

Goofy Green Glows

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Tessier, Thomas. *Wicked Things*. New York: Leisure, 2007. 243 pp. \$6.99 pb.

Wicked Things is an interesting departure for horror mainstay Thomas Tessier, best known for his dark psychological works such as his early effort *Finishing Touches* (Leisure, 2005, ©1986) and his critically acclaimed *Fogheart* (St. Martin's, 1998). It is a combination a hard-boiled detective novel and small town horror tale. Unfortunately, the novel does not hold up under any serious analysis; rather, it seems unformed, or underdeveloped as a story, and it lacks the effect of being horrifying, or even disquieting.

The protagonist of *Wicked Things* is hard-drinking, womanizing P.I. Jack Carlson. Everything about Carlson, from the way he narrates the story, to the in-your-face interrogation methods he employs, to his womanizing harkens back to the Mickey Spillane/Raymond Chandler hard-boiled private investigator, with one important difference—Carlson works for an insurance company. He is sent to the idyllic town of Winship to investigate sixteen diverse claims by sixteen individuals. These claims have raised suspicion because they are all handled by one agent, Joseph Bellman, but each one has been issued from a different insurance company. Carlson discovers almost immediately that Winship is not an average small town. To begin with, it is virtually impossible to locate, even with the aid of a map. When he finally does arrive, he finds not only the town that time forgot, but a town which has miraculously prospered economically, while its neighbors have withered. He also hears strange sounds issuing forth from the cemetery, and these are accompanied by an eerie green glow that seems to travel among the graves on its own accord.

As with many detectives of this ilk, people who befriend or act as informants for this P.I., for example Bellman's secretary, Chris Innes (the first woman Carlson beds), either disappear or die under mysterious circumstances. And once Bellman himself is dispatched, Carlson takes up with a stripper named Kelly, who is a member of a visiting troupe. It seems that although Winship proper is the epitome of innocence and nostalgia, the outskirts of town are reserved for the most degenerate vices imaginable. Carlson and his stripper companion team up to investigate not only the spurious insurance claims, but also the disappearances of other strippers. Their investigation is made dire when a strange incident wherein Carlson, while walking through the cemetery, is attacked, beaten, stripped naked, and left for dead by teenagers dressed in tunics. It is only as victims that the two finally unravel the mystery of Winship's financial success: human sacrifice.

While this may all sound like an interesting premise, the execution of the story leaves quite a bit to be desired. For starters, Carlson himself is too much of a cardboard cutout to

do the novel justice as its central consciousness. Take for example his reaction to the death of a woman he has befriended and with whom he has had sex: "I felt bad, really bad for Chris. Some measure of responsibility for her death belonged to me, and I didn't even bother trying to rationalize it away. I smoked a cigarette, but that didn't help." This is almost immediately replaced with his worrying over how the police will draw him into the investigation. Granted, this is a weakness of the hardboiled detective subgenre; nonetheless Tessier is too seasoned a writer to not figure a way to rise above the conventionality of the character type. Ultimately, no reader can care what happens to him, so the idea of a sympathetic protagonist goes out the window as well. Finally, and perhaps the is the greatest literary crime committed here, Tessier gives no clear idea whatsoever what the green glow was, who the children were, or what even what has been happening. It's as if the ground swallows up any sense of plot continuity.

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