

Unsentimental Journey

Crime sprees and circuses in the Roaring Twenties

THIS SIDE OF JORDAN by Monte Schulz.
Fantagraphics Books, 2009. Hardcover, \$22.99.

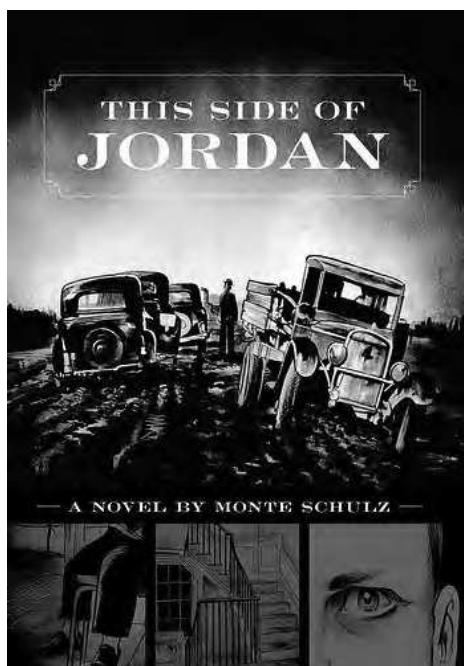
Like the water that slowly fills a hastily dug grave, *This Side of Jordan* is a creeper. It's the second novel from Monte (son of Charles) Schulz, though his first was almost two decades ago; it's also just the second text-only novel from Fantagraphics, a Seattle publisher known for graphic novels by the likes of Joe Sacco and Daniel Clowes. And it begins in the middle of things: the middle of America, the middle of 1929, the middle of Alvin Pendergast's unlikely day.

Alvin is a very young 19, a consumptive farm boy watching a dance derby in which he can't participate. His illness looms constantly, and Alvin fears it, fears being sent back to the sanitarium, which smells of death and chemicals. He doesn't want to die there, but he's barely fit for life and work on the farm. When a slick, clever stranger invites the farm boy to join him — at first just for a slice of pie across the river, but then on a long and dirty trip — Alvin barely hesitates.

This Side of Jordan is a road story, a crime novel and a coming-of-age tale pocked with death and darkness. Chester Burke, the stranger who whisks Alvin away from Farrington, Ill., is a smooth talker

and a murderer, a man lacking in conscience and utterly uninterested in anything but dames (briefly) and money. His schemes involve various forms of robbery; his victims run from fathers and daughters to preachers. Alvin's time with Chester is an education and a horror, a rude awakening to the fact that not everything beyond the farm's borders is nice or interesting. There are things better left unseen.

But Alvin's education in the nasty underside of 1920s America has a peculiar foil. Along the way to a robbery, Alvin meets a dwarf who calls himself Rascal, who speaks with unmatched eloquence, telling tales about his beloved uncle Augustus or about the seemingly impossible adventures he's had in his 20-odd years. Rascal is smart and strange,



either an epic liar or the only good-hearted person in Chester and Alvin's company. Or possibly both.

Schulz' story is broken up by location, as this odd trio drifts across the Midwest to Missouri, chasing a circus. While Alvin wrestles with innocence and awareness, growing more and more horrified by the man with whom he's entangled, the countryside looms out the Packard's

windows, a place of dust and open space, storms and wildflowers, muddy wheel tracks and dark train stations. The time provides the sense of impending disaster — it's just months until the stock market crashes — but the landscape through which Alvin passes amps the ominousness, the loneliness; houses stand in the middle of nowhere, where gunshots will go unnoticed. Towns seem cramped and

uncomfortable, with eyes everywhere that might notice what Chester is up to. And everything is dark, dusty, bleak and corrupt under Prohibition.

If there's an American dream in this place, it's still struggling and scrabbling for a hold on the psyche of kids like Alvin, who's no hero but no villain either. He's just a kid in a strange place. And by the book's end, Alvin's journey has taken him to the strangest place yet: a traveling circus, one which Schulz paints in vivid detail. Its wonders — a giant calliope, a house of mirrors, tightwire acts and lion tamers — are made more strange by the fever of Alvin's slowly returning illness. In the circus' heightened reality, there's a perfect mark, a lovely dame, a chance at redemption and a way home, all somewhere between the big top and a fortune teller's wagon. In gorgeous, restrained language, Schulz winds the country's promise and danger, history and future into the tales tucked into Rascal's pockets, the meandering thoughts of the unwell farm boy, the focused cruelty of Chester's killing. *This Side of Jordan* is a novel of long ago and far away, but the world that is its subject is still ours. **EW**

Monte Schulz reads from *This Side of Jordan* at 7:30 pm Wednesday, Oct. 14, at Tsunami Books.

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