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When Johnny Richardson returns to Oakridge he has one thing on his mind--correcting a terrible mistake that caused him to flee his hometown eight years ago. Revisiting the past, though, is a dark and dangerous game in small-town America. When a careless sexual episode leads to the suicide of the town's first lady, Johnny finds himself the target of a revenge campaign that threatens to tear apart the fragile world he's built among the gold-bearing mountains of Northern California.

Left an unexplained piece of land when his father mysteriously disappears, Johnny must unravel its secrets in a desperate bid to protect those he loves. But his efforts to do this have deadly consequences and will ultimately force him to confront not only his own failings, but the very nature of guilt.

A searing meditation on the futility of trying to right the wrongs of the past, *Empty Mile* blends elements of thrilling urban noir with the wide-open spaces of outdoor adventure in a story that reflects America's contemporary uncertainty about itself.

Empty Mile Details

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Author : Matthew Stokoe

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From Reader Review Empty Mile for online ebook

Kurt Reichenbaugh says

Johnny returns home after a self-imposed exile and picks up right where he left off with his old girlfriend Marla and his malicious friend Gareth. Once again, Johnny is led into a lake of guilt he thought he could escape from. Voyeurism, blackmail and murder ensue. The theme of the damaged protagonist returning home to a pastoral town seething with corruption has been around from Blue City to Blue Velvet. If you like that type of story you'll like this one. Highly recommended.

Joshua Williams says

A good reminder that I dont like noir.

Linda says

I'm not sure if I should review this book since I only read 144 of the 391 pages. I'm not sure how I came to pick up this book. The story line is a man returning home after leaving home because of a trauma. While he was having sex with his girlfriend in the woods his brother came close to drowning. His brother ended up with brain damage after this. So now he's back and the first time he has sex with this same girl they are paid by a man to let him watch and masturbate. Come on, who would do this? Then he finds out that she had been prostituting herself to keep the house they had bought together before he left. When she tried to give it up because she got a good job she was blackmailed into still doing it occasionally by the man's previous best friend. Well that did it for me. Every character in this book is severely screwed up. If I could give this book NO stars I would have.

John says

As much as I consider myself a fan of dark books, this one was ultimately unrewarding. While the baser aspects of human nature should never be surprising when they emerge, in this book it seems as if pretty much every character is twisted into psycho-sexual pretzels. Sounds good, right? The problem is the protagonist. He's wracked by guilt at having left home 8 years earlier and upon his return, the elements of his past that he'd been running from are waiting. Waiting and pissed. And perverted. Again, sounds good, but he's so bland and underdeveloped that he seems powerless. You wait for him to snap out of his torpor, but he never really does, and his inaction in the face of increasingly mounting threats ultimately further damages everyone he claims to be so guilty about hurting in the first place. Kind of was an empty mile after all.

Hudson says

Aha! Just as I suspected.....Matthew Stockoe is a "real" author.

I say (type) that because the first book I read by Stokoe was Cows. Cows routinely makes lists such as "Most Depraved Work of Fiction" or "Most Disgusting..." etc, and it truly was an incredibly horrific story filled with the most awful scenes I have ever read. I initially thought Cows would be some sophomoric gross out story that sought only to offend people and in some ways it was. But I thought I detected some real writing in there and wanted to check out more writing by this guy.

I was right. This book delivered.

Empty Mile is the story of a man who comes home after being away for a number of years. He left because of a terrible accident with life changing implications and his became too much for him. Once home he tries to pick up the pieces but his father disappears, his one time love has been through some rough times and has a lot of issues, he's being hassled by a rich man with a hidden agenda and has some problems with an old friend who is not so friendly any more.

This book is at times very dark and at other times incredibly poignant. The ending was so sad I almost got choked up, really powerful.

I think fans of Galveston by Nic Pizzolatto and Ugly As Sin by James Newman would enjoy this book.

