigns, goats have human skin, and a “handibot” can misunderstand a metaphoric command and surgically remove human eyes in 2.1 seconds? Perhaps it is a tragicomedy set in such realistic relief against the geography of southern Utah that the reader will cry about the seemingly inevitable destruction and simultaneously laugh aloud at a “retired” demon's wit—as well as surreptitiously check over her shoulder to see if the demon or the Knowledge Enabled Neural Tactical (KENT) Banefinder BattleDredge is following her home.

1. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act V, Scene iii.

Then again, perhaps this book is a purposeful contorting of the Bard's plot into a tool for cultural commentary—a tool that slices and dices casual opinions about contemporary romance and sexual mores, religion, politics, ethics, family relationships, and the environment. Or maybe it is an ironic parody that warps Shakespearian dialogue into outrageously discordant genres and diction as characters square off against each other in cowboy-cussing slang, philosophical soliloquy, plagiarized essays on love, blank verse rantings, religious computerized ponderings on grace and ethics, romantic innuendo, trash-talk texting, binary computer code and prose.

My answer to these questions is this: whatever this book is, it is well worth reading.

If Peck's title, *The Tragedy of King Leere*, does not broadcast this text as a creative and modern re-envisioning of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, then readers should suspect that after casually perusing the list of the "Dramatis personae." Peck introduces themes of gender, religion, and post-apocalyptic future from these first pages, prior to the narrative's technical beginning; in the list of characters, the Shakespearian Lear's three daughters Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan become the Peck-ian Leere's daughter, Delia, and his two sons, Neril and Regan; Lear's Fool becomes Leere's Botavita, an ex-Mormon bishop; and Lear's Kent becomes Leere's "KENT" aka a military-grade killing machine who decides what liberties he can take with commands with his ethically-challenged and frighteningly religion-laced logic. Interestingly, readers could overlook what becomes the book's leading thematic concern—the ecological fate of the earth—since the theme is only hinted at by King Leere's description as the "Landholder of the La Sals" and a "goatherd" (xiii). But whether the list of characters provokes thoughts about ongoing themes or not, it should at least let the reader know that what follows will not be a simplistic re-hash of Shakespeare's famous tragedy.

Rather than jumping right into a parody of *King Lear*, Act I and Lear's infamous love contest (in which his children must declare how much they love him to gain his kingdom), Peck's Act I introduces "Asmodeus," who—after a few pages of reflections—properly introduces himself as the

author and “omniscient narrator” of this text. He is a “daemon by trade” (3), though he has retired, thanks to Nietzsche’s philosophies; Asmodeus believes that it makes more sense to move “beyond these senseless categories of good and evil” (5). He has determined he no longer “serve[s] Satan” or “fight[s] against the Almighty One” (4). Readers would do well to question how trustworthy this smooth-talking, reflective demon is, especially since he tells readers, “And I am a trustworthy [narrator], for I always speak the truth, even when I must lie to do so” (6). Trustworthy or not, the demon is delightfully snarky and sarcastic, guiding readers through the murk and mire of *Leere* and its telling of a “possible future. One that might be. Or might not be” (6), all while flirting with Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, and its dysfunctional relationships, epic characters, and tragic conclusion.

Like Shakespeare’s *Lear*, *Leere* catalyzes the plot when he prematurely and immaturely decides to make his children compete for their inheritance, not realizing that giving his money means giving away his power and any claim on a relationship with his spoiled and greedy children. Unlike *Lear*, who asks his children to speak the extent of their love for him, *Leere* asks his children to write an original essay saying how much they love the land. Neril and Regan produce plagiarized essays, not that *Leere* notices the falseness of their expressions since he is caught up in their hypocritical professions of love. Delia refuses to complete. In what readers assume will parallel Shakespeare’s *Lear*, Delia announces that she has “nothing” to read, that she cannot provide even a draft of an essay. However, then Delia (unlike Cordelia) surprises everyone with her video presentation about the La Sals and their former beauty, one of a number of plot differences between *King Lear* and *King Leere*. Though she says relatively little, her video presentation is not the same “nothing” as Cordelia’s.

