The Parrot Trainer by Swain Wolfe

Great Combination Of Humor, Scholarship And Story

An archaeologist from the East, a former art dealer and pot thief, the spirit of the Parrot Trainer trapped in an ancient bowl, a renegade Indian, and a French social theorist and the team filming him all clash with each other and provoke the locals during an unexpectedly dangerous trip in New Mexico. Tweaking knee-jerk political correctness and academia, Wolfe sets his novel against a rich archaeological and anthropological background, and deals with some of the fields most controversial issues. Witty, sexy, and rife with local color, this novel of ideas has magic realism and a tender love story at its core.

My Personal Review:
Jack Miller meets people in the strangest ways.

Take the dead man at the beginning of this finely crafted Southwestern novel. The car he’s driving flies off the cliff above Miller as the former pot hunter is digging in a place called Lacuna Canyon. Inside the wrecked Ford Taurus is a German anthropologist dead from a probable heart attack. Among his possessions are drawings of a compelling young woman on a Mimbres Indian pot and a map on how to find it.

Driven by the compulsion that some people have for ancient artifacts, Miller follows the map and finds an untouched Mimbres site with the bowl in a bed of parrot feathers. Carrying the find to his truck, Miller is bitten by a scorpion whose poison makes him delirious. That’s when he meets the second stranger in the form of a sexy Tinker Belle named Willow—an apparition of the girl on the bowl. Her spirit is trapped inside, she tells Miller. Her request: break the bowl so her spirit can go free.

This quest and others Miller undertakes explore his conversion from a mercenary pot hunter to man with a genuine desire to unlock cultural mysteries. In the course of his exploration, he encounters such odd characters as Henri Bashe, a French intellectual who deconstructs everything he observes; a film crew right out of Dukes of Hazzard; an
Indian art forger named Kills the Deer; and Lucy Perelli, the sexy head of a preservation fund. She proves to be an enabler for a sleazy Eastern archaeologist. His goal: lay claim to an archaeological find of Millers that proves prehistoric migrations took place much earlier than those claimed by Native Americans.

With this stew of characters, the plot cooks up into a wild comedy. It is a darkly funny send-up, in which cultures and characters that should not even be in the same county with one another are forced to interact. The result is thoughtful, hilarious, frightening and at times philosophical.

I have known Wolfe for three years now, meeting him here in the Valley while he was in the midst of writing The Parrot Trainer. We visited the Salado ruins near Globe, where he exhibited an encyclopedic knowledge of the dwellings and artifacts there. But he never revealed the bizarre plot line that he was working on in his book. I'm glad of that, because reading the final product has been a delight.

I had never thought of the stodgy world of archaeology as being fodder for such wry stuff. But here we have a diverse cast of characters examining the meaning of culture through lenses warped by their own cultures. These differing and sometimes hilarious points of view make it easy to understand the observation by Bashe that is the central theme of the book: The waking world is merely illusory. The world of dreams is the true reality.

This is one of the few novels I have read that contains a bibliography of scientific references. This provides reassurance that the historical references in this work of fiction are indeed accurate. But I think the fiction in this wonderful little book is accurate, too. The past holds many treasures, and these can bring out the best and worst in us all. - Paul Perry

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