
Stephen Graham Jones; ed. Theodore C. Van Alst, Jr. *The Faster Redder Road: the Best UnAmerican Stories of Stephen Graham Jones*. University of New Mexico Press, 2015. 408pp.

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The Best UnAmerican Short Stories. The subtitle streaks boldly across the book's cover with a truck's headlights in the distance, while the words and image hint at Stephen Graham Jones's underlying intention for his latest book—a journey into the unknown.

Thirty-five stories were chosen or excerpted from some of his most notable books, such as *Demon Theory*, *All the Beautiful Sinners* and *The Gospel of Z*. Some of Jones's fans have struggled to categorize his work as purely horror, crime noir, sci-fi or Native American literature, but this anthology eradicates those purist views and pushes his work into the mainstream.

The introduction written by Jones's collaborator and editor, Theodore C. Van Alst, Jr., serves as a guide to the inner thoughts of a complex author. Readers may be tempted to skip the introduction, but in the case of Jones's work, such a leap would be a mistake. Van Alst's observations are critical to orient the newcomer before embarking on a wild ride through the pages. Jones provides short commentaries about his craft and thoughts behind each story. However, his most revealing statement comes at the end of "How Billy Hanson Destroyed the Planet Earth and Everyone on It," where he explains that the reason that he writes is to create awe and wonder within readers and leave them feeling connected.

This anthology is a series of stories that explore human nature and serve as an indirect commentary on society. Honesty is a critical element in this compilation, with its implication that the author is a kind of leveler, using his stories to expose the darkness within humanity. His work will appeal to almost any reader, whether diehard genre lover or literary purist. The tone and effortless writing style knit the collection into a cohesive body of work. Jones's strength lies in his ability to blur the lines between reality and fantasy, thus creating a tension that moves each story forward, often in unexpected ways.

The detailed descriptions of small towns and places where Jones lived or visited throughout his life provide a level of authenticity than can only be derived from firsthand experience. The dialogue, phrasing, and use of colloquialisms indigenous to the time period and location only draw the reader closer, making them feel as if they are passengers along for the ride. Notable is his story, "Rendezvous with Sula Prime," where the main character, Sam drinks coffee at a truck stop as he contemplates suicide, twenty years after his first wife's death. A mysterious stranger, Ted approaches him and draws him into a concurrent world connecting reality, suicide and hell. Sam grapples with his sanity as he time travels alongside a shape shifting reptile to heal invisible lions and decide whether he will pay the tax to the ferryman or walk amongst the living. Readers will be on the edge of their seats, confused between the normal and supernatural, and wondering what will happen next. But whether Jones writes about the future or the end

of days, his stories beckon his readers like a siren's song, inviting them to play beside him in a state of suspended disbelief.

Jones's writing is an exploration of people who live on the fringe of society. Events lead his unwitting characters to a crossroads where their character and morality meet. On the surface, these individuals appear simple, but as each story unfolds, layers of complexity are revealed that, at times, test our sympathies. Nowhere in the anthology is the reader's compassion put to a greater test than in "Interstate Love Affair," a story about a serial killer who mercilessly kills women and dogs along Interstate 10. Told from a third person perspective, Jones provides a gruesome, realistic view of a serial killer's thoughts and actions, devoid of any of the romanticized elements prevalent in pop culture today. The reader may feel fascinated, frightened and repulsed all at once, yet they won't find be able to stop turning the pages.

Much of the material is rooted in West Texas, where Jones, a boy of Blackfeet descent, grew up facing small town values and Native American stereotypes. Within each story, innocuous events build to the point of eruption, leaving the reader in the aftermath to ask why. Jones's work cannot be characterized as purely Native American literature. Only four stories have overt Native references, "Lonegan's Luck," "Captivity Narrative 109," "Discovering America," and "Rocket Man." However, one could argue that Jones' Blackfeet heritage is softly tucked into the titles, scenery, dialogue and characters, making it impossible to separate the work from the author.

In "Captivity Narrative 109" from *Bleed Into Me*, an Indian man, Aiche, leaves his reservation to pawn a rifle. When a young girl and boy get into his truck, a simple mistake unfolds into a series of unplanned for consequences that reveal how much racial bias is woven into the fabric of society. The most disturbing element is not the racial prejudice. It is Aiche's deep seeded belief that he will be convicted for a crime simply because he is Indian.

Jones is a reluctant autobiographer, leaving his readers to guess what personal history is reflected in his work. But in "Discovering America," some of the sources of his earlier stories become clear. Whether it is Lonegan, Aicher or the boy referred to as chief in "Rocket Man," each character experiences racial bias in everyday interactions. The prejudice becomes more explicit when Jones describes his personal experiences when he worked the fields between Florida and West Texas one summer. He begins each paragraph with the phrase, "Because I am Indian" and tells about the wide-spread ignorance and racism that is pervasive in America today. One can only empathize with Jones as he recounts how he was asked to identify animal tracks and perform a rain dance.

Humans. Vampires. Zombies. It doesn't matter. Jones's stories hit the mark, taking the reader to a place where the dark and unadulterated parts of people can roam together freely.

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