

10-1-2013

Book Review: Auraria: A Novel

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Melissa E. (2013) "Book Review: Auraria: A Novel," *Georgia Library Quarterly*: Vol. 50: Iss. 4, Article 18.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq/vol50/iss4/18>

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Off the SHELF

Auraria: A Novel by Tim Westover (QW Publishers, 2012: ISBN 978-0-9849748-0-1, \$17.95)

Auraria: A Novel is set in the north Georgia mountains during the mid-nineteenth century. It tells the story of James Holzclaw, a city slicker from Milledgeville, whose boss sends him to the small town of Auraria, which is located near Dahlonega, Georgia, site of the first gold rush in North America. It is Holzclaw's job to purchase the town and its surrounding land. Initially, Holzclaw is unaware of why his boss wants to purchase the area, but he diligently treks throughout the mountainous region to complete his task. There are picturesque descriptions of Holzclaw's surroundings—"beneath the high canopy of chestnuts, an unbroken carpet of ferns strained for light."

As Holzclaw continues on his journey, he encounters some of the supernatural elements present in the area. His initial reaction to the moon maidens and ghosts is rather dull and unconvincing. While walking back to town after one land purchase, he hears a noise. He cannot fathom what the sound is, but looks through the bushes to see "in the water there were six human forms." Holzclaw does not yet know about the spiritual entities in the region and yet, they are not described as figures or people; they are presented as "human forms." The reader learns that these are the moon maidens who slough off gold flecks while bathing in the lakes, but the initial introduction is ineffective.

In another incident, Holzclaw purchases a house and land from one of the residents, Edgar Strikland. As they are seated in the kitchen, Holzclaw learns that Edgar's wife died the previous year. When a woman enters the room, Edgar informs Holzclaw that this is the wife's

ghost. Holzclaw greets her politely, but the reaction from Holzclaw is rather uneventful; he is in a "quandary." He presents no fear or excitement in coming upon a ghost. The incident is treated in a rather blasé manner.

Despite Holzclaw seeming a bit bland, there are some colorful characters he encounters who enrich the tale. The child-like Princess Trahlyta follows him throughout his journey giving him her advice, and a piano-playing ghost called Mr. Bad Thing adds some liveliness to the Old Rock Falls Inn with his talents.

Eventually it is revealed that Holzclaw's boss, Shadburn, has a scheme to build a dam and flood the area to create a grand resort that will "attract the best people and convince them to leave their money in the valley." Shadburn wants to provide the residents with a source of income. The residents catch gold fever, and instead of working to earn a living, they waste their lives panning for gold in vain.

Some of the word choices are disconcerting and occasional words in elevated speech are used where more common words would have sufficed. They seem out of place, much like the city-slicker Holzclaw in this country atmosphere. And, although many of the folk stories of the north Georgia mountains are brought to the surface, none are given much depth. A further exploration of the legends would have added richness to the text. Like the gold fever experienced by the locals, *Auraria* offers the promise of great wealth; it just doesn't pan out. However, *Auraria* might be a whimsical addition to libraries, both academic and public, with an interest in north Georgia mountain folk tales.

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