L says

I almost abandoned this one, not because it isn't good, but because it is too good. Stokoe writes powerfully of bleak lives. The characters make no choices other than wrong choices, except, perhaps, for Stan. None the less, I couldn't help but care for and about them. When I first picked up this novel, I just couldn't continue to watch their train-wreck lives. You have to be in a relatively strong place for a novel like this; it is beyond noir.

It isn't only the land called Empty Mile that is empty. The lives of most of the characters are empty. Mind you, this emptiness, combined with good intentions, does not keep them from destroying the hope and pleasures of others in their circles. And those are "the good guys." Then we have the bad guys, those bent on revenge and/or manipulation/control. And those folks--whoa! Some of them make "evil" look like Sunday School. There are exceptions. Stan, who suffered a near drowning and the resultant brain damage, is rather childlike and good. He has one or two dreams. The fallout from some of the actions of his brother (who was connected to the near drowning)--not that what his brother did was evil or dangerous in itself--destroys at least one dream. The substitute dream of the father, visited on the sons, doesn't do anyone a whole lot of good.

There is a plot. There is a mystery. Both are solid and will pull you along. They just aren't the point, at least, not by my reading. The point is more to see who, if anyone, escapes/survives/overcomes their bleak lives. Stokoe's tale is amazing (5 stars worth) in an amazingly bleak way.

Karl says

This is copy number 47 of 85 signed numbered copies, signed by Matthew Stokoe.

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

So I have to confess, it took an unusually large number of pages before I started sincerely really getting into the latest novel from our friends at Akashic Books, Matthew Stokoe's *Empty Mile*, because of it starting with a whole series of tropes endemic to a genre (noir) that I'm simply not a big fan of; and this of course is always the inherent problem with most genre novels, that they are loaded up with a fetishistic amount of stereotypes from that genre, specifically to please hardcore fans of that genre. (And seriously, I think I could probably go the rest of my life without ever seeing another developmentally disabled character in a noir, constantly spouting cutely retarded dialogue and existing pretty much so they can commit some dimwitted blunder that's necessary for that book's overly complicated plot.) And indeed, I had a problem with the end of this novel as well, because of it relying at its climax on not just one but two highly unlikely actions that are hard to believe the character involved actually doing, in order to create the inescapable disaster that leads to the book's tragic ending; and this of course is a common problem within the specific genre of noirs, that since most rely on their hapless characters to dig themselves into deep holes of which they are unable to get out, a rather delicate spiderweb of sometimes highly implausible events must be spun to create this hole in the first place, making many noirs in my opinion feel less like good literature and more like a nakedly manipulative puzzle the author has foisted on that reader.

Ah, but the middle of this book was a quite different story, and a good example not only of why so many people like noirs but why Stokoe has such a passionate cult following (he's also the author of the revered *High Life*); because he certainly knows how to create some memorably douchebaggy characters, that's for sure, a whole string of small-town losers who are set loose within the milieu of a forgotten rural former gold-rush community in northern California, telling a tale of our dark nomadic antihero local coming home for the first time in years, and how the convoluted lives of his family members, ex-girlfriends and old school chums end up pulling him into a mess that just keeps getting bigger and bigger with each passing chapter. (And speaking of this, I would be remiss to not mention what a great job Stokoe does with this unique mountainous setting, using the area's past as a prospector boomtown to great effect not only plotwise but simply in setting a mood, kind of like combining a traditional noir with a Sam Shepard play.) This is the second book in a row from Akashic I've read that felt like it was signed less for its own quality, and more as evidence of long-term support for challenging authors they believe in; and while this is certainly admirable, it makes *Empty Mile* almost the definition of the fabled "minor work," one of those titles that twenty years from now will be little more than a rarely visited, red-colored stub link at the end of Stokoe's Wikipedia bio. Although it comes recommended to existing heavy readers of noir, it can be fairly safely skipped by those who are only casual fans of the genre.

Out of 10: **7.7**

ABC Group says

Matthew Stokoe's new novel is quite a departure from his previous work, *High Life*. Much more subdued and not nearly as shocking, *Empty Mile* tells the tale of Johnny Richardson, a man seeking reconciliation from his past transgressions. Upon his return home, Johnny finds out that making up for past sins is an exercise in futility. His life, and the lives of those he has affected, have changed too much in his 8 year departure for there to be a clean break with the past.