Of course, much of the plot remains the same; Peck stays with Shakespeare’s plot in most of the drama’s most memorable moments: for example, in both, the youngest child’s refusal to satisfy her father’s strange love contest results in disinheritance. Another character (*Lear*’s King of France; *Leere*’s Ellie) accepts responsibility for and offers love to the disinherited child,

and the remaining children display their true temperaments as soon as they acquire their father's money. Those who have read *King Lear* will enjoy parsing Peck's book, noting the intriguing ways in which the plot mirrors and breaks with Shakespeare.

Given his decision to limit his story by remaining within reasonable Shakespearean plot parameters, Peck of necessity created characters who behave anywhere from poorly to murderously. With the possible exception of mother-daughter pair Hester and Ellie (who each have tragic flaws and blind spots but are, ultimately, decent people), as well as the family's cowboy robot, Bob (who loyally stays beside Leere, swearing like a salty sailor until the bitter end), Asmodeus may be the most likeable character—demon—in Peck's novel. Leere, for example, is at least as unlikeable, rich, and arrogant as his namesake, Lear: both are too wealthy and too blind to realize that their blatant favoritism fractures families, that they have merely "bought" the seeming love of their children with money and the associated power.

Arguably, the only real relationship Leere has is with Hester, his common law wife, who admits that she "found him arrogant and overbearing" when they first met, and has worked to "bring that goodness" in Leere "into the light" because "there is more to him than [the] darkness" that everyone else sees (32). If not for Hester's love of him, Leere would be even less likeable. Unfortunately, Hester's love is questionable. Though Asmodeus interrupts to make sure readers understand that "Leere's own dementia" is metaphorically tied to the "planet's demise" (16), it is also possible to read the goats as symbolic of Leere. Even Hester "hates those goats" (30)—as do Leere's sons, and daughters-in-law, the ranch neighbors, and in many ways, Leere himself. He is the goatherder of these genetically-altered animals and their horrifying human skin, skin that was somehow acquired during the "war" with the "Oceanic people" (31). In a psychologically insightful comment, Hester explains that Leere fought in the war and feels intense guilt for the "terrible things" he did to the Oceanic people—but rather than making him repentant, Leere has "transferred his guilt into an ugly hatred for the people he's caused to suffer" (32). Even as the book draws to a close, it is

difficult to find anything to like about Peck's racist and unforgiving landholder, although his counterpart, Shakespeare's Lear, seems to attract some amount of pity by the conclusion.

This may come about because of a simple flip: whereas Shakespeare uses the dividing of the land of England as a mechanism to display and comment on family and relationships, Peck foregrounds family and relationships as a means of commenting on the land and the environment. These decisions necessarily alter characters and the plot such that the two stories diverge in increasing degree as they move toward their respective conclusions. In particular, Peck risks altering Delia. He has her present her video of the La Sals, for example, rather than speaking "nothing" like her counterpart, Cordelia, which inevitably changes Leere, Delia, and their relationship—and that cannot help but alter the story. Peck's decision to follow Shakespeare's plot conjoined with his decision to write a story about the environment means that even when plot markers and characters appear to be parallel, they are not doing the same work. These stories may have less to say to each other than readers might expect because Shakespeare's *Lear* is ultimately about people and relationships, and Peck's *Leere* is ultimately about the "La Sals . . . dying slowly. . . slowly enough that humans will feel justified in their determined perplexity about the change" (213).

Or is it?

Steven Peck may be the only author creative enough to dream up the idea of recreating a classic Shakespearean play and setting it in a dystopian future in the La Sals of southern Utah; staffing it with human-skinned goats, BattleDredge robots, and human characters that readers probably won't like very much; and framing it with commentary by a sarcastic and sincere (?) demon narrator. Doubtless, Peck is the only author with the capacity, literary and scientific background, and personal love for and knowledge of that landscape whose attempt at such a wildly creative story would yield *The Tragedy of King Leere, Goatherd of the La Sals*. While the tale is an obvious reworking of Shakespeare's epic, Peck's *King Leere* does not need to be propped up or only read as a comparison—it is a well-written and thought-provoking tragedy that can stand solidly on its own.