

lesser-known essays will reward multiple readings. Although the volume would have benefited from an index and more robust editorial summary in the introduction, *Envisioning Scripture* is highly recommended for anyone interested in early Mormonism.

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## No Country for Nostalgia

Todd Robert Petersen. *Picnic in the Ruins*. Berkeley, Calif.: Counterpoint Press, 2021. 336 pp. Paperback: \$16.95. ISBN: 9781640093225.

*Reviewed by English Brooks*

Even in the modesty of its title, *Picnic in the Ruins* is a deceptively ambitious novel. At once wry and gentle, its depiction of the various lives and stories that become snarled up in a nonstop eleven-day western thriller is set in the borderlands of southern Utah and northern Arizona. Mormon country, sure. But as Petersen demonstrates, this is a region shot through with multiple fiercely competing claims to lands, their management, use, meaning, and history. Based primarily in Kanab, *Picnic's* action ranges to Bryce Canyon National Park, the Kaibab Paiute Indian Reservation, the Short Creek Community, and various corners of a newly designated (and even more recently rolled back) national monument. The contested boundaries of this monument—which, while never explicitly named, is clearly a fictionalized amalgamation of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante—constitute the stakes of the novel, in life-or-death terms for some of the characters. Thematically,

*Picnic in the Ruins* takes on questions of ownership, patrimony, and repatriation (of both lands and artifacts) and of problems of authenticity in an American West under the ever-increasing pressures of industrial tourism, energy resource extraction, and debates about how best (and for whom) to preserve what remains of its past. In doing so, the novel manages to hold parties accountable while avoiding the polemics of oversimplified finger-pointing. More than anything, though, it's a compelling ride, balancing sequences of desert-road car chase and overland on-foot pursuit with nuanced, often witty, dialogue and the development of characters that manage to be both colorful and uncannily believable.

Sheriff Patrick Dalton is a veteran of army tours in Afghanistan and Iraq who we find now recently divorced and trying to decide whether to respond to a text he receives in the middle of sacrament meeting. It's about a homicide, one that becomes readily attributable to homegrown scapegrace delinquents the Ashdown brothers. Observant and canny in ways that evoke a Philip Marlowe-esque detective, Dalton also exhibits a social worker's care and temperance in his interactions with the local community. For example, in conversations with a deputy about the likelihood of the Ashdowns' implication in the crime, the two discuss the brothers' hard-knock past as latchkey kids looking after each other. But neither Dalton nor the Ashdowns are the novel's only protagonists, as Petersen extends a pretty ecumenical narrative voice across a variety of central players. Sophia Shepard, an idealistic doctoral student in anthropology from Princeton, is working in the area as a volunteer, researching for her dissertation. Her keen interest in and commitment to the ethics of preservation collide with a somewhat gonzo artifact repatriation project being carried out by her new friend Paul Thrift, a chivalrous and earnest national park ranger who quotes Thoreau and reads from Buddhist spiritual texts.

The novel's action accelerates with the involvement of a wonderfully terrifying and charmingly cynical assassin named Nicolas Szczesny, whom we get to know as simply "Scissors." Initially hired by a shadowy

figure named Frangos as a fixer to clean up after the Ashdowns' botched robbery and murder of Bruce Cluff (former dentist, pothunter, and local good old boy), Scissors comes into focus over the course of the novel as a rare type of monster in the style of *No Country for Old Men's* Anton Chigurh. However, some nice touches here include this assassin's proclivity for loud shirts, sleight-of-hand conjury, constantly wolfing down junk food, and driving a silver Sebring with a spare tire on it. (Think McCarthy via the playful hand of the Coen brothers.) Along the way, a German tourist and sort of guileless innocent named Reinhardt Kupfer eavesdrops on a conversation in a diner about a special map and finds himself also dragged into the action. A dermatologist back home, Reinhardt has come to Utah with a sincere—but fetishizing—lifelong desire to experience an authentic Native American West. When he finally decides to abandon the gimmicky "Ranches, Relics, and Ruins" adventure tour he initially signed up for, he begins a Campbellian hero's journey to "see something quiet and real and true" (69), tying his fate to that of the other protagonists. In the case of these and other characters, and of the action that ensues, *Picnic* rises to the level of a T. C. Boyle thriller, populated by a cast as fully formed as that of a Barbara Kingsolver novel. And fans of classic western fiction will likely hear echoes of Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* and even Owen Wister's *The Virginian*.

Fortunately, in Petersen's telling of this story, the places involved are treated with the same level of attention and subtlety as the characters. His depictions of the sky, for example, are frequent, often lyrical, and attuned to unique desert phenomena like petrichor and virga. In one passage, for example, "As [Dalton] drove, he spotted a cluster of thunderheads to the south. They were deeply shadowed at the base and almost specular at the top, the light shearing them into flat stacked planes. A thin flicker of lightning pulsed twice in the core of the cloud, and in the gathering dusk the evening star came on in a single pulse" (198). Elsewhere, "The sky above them was a swirl of purple, gray, and abalone" (206). And, reflecting the heightening tension later into the

novel, “A helix of turkey vultures rotated and lifted in the distance like shattered bits of creosote” (243). If such passages aren’t reliant on the metallic color palettes of Cormac McCarthy’s skies, other aspects of Petersen’s novel do make more deliberate nods to McCarthy’s obsession with ongoing cycles of violence in American frontier lands.