What's striking is the normative setting of this book: small town America, dad and his two sons, embittered friend whom Johnny betrays, and finally, the fine young lass that was left behind during the 8 year departure. What Johnny comes to realize is that much has happened during that time. Life has a way of delivering tragedy and despair to those who are already weak and broken. A pitfall of constant struggle pervades some characters in this book, almost to the tune of a lockstep measure.

What's troubling is that some characters are so clearly defined. The mentally challenged brother is painted in ways that seem true to form, given the nature of a childhood accident. At the same time though Stokoe borders on stereotypes of mentally handicapped folks, that Stan (Johnny's brother), almost comes off as comical when he's clearly not meant to be. Marla, the aforementioned lass, is so incredibly weak as a person, any slight push can get her to do the most unmentionable acts...to the point of total disbelief. This brings us to Johnny himself. Hands down the most unredeemable, emotionally, physically and mentally vapid character in the book, our narrator, is a door mat. The tone is set quickly that he acts completely out of a sense of self...and the repercussions of this particular act have lifetime reverberations. But this is clearly not just a metaphor for how his life will unfold. Stokoe paints a picture of man totally devoid of loyalty, who is completely incapable of standing up to any sort of transgression (or person) in his life, and as a result, he watches as his world crumbles around him and allows decisions to be made that have horrific consequences for those he attempts to love.

The main narrative is set against the back drop of Empty Mile, a piece of land purchased by Johnny and Stan's father. The more interesting part of the book is the aspect of prospecting for gold that is introduced through this land and how it ties back to Gareth (Johnny's ex-pal), the local community writ large and the long term hope that Empty Mile represents for most everyone in the book. While this piece is fine, and most stories need some sort of salvific measure for us to work toward, Empty Mile (the land) is overshadowed by such wholly unbelievable situations that it simply cannot, and does not, tie the book together.

Clearly frustrating and at once a long-feeling read, *Empty Mile* did arouse such physical responses in me to certain situations in the book, I got the feeling that Stokoe is a master of showing how ordinary people are completely capable of some really horrendous stuff (see his previous work). While there is plenty of that going on in *Empty Mile*, Stokoe's other work shows how shocking can be done without doing it for the sake of shock value. Unfortunately, in *Empty Mile*, most of what is shocking just wreaks of being unbelievable. I had incredibly high hopes for this book and teeter on liking certain portions, but ultimately found this to be an unrewarding read.

Elwycke says

Mr. Stokoe likes to lay it on thick.

This worked wonders with his two previous novels: "Cows", coprophagia and bestiality taken to absurdist levels and "High Life", sexual degradation & coprophagia taken to noir-ish levels. Both extremely well written and deliciously disgusting.

But "Empty Mile" removes the magic realism and just layers on the misery, on top of misery. True it has an exhilarating centre-piece involving a forest at night and a carcrash, but this one for me was just depressing.

Julie says

I had never read a noir before, and the premise sounded interesting. Wow. Dark. As I read it, hoping against hope that things would turn out all right for these characters that I found I couldn't help caring for, I kept reminding myself that it was a noir.....so it wasn't going to be peaches and cream. I did enjoy the book, the writing was good, I got sucked into the whole plot--the treasure hunt, the need for redemption. But, I like a happy ending, so I don't know that I will pursue this author, although I do think he is a good writer. Not my type of book, but also, not one I regret reading.

Michael Seidlinger says

Stokoe enters different territory with his latest book. Thankfully, it's refreshing enough while still containing the grit and grime we've come to expect from his work.

Not his best, but worth a read if you enjoyed Cows and High Life.

