



The Scummers

Lee Maynard

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The Scummers completes Lee Maynard's coming-of-age trilogy that began with *Crum* and continued with *Screaming with the Cannibals*. In this third book, Jesse Stone leaves Appalachia and the South and goes west. He works on a ranch, then rolls onto the very edge of the continent. *The Scummers*, like the other novels, has more than a hint of magical realism—or, perhaps more appropriately, of Appalachian tall tale. The book is filled with humor and violence. A cannonball careens through an Army mess hall; characters are unnaturally huge and crazier than insane; Jesse's friend Wendell can sometimes disappear in plain sight.

Forces that oppose Jesse also loom larger than life. He struggles against all authority, and for most of the book, authority seems to be winning. The judicial system of California catches him and sentences him to do time in the U.S. Army. Jesse ends up in the Military Police in rural upstate New York guarding nuclear warheads. Over and over, he asks himself, "What the hell am I doing here?" He is desperate to get out, to

move on, but it's harder to escape the Army than it was to escape Crum, West Virginia.

He also has to face an adversary named Starker, who is reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's embodiments of evil. Starker is a demonic trickster whose early defiant shenanigans include things that, done by another character, would amuse Jesse or even cause admiration. By the time they get to upstate New York, Starker has begun torturing animals and tempting Jesse to become like him. Starker is an extreme exaggeration of Jesse's anti-authoritarianism that moves into highly destructive nihilism. The novel offers a more or less realistic reason why Starker gets away with so much, but his real function is to exemplify the dark side of total freedom, which is in the end a rejection of human connections. Before Jesse can become a true man, he has to face down his own dark impulses.

Jesse is happiest when he has the support of male friends, and he makes common cause with people he identifies as oppressed: Wendell the Indian and the Mexican, in particular, but also a couple of the MP scummers. In the last third of the novel, he has fewer and fewer relationships until, toward the very end of the book, he is pressured into working with a sinister and ugly Army investigator named Ruker. Reluctantly, Outlaw Jesse joins Ruker in an internal Army drug investigation. He is beaten nearly to death but survives and escapes the Army with an assist from Ruker.

Free and on the road again, Jesse tries something new: retracing his steps. He goes back for a final look at Crum. He is still, you realize with surprise, a very young man. He looks, he contemplates, he leaves again. Finally, there is an epilogue in which the great love of Jesse's life (whom he insulted so deeply in *Crum* and who re-entered his life in *Cannibals*) also shows up back at Crum, with a little boy who appears to be his son. Their paths don't quite cross: The Jesse Stone trilogy is not about a happy family ending. It is about the development of a man before he is ready for adult relationships. Still, the missed connection suggests the multiplicity of possibilities before Jesse in his adult life. ❖

Meredith Sue Willis was born in Clarksburg, West Virginia. Her many books include *In the Mountains of America*, *Out of the Mountains*, and *Oradell at Sea*.