



Twisted Tree

Kent Meyers

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Hayley Jo Zimmerman is gone. Taken. And the people of small-town Twisted Tree must come to terms with this terrible event—their loss, their place in it, and the secrets they all carry.

In this brilliantly written novel, one girl's story unfolds through the stories of those who knew her. A supermarket clerk recalls an encounter with a disturbingly thin Hayley Jo. Sophie, Twisted Tree's resident but secretly not-so-altruistic saint, is shaken by a single, passing moment during Hayley Jo's adolescence. Dark memories paralyze Richard Mattingly as he as he struggles to help his son, Clay, cope with their new loss. An ex-priest remembers baptizing Hayley Jo and seeing her with her best friend, Laura, whose mother the priest once loved. And Laura berates herself for all the running they did, how it fed her friend's withdrawal, and how there were so many secrets she didn't see. And so, Hayley Jo's absence recasts the lives of others and connects them, her death rooting itself into the community in astonishingly violent and tender ways.

Twisted Tree is a tribute to the powerful effect one person's life can have on everyone she knew. Solidly in the company of Aryn Kyle, Kent Haruf, and Peter Matthiessen, Kent Meyers is one of the best contemporary writers on the American West. Here he also takes us into the complexity of community regardless of landscape. Readers will be entranced by *Twisted Tree*.

Twisted Tree Details

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From Reader Review *Twisted Tree* for online ebook

William says

The chapters of "Twisted Tree" connect – sometimes deeply, other times at a glance – to draw by absence the life of Hayley Jo Zimmerman, and reveal, beyond a horrific tale of abduction and murder, the reverberations, however intangible or slight, that one person's life can have on a community. With passages of understated depth and a painstakingly crafted delicacy of language, Meyers' South Dakota town becomes an almost mystic place, rich with history, failure, innuendo, and joy, with every resident delving inward to understand the irrationality of existence and to compose meaning from murder. Though many novels stitch together separate stories, "Twisted Tree" is so thoughtfully composed that the connection can be almost forgotten; when it comes, HayJay appears like a unsettled ghost over the narrative, bringing each piece and player into relief. The murdered girl is shaped here in shadows of understanding, yet remains startlingly present, vital, and, for the fleeting moment, alive.

Nancy says

So done!!!! Started off sort of creepy, then turned weird, then not too interesting. Each chapter was separate from any real story line, and if I did not like the chapter I could just skip it and not miss anything about any story line. I liked the last chapter the best. I would not recommend reading this as it did nothing for me. I do however recognize what the author was trying to accomplish, and so I give him credit for that.

Visha says

What a delightful challenge in writing (and reading) *Twisted Tree* is! This is no ordinary murder mystery, no clean inclusion of the crime thriller genre - and as a novel, it flows more as poetry or even lyric non-fiction, although the people and story are all of Kent Meyers's creation (I'd call it a 'novel novel' but then have to slap myself for being too cheeky).

A loose orbit of Twisted Tree, South Dakota, townspeople share their remembrances of both an anorexic sex-crime victim (Haley Joe Zimmerman) and the town that shaped (and sometimes destroyed) their lives. The narrative moves back and forth in time, through more than a dozen voices. This deviation from the typical plot-driven novel narrative can be frustrating if you aren't prepared - these chapters cannot be blown through, devoured and digested like a fast-food lunch... you have to savor the language, follow along until you are certain who is talking and what their connection is to the other characters.

Certainly, some chapters were more frustrating to me than others; some chapters I loved tremendously - but overall, the images Meyers creates are haunting, indelible: the smoky recollection of 9/11 that floats through one chapter and the terrifying rattlesnakes that appear in others, the lumbering buffalo, the headlights of cars (I haven't encountered another writer who creates such a myriad of possibilities for headlights), a squinty-eyed playfulness of religion (Native American and Christian), a focus upon *objects* - those small, defining parts of a person you hold onto after the person is long gone (a silver rodeo belt buckle, glass marbles).

Great quote from the novel that could, perhaps, summarize things:

"The universe itself is a void so vast the stars are tiny things, and the planets only guessed at by the deviations they create, the anomalies of orbit. And maybe we're all anomalies in each other's lives, circling stars that may not be of our own choosing, sending codes into the bigness that we hope someone will decipher, to redeem us from coincidence."

Randine says

For a "good time" do not read this book. This doesn't mean i didn't like it - i did - but it's serious and revolves around the murder of a young girl and the effect that a life (not a big life or a long life) has on the people around them. The small thoughts, the guilt we put on ourselves when we don't do what we think we should have, the sweet memories.

Kent Myers (who lives in South Dakota) is a very good writer. I read this because of 'The Work of Wolves' which is also not very funny and is very good and his people are deep. Chapter 1 of 'Twisted Tree' will stick with me a long time because it gets inside a serial killer's brain and you get that machine-driven feeling that they are not people. They are killing robots. It is very creepy although the book is not a thriller or book about killers. It's about relationships.