Maddy says

PROTAGONIST: Johnny Richardson

RATING: 3.75

They say you can never go home again, and maybe things would have turned out better if Johnny Richardson had heeded that advice. He's spent the last eight years in London but finds he needs to return to the life he left behind so that he can make up for all the damage he caused before his departure. While on a trip to a lake with his brother and girlfriend, he succumbed to sexual desire and left Stan on his own. Stan entered the water and drowned, with Johnny rushing to him and helping bring him back to life. Alas, it was not soon enough, as Stan suffered irreversible brain damage as a result of oxygen deprivation. Johnny berates himself constantly for what happened; Stan never blames him and loves and reveres him. Stokoe paints a wonderfully poignant and touching picture of their relationship.

Johnny returns to a world that hasn't changed all that much. He and Stan live with their father, a hard-working man who is emotionally stunted. Johnny soon renews his relationship with his former girlfriend, Marla, who has loved him all this time. Her life for the past 8 years has been a study in misery. At times, she turned to hooking. Part of that was due to a blackmail kind of situation from her lover before Johnny, Gareth;

but it is not always clear why Marla is so willing to constantly degrade herself. Gareth is a mean and vicious individual; in dealing with him, Johnny finds himself killing a man, with Gareth holding the evidence of the murder to manipulate Johnny.

It turns out that Johnny's father also had some dealings with Gareth. He purchased a piece of land known as the "Empty Mile" which at one time had been panned for gold, with no return. However, Mr. Richardson believed that former prospectors had not looked in the right place and that there was lots of money to be made from the gold on the property. When he disappears, it is up to Johnny to try to figure out why the seemingly useless land was so important to his father and what exactly was going on with Gareth, a young man his father seemed to detest.

Reading EMPTY MILE is like being a storm watcher. There's a lot of forewarning that things are going to be bad; the atmosphere darkens all along the way. Every once in a while there's a glimmer of sunshine which provides hope that maybe there is a way out of the various horrors that have been visited on the characters. The hope is false.

It was difficult to read about what these people did to themselves and each other. There is quite a contrast between Stokoe's lyrically beautiful writing and the terrible things that happen to the characters along the way. As the book progresses, the despair is palpable. Unfortunately, the book was overly long; a lot of the emotional turmoil that Johnny faced was explained several times, which somewhat diminished its impact. Nonetheless, you'll find EMPTY MILE to be shocking, heartbreaking, gritty—Stokoe is definitely an author to look out for if you're a fan of noir.

Andrew Nolan says

I finished this purely on the basis of the immense amount of goodwill Stokoe's previous two books have generated in me.

That this is nothing like either of those two books is not the issue, i think God Jr is one of Dennis Cooper's best books. Empty Mile is overly long with much time spent on gold panning (thrilling...), businesses selling plants and being responsible for the upkeep of those plants (thrilling...), and in combination with the main female character being a paper-thin shit-magnet who's sole purpose in life is to hang around waiting for the main male character to pick her up off her feet kept me audibly groaning towards the conclusion.

At least everyone in this book was intentionally awful and had no chance of redemption, that was a genuinely good touch.

Stoke is still an excellent writer, it's just that Empty Mile falls prey to the sin of being both boring and not having a pay off worth reading through the 390 something pages of the book to reach.

Mike Kazmierczak says

I first heard of Matthew Stokoe due to his novel **COWS** which was supposed to be violent, bloody, gritty and an instant cult classic. In the search of that book, I first found **EMPTY MILE** and, of course, had to get it. While not violent, bloody or gritty, **EMPTY MILE** was still intriguing and very gripping. The characters and the story were both interesting and compelling.

Johnny Richardson returns to his home town of Oakridge in an effort to make up for a terrible mistake that in turn caused him to flee town eight years earlier. His appearance though creates new issues while simultaneously ripping open old wounds. Friendships and relationships that he abandoned years ago have not healed in the time past. And then a careless sexual encounter leads to new wounds. Twisted amongst these wounds are a puzzle provided by his emotionally-stunted father.

A lot happens in the novel and by the end, I felt just as drained as Johnny. I was definitely pulled into their lives and impacted by everything that happened. The story is often bleak and tragic; the tragedy though is one where I wanted to help out and do something. But of course, all I could do was keep reading and hope for the best. If all Stokoe's books are this powerful, it's going to be well-worth it for me to add him to my favorite author list.
