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Book Review: *Path of the Half Moon*



by Vince Bailey

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Read a Description of *Path of the Half Moon*

Book Reviewed by Robert Fleming

There has to be a great deal of skill to pull off a literary mashup like this. Imagine a superb paranormal Western novel complete with settlers, cowboys, sheriffs, demons, devils, Native American specters, magic, hard labor, and the mystique of the vast desert. Its author, Vince Bailey, a native of Arizona, knows all of these things well.

His debut novel, *Path of The Half Moon*, a winner of the Arizona Author's Association Award, comes from his youth and his obsession with Western folklore. The leading character, Curtis Jefferson, supposedly commits a crime, a lawless adventure seen by a single eyewitness. A charge of arson accompanies the lad's conviction to a juvenile detention center with a bad reputation, built on the historic site of an Indian massacre. Some say Curtis looks like the young Cassius Clay, the Olympic boxer. Upon Curtis's arrival at the facility, Sergeant Joe tries to set the rebellious kid straight: "Youngsters like you with an overactive imagination tend to dream things up while they're in the cooler – supernatural things, I mean. Just keep your head focused on realities, and the nightmares will go away." He also instructs him to work hard, study hard, stay busy, keep to yourself, and the time will go by.

The reader moves through the "gates of hell," with terrifying guards, cruel inmates, corruption, betrayal, torture, and murder. Although the headmaster is rigid and plays by the book, enter Harvey Huish, a rich boy, convicted on negligent homicide. His father, with a bankroll of millions gained from a career as one of the most successful merchants in the Arizona territory. The profits assure his son will not go to state prison but rather to the less dangerous environment of a reform school.

Bailey paints a vivid picture of the notorious Fort Grant, going back to its bloody past. He mentions the 300 juveniles housed there, strictly bad eggs, coming from all races: Indians, Mexicans, blacks, and a slim minority of whites. The state orders a tough disciplined routine, no TV, two hours of courses, a midday meal, more school, library study, and then lights out. The guards watch the inmates very closely.

He has a deft touch in creating characters such as Marcus the old guard, Will the lawyer, Betty the insider, Jeb the corrupt jailer, and Randy the former cat burglar. Betty tells Will that his predecessor Phillip was assigned to make life very easy when Harvey was jailed. Harvey's rich father was leaving nothing to chance. The boy was to be provided with all of the outside comforts. Money was passed around to the people who could coddle Harvey. At first, Will refuses to continue what Phillip had done. But suddenly Carol, his wife was in the ER with trouble breathing. Treatment fails until a tracheotomy is performed. One night, Curtis sees a young woman, half nude, with the right side of her face ruined. Her skull is smashed. He runs into Marcus but he doesn't tell her what he has seen. There have been other horrible visions. Curtis has a visit from Randy and they talk about escape. He notices Randy walks weirdly as if the other boys had abused him sexually. They survey the top of the wall, listen to the coyotes sing, and voices howl in unspeakable horror.

This is a first novel, so accordingly the author throws every ingredient in the mix. Some things he gets right, but he falters on others. He scores on the enticing voices, desert spirits, and sacred talismans. He finds gold when he speaks of false promises, broken treaties, and bogus assurances regarding Native Americans. When he quotes an Apache sage, he's dead on: "I only wish to make the point that the white man's heroes are false and short-lived. They are quickly forgotten and certainly undeserving of an Indian's admiration.

Bailey, a fledgling historian of the West, also notes that the Indians knew they were overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of the whites from the East and his cunning use of words and language. So many lies, betrayals, promises, and secrets.

He places Will and Randy as allies of Curtis, allowing him to talk freely about escaping the hell hole. Randy works in the Fort's archives, enabling him access to every inmate's files. He tells Curtis that if Harvey's lawyers fail in their appeals, the rich kid could go to state prison. Harvey is the only convicted killer jailed there. They plan to break out of there.

Will, the young lawyer, believes Harvey has paranormal powers. He explains to his charge that he has tape-recorded his talks with the headmaster many times and hired a famous entertainer to make a bogus tape of a deposition. Harvey says it's a brilliant move. Will thinks Harvey has gained power over his wife when he snatched her holy medallion. The wily criminal, a true racist, has bought a guard, Jeb, sending him to buy kilos of weed to sell to the other inmates at a big profit. Also, Harvey is extorting cash from the parents of the other inmates as "insurance" money to prevent them from getting gang-raped. The cash is used to buy more dope. The mastermind has the perfect scam: booze, cigarettes, cards, dice, drugs, and perverted sex.

While the main theme of the book is escape, Curtis realizes he faces the dangers of horses, cops with itchy trigger fingers, bloodhounds, helicopters, and tricks of the mind. The final chapters fall flat in terms of nail-biting action, suspense, and tension. For most Americans, the Old West holds a moral fascination. For most of us, we can only imagine this place; we can only read it. With intelligence and wit, Bailey has delivered the goods in this magical book, only occasionally dropping the ball.