By far the most horrific scene in *Picnic in the Ruins* involves a shoot-out that converges on the brutal, active looting and desecration of an ancestral burial ground with a backhoe. In its depiction of excavation and theft, the episode seems to collapse time in ways that reveal layers of violence and intergenerational trauma lying just under the surface in much of *Picnic*. In such moments, the displacement and erasure of Native people in the past and the ongoing silencing of their claims on the present are brought to the fore. Indeed, with a few exceptions, actual Native characters constitute a generally absent presence throughout the book. As one character points out, they “seem to be hidden” (59). In short, this is not a Tony Hillerman novel, and some readers might characterize this choice as a failure or omission. Though I wouldn’t speculate on Petersen’s motivations in this regard, one effect of this aspect of the novel I find as a reader is that of allowing an appropriate measure of responsibility for the past to reside with settler culture. That is, although they impact Native people, the problems remain white people’s problems, to either deal with or continue repeating. Reflecting on the aftermath of the shoot-out, Sheriff Dalton—who maintains a kind of public agnosticism about the politics of pothunting and repatriation—remarks “This thing is just a black hole. . . . We’re all gonna end up sucked into it” (254).

Kimball Tillohash, one of Paul’s fellow NPS workers and Kiabab Paiute, however, offers another perspective. “Look, you want to save this place. We’re a little sick of saviors, but okay. I want to save it for different reasons. We’ve been trying to use white people’s tools to tear down white people’s walls. It works for a little while, then it stops. It always breaks down” (286–87). Also implicated in this cycle of violence

is the aggrieved petulance and brittleness that manifests in white settler culture. For example, readers are treated to a quick glimpse of a cartoonish “Freedom Jamboree” held by an anti-government community characterized by Bundy family–style standoff antics. “You remember the folks that took over the tortoise preserve in Nevada? A guy blew off his own hand trying to dynamite a boulder so it would block the only road in and out? . . . This is their celebration” (260). Even the novel’s initial crime is presented as a fictional reworking of the suicides that famously followed a 2009 federal raid on men trafficking Native artifacts from the region. Although portrayed generously and sympathetically throughout, Mormon characters are not held harmless here.

But for Mormon readers, the novel’s depiction of Mormon characters may also provide one of its more rewarding and refreshing pleasures, as these range from conventional churchgoing types to Jack Mormons to fundamentalists, among others. One especially touching episode occurs when Sophia, Paul, and Reinhardt are taken into hiding by Euphrenia Hamblin and her polygamist family to spend the night in their home. As Euphrenia and her daughters tend to Sophia’s injuries, then oil and braid her hair, their conversations, however haltingly, eventually turn to commonalities in the Hamblins’ and Sophia’s family’s experiences. Sophia comments on similarities between the deserts of Iran (her mother’s homeland) and the Colorado Plateau, comparing Euphrenia’s hospitality with that of her Persian culture. Although Sophia explains how her mother fled from Khomeini-era repressions, Euphrenia still muses, “Muslims are some of the only other people with families like ours. . . . I’d like to talk to somebody else who’s living this way” (266–67). Action and adventure aside, such moments of intimacy are when *Picnic* comes in most movingly, as they allow for the dissolution of the otherness and alienation that plague our current social and political relations.

It is, in large part, by pushing beyond Mormon and other western character types that Petersen’s novel is able to succeed with some of

its larger project. Writer and scholar Theodore Van Alst suggests one way of understanding how this works. In his appraisal of the delight he finds reading the fiction of Stephen Graham Jones, Van Alst declares that “finally, *finally*, when I read these stories, unless I am told otherwise, all of the characters are Indian. But best of all, very best of all, they’re incidentally Indian.”<sup>1</sup> In some similar ways, in *Picnic*, Petersen has gifted us a novel in which the incidentally Mormon characters in all their variety, though in many ways characterized by their Mormonism, are not merely essentialized by it. This characterization leaves room for us as readers to not only appreciate their uniqueness but also to more readily see some aspect of ourselves or our own story in them. Furthermore, it allows us to consider critical and often difficult questions about the West we’ve inherited and who is no longer here in order for us to be here. As is indicated in the distortions of memory and nostalgia at play in the novel’s title, *Picnic in the Ruins* invites us to reckon more honestly with our relationship with these histories of displacement and dispossession.

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1. Theodore C. Van Alst Jr., ed., *The Faster Redder Road: The Best UnAmerican Stories of Stephen Graham Jones* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015), xiv.