



U.P.: A Novel

R.A. Riecki

Ghost Road Press

Softcover \$19.95 (236pp)

978-0-9796255-6-5

“The U.P.’s greatest export is drunk drivers; its greatest import is cold weather,” writes R.A. Riecki, who has been paroled from a life sentence in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. By mercilessly displaying the warts of Yooper culture, Riecki has probably made himself as unwelcome as Thomas Wolfe did by writing *Look Homeward, Angel*. Or else he’ll be named grand marshal for a parade. Yoopers don’t get much attention.

U.P. rolls through a decent enough plot of conflict, striving, and ennui, but characterization reigns supreme, as long as the location itself can also be a character. Set around Ishpeming, a mining-based suburb of Marquette, four teenage narrators are living so hardscrabble, displaying such poorly adjusted psyches, that they should throw in the towel on life to save further agony. This is an ambitious literary novel stripped down to utter rawness. There’s as much sex as an episode of the Jerry Springer Show, and the violence is nearly on par with the nightly news.

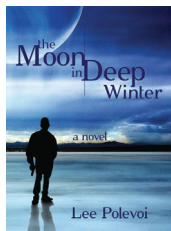
Antony, who once lived in Detroit, thinks of himself as black, though he isn’t, listens to rap, narrates in hip-hop vernacular, and obsesses on revenge after an Indian kid demolishes his shoulder with a baseball bat. Craig is a head-banging Slayer fan, a jock, and a hugely muscled weightlifter with a sex addiction. J, whose legs are damaged by cerebral palsy, is a constantly depressed worshipper of Sid Vicious, Iggy Pop, marijuana, and his mostly absent father. They’re all cousins to Hollow, an atheist dating a religious girl, a pacifist considering joining the military. Hollow doesn’t drink or deal with true emotions, since his brother was killed by a drunk. The four use such distinctly different thought processes that it would be possible to identify speakers without names. Of them, Craig’s sections emerge as car-wreck fascinating. He’s capable of intense anger and pleasure. He seems to realize that something isn’t quite right within, but self-control and the will to turn things around aren’t accessible.

Despite Riecki’s perfectly authentic rendering of the Upper Peninsula’s unique conditions, the style isn’t as much Midwestern as it is Southern grit-lit. Think of a still-developing version of the great Larry Brown, or the cockeyed perspectives of Harry Crews and George Singleton, minus a bit of the humor. The approach seems counter-intuitive but it works beautifully, because the hopeless underclass of the two regions share attitudes: disdain for authority, a touch of fatalism, suspicion of outsiders. Riecki calls certain residents “snow Confederates.”

Hollow tells readers “If it were not for friendships, we would all self-destruct.” Staking his

claim to an under-populated corner of Realism with this iron-hard debut novel, Riecki lets us know that even friendship or good intentions don’t always prevent a fall into the bottomless abyss. (November) *Todd Mercer*

MYSTERY



The Moon In Deep Winter

Lee Polevoi

Casagrande Press

Hardcover \$23.95 (222pp)

978-0-9769516-5-0

Anyone suffering from even mild depression would be wise to set this book aside and not pick it up again until the sun shines brightly or the liquor kicks in. The setting, the characters, the plot are all awash in gloom. Still, the story is irresistible. The time is 1981. After five years of ne’er-do-well rambling, Parker Sloane returns on a surprise visit to his home in rural Massachusetts, just as winter is about to descend. There he is greeted (with varying degrees of hostility and suspicion) by his harried mother; his overbearing stepfather, Burke Sullivan; a sullen younger stepbrother, Walt, who’s building an airplane engine in his room and fantasizing about escaping to Easter Island; a beautiful stepsister, Rita, for whom Parker feels an immediate sexual attraction; and Burke’s ancient and deranged mother, Eugenia. The family is a minefield.

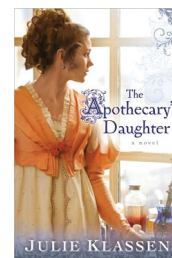
Although there is a suspenseful build-up to the inevitable emotional explosion, this book is not a mystery in the classic sense. There’s no big secret waiting to be revealed that clarifies and unifies this maze of dysfunctions. Rather, the mystery lies in how each of the characters will unravel under the enormous pressure of simply being around each other. Rita, who wants to be a dancer, is the sanest of the lot, the one least haunted by memories, misdeeds, ambitions, or despair. Parker, through whose eyes the story develops, longs to know more about his real father, who, according to his mother, drowned in a motel swimming pool. Walt alternately withers and rages under his own father’s unconcealed disdain for him.

Adding tinder to the mix is Dr. Leo Trunk, who identifies himself as a professor of paleoanthropology on sabbatical from Harvard. He, too, casts a carnal eye on Rita and dazzles the stolid Walt by attempting to teach him to fly. Deputy Sheriff Alf Cooper appears to have something going with Parker’s mother. Convolved though this may sound, the author keeps his narrative threads straight and sculpts his characters with exquisite precision, never allowing their intrinsic strangeness to become distractingly grotesque.

Polevoi is also a master of scene setting. That quality is evidenced here as he describes a nocturnal ice-fishing outing on which Parker and Walt confront the wily and paranoid Burke,

who’s just told them a World War II story about parachuting at night behind enemy lines: “A hush overtook Ghost Lake. Looking up, Parker imagined wave upon wave of fledgling spies falling from the sky. He noticed Burke fumbling inside his flight jacket as if scratching an obscure itch, and thought: I can’t take much more of this. But when the old man squirmed free of the jacket and he saw what he was holding—the revolver from the desk drawer with an eagle on the ivory grip—he felt not alarmed so much as simply in thrall to the rush of oncoming events.” That’s pretty much the way the reader will react. (November) *Edward Morris*

ROMANCE



The Apothecary's Daughter

Julie Klassen

Bethany House

Softcover \$13.99 (352pp)

978-0-7642-0480-7

Young Lilly Haswell stands on Honeystreet Bridge in a small town in the Wiltshire district of Regency-era England, searching the barges and narrow boats for a familiar face. Her mother’s run off, leaving her father, the apothecary Charles Haswell, her brain-damaged brother Charlie, and Lilly with no word about why. However, Lilly “felt a shameful thrill” at her mother’s disappearance. She imagined her mother traveling the world, something Lilly longs to do, stuck as she is “in an inconsequential village” she “was certain that would never be enough.”

Klassen, author of *Lady of Milkweed Manor*, a Christy Award finalist, enriches Lilly’s story with wonderful specific details, such as Regency settings and rules of society and concoctions of the times, like “tempered figs”—figs pressed and heated as much as a patient could endure—to ease breast pain, and “ointment of lemon, rose water, and silver supplement” to treat blemishes. Further, at the beginning of each chapter are gems of healing remedies from *Culpepper’s Complete Herbal* or other sources, as well as a view into the period through advertisements in the *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette* from 1833.

Though Lilly’s longing for a different life is realized through her mother’s brother, a member of London society, she can’t escape her upbringing in her father’s shop. Lilly is a “rememberer”; her gift of eidetic memory is an essential component in dispensing medicine. At a society party when the father of a friend is choking to death, Lilly steps up to the plate, obtains a “probang” from the house medicine chest and uses the flexible tube to dislodge a peppermint that is stuck in the man’s throat. Saving this man’s life spoils her London Season; there is no way that any gentleman of quality would offer marriage to a woman whose father was “in trade.”