Annie says

I hedged about buying this book but this past week I realized I'd been drawn to the book since it came back in hardcover and unless I intended to read the first chapter every time I walked into a bookstore for the rest of my life, I may as well buy it and pick it up over and over again in the comfort of my own home.

I love the West. I love horses. (The bookseller asked me, when I bought it, is it about horses?-- based on the cover illustration. It's really really not.) I love this genre I'd never noticed before: interlocking short stories that form a novel. It's maybe a semi-mystery?

The thing that really gets me here-- the really haunting thing-- is that no one has all the information. So it's like there's this mystery that will always remain because it resides in all these different people, none of whom will ever have all the clues. It's really haunting and it's perfect for this story.

A young woman is kidnapped-- that's not a spoiler, by the way-- and that sets the book in motion, but the book isn't exactly about her or about her kidnapping or even about the aftermath or the beforemath. And it isn't some heavy-handed metaphor, either, or a device. It's just the beginning of a series of stories.

More than any other writer I've read, Kent Meyers actually creates completely autonomous interlocking stories. The narrators are clearly their own characters. The characters are kind of the point. And I felt satisfied by the experience, even though I didn't get all the answers I longed for. (That's also kind of the point.)

I need to read it again because I know there's more that I'll get upon repeated readings. I had to turn back to remember what had happened before and I found new resonances just in the course of skimming what I'd read. I can't wait to reread this one.

This is easily one of the best books I've read this year.

Ken says

The following is a quiz for readers: How patient are you? How much do you love poetry? Do you admire wordsmiths? If a book lacks a plot, do you find yourself saying, "What the hell, they're overrated anyhow"? If there's no main character to hitch your wagon to, will you careen off the road?

If the answer to the above preguntas is "Very," "A lot," "Yes," "Yes," and "No, sir!" then you might enjoy Kent Meyers' western hodgepodge, *TWISTED TREE*. It's similar (but different) to *OLIVE KITTERIDGE* and *WINESBURG, OHIO*, in that it explores place by adopting multiple points of view and variable story lines from different people in a small town, USA. A young anorexic girl is murdered and the book begins with a creepy sequence where she is abducted and we see it all through the eyes of the serial murderer. After that, we go from person to person – some of them with intimate knowledge of the murdered girl (her parents and boyfriend, for instance) and some of them remote (the grocery check-out lady comes to mind). You'd better be patient because it's all over the place and the quality of the chapters is uneven.

Nevertheless, there's no denying that Kent Meyers knows his way around a sentence. I recommend particularly a chapter in the middle called "Draw." A young married woman is driving toward her mother's funeral with her husband sleeping in the back seat. She's a bit frigid and their marriage seems to be on ice when – paging Doctor Freud – the young woman discovers an unexpected hitchhiker in the car. Meyers describes the revelation in a chillingly-beautiful sequence that begins with this:

"Ten miles down the road she felt a touch of low breeze on her foot. She shifted her leg away from it, but in a few moments the touch came again, harder, sensuous. She unlocked her eyes from the light before her and leaned over and peered through the steering wheel at her feet. For a moment she could see nothing, could only feel, not even a touch – a pressure – on her ankle. Then the sunlight still blinding her faded out of her eyes like a surface breaking up, and the dim floor of the car took shape underneath it. Her breath was jerked from her chest. A rattlesnake thick as her forearm lay under the clutch and brake pedal, its blunt, triangular head touching her ankle softly as air."

For the next five pages, you're in for the ride of your life as a reader and that alone bumps it up a star. The trouble is, between all of the jumping about from person to person and the AWOL plot, it's hard to take root and plant yourself as a reader unless wordsmithing alone can sustain you for 388 pages. In that sense, it may be worth a look, but I know that this book is the type that readers either love, hate, or love and hate in equal measure because it begs for the "parts not equal to the sum" or "sum not equal to the parts" argument. Twisted, no?

S.C. says

Gaze deeply at the cover photo of this novel and you will feel just how vast the landscape beyond the barbed wire fence is, how expansive the sky. You may even feel the wind blowing, see it whispering through the bristly grassland and blowing back the silken mane of the mare who stands by that fenceline, her coat blushed by the vermilion tones of a Southwestern sunset. Open the book up, begin reading, and author Kent

Meyers will take you the rest of the way, away to a modern Arcadia where the absence of one of its residents never goes unnoticed. Welcome to Twisted Tree, SD, a town with a sometimes unsettling history and a repository of well-contained secrets.

"Twisted Tree" takes from the author's years of farming experience as well as knowledge of South Dakota's climate and topography to create the story's sense of isolation and small-town mentality, not to mention the inescapable gossip that permeates small-town life. Though there's not much gossip going on, it is the unspoken wonderings of each resident that elucidates the personality of Hayley Jo Zimmerman and the curious impact her sudden and tragic death has on them all. Every chapter proceeds with a person's personal memories of Hayley Jo (including the man who murdered her, the book's opening chapter) and a glimmering of their own history as well, often connecting with the history of the story's other characters. By the novel's end, Meyers has managed to construct an intriguing web of people and the subtle ways in which each of their lives have intersected, past and present. In trying to learn more about Hayley Jo, we find out some interesting things about everyone else, in particular some urban folklore on the Valens, a family that has a bizarre and deep-seated history in Twisted Tree.

The manner in which "Twisted Tree" is put together may give the impression that it is an amalgam of short stories that came together by accident or impulse, a novel that resulted from Meyers deciding to take these stories and tie them together with a recurring theme as well as recurring characters. The end result is a story that wanders from here to there, oft overwhelming its reader with so many introductions to new characters that they may lose track of time and events. Plot is a sacrificial lamb here, an inevitable drawback to such an extended cast of characters and the time that is invested for characterization virtually eliminating the need for contrivance. The desired effect is to get to know Hayley Jo through the residents of Twisted Tree but I'm not so sure Meyers succeeds at this - I still felt I barely knew her by the time I reached the end (I felt I knew Shane Valen the most, he being the strangest, therefore the most interesting, character of the story).

Being that his novel is set in some of the most rural areas of the Great Plains, Meyers adopts some of the less genteel dialect of the natives for some of his characters (Shane especially), the slang word "ain't" a constant in their rudimentary vernacular (e.g. "Ain't found. Ain't looking. Just there."). You know you're in cowboy country when someone lauds a nuisance plant like tamarisk by saying, "Makes this country smell some good at night. Come upon it? Wake up under it? Like a garden. All mixed up? With cattails and what-all?" Most of his style is simple, straightforward and well-paced, with some metaphorical pearls popping up amidst descriptions of sprawling countryside riddled with gravel roads, ramshackle trucks and tractor trailers, rattlesnakes, buffalo and prairie dogs (from "A Real Nice Girl", pg. 48: "He drools. In the light from the window the wetness shines on his chin - a slug track in morning sun on wilted lettuce leaves.").

An assistant professor of English at Black Hills State University, Meyers has been teaching as well as writing for 20+ years and though American Western fiction (his primary genre) isn't really my cup of tea, I have to admire the man's work ethic (he writes for 3 hours and/or produces no less than 2 pages a day) and the passion and perseverance of his trade (he didn't become a published author until he was in his 40's - his first novel was rejected a whopping 30 times, and his initial reaction when it was finally accepted was "It's about time."). As well as being compared to such greats as William Faulkner (a Nobel Laureate, no less), Eudora Welty and Peter Matthiessen (whom Meyers has read and commended), he will most certainly draw comparisons to fellow western author and Pulitzer-Prize winner Cormac McCarthy, an author whom Meyers glowingly describes as "insurmountable" and "astonishing".

Bottom line: Though the novel deals with death, Meyers avoids sentimentality, decrying its use in literature and avoiding it all costs. What you get from a writer who avoids this is an undemanding story that is authentic, lyrical and appealing to the basic truths of the human heart. If you're a fan of the aforementioned

McCarthy or just love a good American Western-centered fictional story, "Twisted Tree" is right up your ally, and that "ain't" no lie.

Mirrani says

This book is written in chapters, like most books, however each chapter is told from the point of view of one person in the town. Each chapter-sub-story lets us look into the lives of these people and as we read along we begin to see how the stories intertwine into the history of a place. You often hear about how in small towns everyone knows everyone else, well this is why that is.

Twisted Tree is a beautifully written book about the bonds between people and the places they come from. It starts out with a murder and in some ways there is some mystery behind who would have done the murder itself, but the story goes well beyond that. It is just as possible that by the end of the book you have forgotten to wonder who killed the people on the highway, because you have become so caught up in the lives of the others who knew them that you simply became a part of the town.

Laura says

Loved how Hayley Jo's story was created by exploring the lives of small-town people who had contact with her before her murder. Very impressed by the subtle and surprising ways the different characters' chapters were linked together to create a cohesive whole. Many of the chapters were strong enough individually to read as short stories. Beautiful, original, and stunning prose throughout. There was very little from Hayjay herself, or her killer (an interstate serial killer who targets anorexics), and in fact her storyline felt secondary to the others, serving mainly as a device to connect all the characters. If you're hoping for a gruesome serial killer tale, there's little of that, but plenty of dark and delicious small-town secrets and tragedies.

Judith says

There is a fascinating first chapter in which a demented serial killer traps his prey, a young anorexic girl he has first on the internet by pretending to be a female 16-year old. To add insult to injury, before he kidnaps and kills her, he spends months convincing her to become anorexic.

The rest of the book consists of short stories revolving around the lives of the townspeople after the murder. This book brings to mind, "Olive Kitteridge", the Pulitzer prize winning novel set in Maine, which was a series of connected stories of the lives of people in this small town, each connected in either a distant or intimate relationship with the main character.

"Twisted Tree", however is just one sorrowful tale after another with no cheer or humor to break up the grief of these characters awful, pathetic, and sad lives. I wish there had been more focus on the murderer and his victim as they seemed the most interesting characters, and yet we get the smallest glimpse of them.

Terri says

Contemporary small town life in South Dakota is illuminated through a series of loosely connected vignettes that arc around the shared impact of one family's personal tragedy. The name of the town, Twisted Tree, serves as an apt metaphor not only for the structure of interconnected relationships between the residents, but also for the rampant dysfunction that underscores many of their individual lives. The reader is cast as a voyeur, peeking through windows at moments captured in time, bearing witness to revealed secrets both sacred and profane. As such (and even so), we come to know the inhabitants better than they can ever actually know each other. In this world, even the perpetrator of the most heinous action is afforded a moment of transcendent recognition: "Everyone has something to tell. Everyone is waiting. Sleeping and dreaming and waiting to wake to someone, who understands." Later, another character shares a small epiphany, noting that "...that was the thing with stories, you never quite knew what to make of them, but you had to make something of them anyway." Treat yourself to the profound and irresistible stories of Twisted Tree.

Iris says

As previous reviewers have said, this book was more like a collection of short stories than a novel. Also, I didn't really think Haley Jo's story "unfolded" through all of the other characters as the synopsis promised. I'd go so far as to say Haley Jo was plopped into each of the short stories as an afterthought to tie them all together into a theoretically cohesive novel after the whole thing was basically written. Haley Jo was someone I would've like to know and understand more, but instead I got little specks of information that could've been summed up in one paragraph... Haley Jo's character was developed less than any other in the book! With all that in mind though, this wasn't a bad book. It just wasn't what it was made out to be. Some of the characters were richly developed and interesting, and many of the stories had unexpected twists and turns. I liked how each little story connected to another in some way. For me that would've been enough. I don't understand the author's or editor's choice to try and make Haley the center of everything. She simply wasn't.

Judith Shadford says

What an amazing book--so much contradiction...exquisitely beautiful writing of the most harrowing stories. That passage where the rattlesnake moves up Angela's leg and into her lap was so powerful I can still feel its weight. Ultimately I was left with the sense of cosmic distances between each little cluster of people, yet they are still connected with the finest of threads so that nothing happens in isolation. Nothing at all. If the large cast of characters is a little hard to keep sorted (think Russian novel without the patronymics), think of the novel as a tightly woven collection of stories. Then, there's the title...

Mherriges says

A really different book than its premise. Its not so much about the murder but about the lives of people that surround it. There is some very effective prose here. There were sentences that resonated with me so much

that I wish I had marked them down so I could feel their strength again. I also liked the clever way in which the author introduced the reader to some of its characters and their flaws. The market checkout clerk idea was a great conduit for the reader. All is not gloom here. There is imagery used in the story that can't help but humor you. A very nicely balanced story!

Angie says

This is a little bit *As I Lay Dying* and a little bit *Spoon River Anthology*. The shifting points of view are reminiscent of *As I Lay Dying*, but the whole is not as connected, has less plot, more like *Spoon River*. (And I don't think Meyers quite nails character/voice or makes you read between the lines the way Faulkner does. I don't really feel like I'm in an entirely different head with each new point of view with this book as I do with Faulkner.) If you are looking for some truly excellent prose as poetry, this is something you should check out. Meyers knows how to use words. Really, some of his descriptions/observations knocked the wind out of me with truth or beauty or horror or a combination. But did I love this book? I don't think I can go that far, mainly because there's no character to carry me through who I'll think back on as someone I've loved (Hayley Jo seems set up to be, but she really isn't). That being said, Meyers does do quite a job of fleshing some of these characters out quickly, but as this book reads like a series of short stories, no one gets a whole lot of air time. Some of the stories/characters are much stronger than others. Some have a lot of voice (Pawnshop Guy, Sheriff, and Indian Guy at the end) and some not so much. But even in the stories that are less powerful, you will find amazing prose. The other thing that prevents me from loving this book is the severe lack of levity. I won't say there is none. Actually, I found the last chapter to be quite refreshing and full of humor, and I thought it a fitting way to put the whole thing to rest. There are other tiny moments of lightness throughout (I'm thinking of the pawn shop), but it's a lot of heavy without as much balance as I'd like. So in a nut shell: awe inspiring prose, well thought out, didn't quite get me invested. I guess some of the stories, if rated as short stories, would pull a five star rating from me, but as a complete novel, not quite.
