

ForeWord Reviews

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REVIEWS

adult fiction

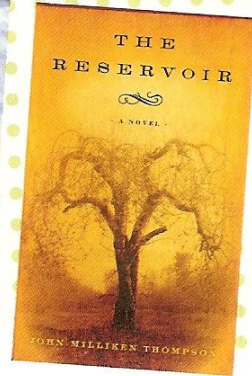
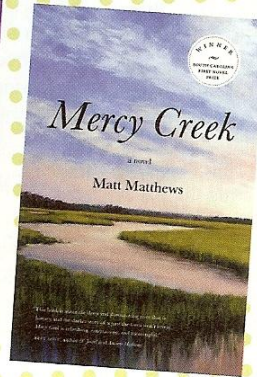
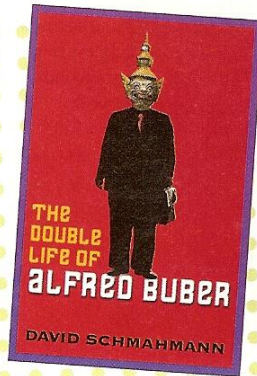
• GENERAL

The Double Life of Alfred Buber**David Schmahmann**The Permanent Press
Hardcover \$28.00 (198pp)
978-1-57962-218-3

Poor Alfred Buber! The homely, chubby child immigrant from Rhodesia worked his way up from practically nothing to the top of a Boston law firm but lives as a visitor in America, in his own home, and in his own skin. He is gifted, however, with an elegant voice that carries us confidently through this account of his obsession. In style and subject, this novel pays homage to *Lolita* and Buber sounds like a cross between that novel's Humbert Humbert and T.S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock—lines from whose love song are mimicked and quoted by a narrator who has the same inclination for self-flagellation.

Buber's tone, however, is all his own. After being told he's being made a partner at Henshaw & Potter, Buber remembers "experiencing the overwhelming sensation that I had almost completed the task of cementing myself like a corpse into a wall. I had done everything I believed I ought to do, had been industrious, careful, diligent, and yet all of it, the gentility, the formal manners, had become stifling. . . I was not a sterile hermit content to putter about his days, there in a frigid law office, here in my solitary cell." Telling people at his firm that he is going to Paris, he instead goes on a sex tourism escapade in Asia. In the Star of Love Bar, where men are publicly felled by young girls, he falls in love with Nok. It's a mark of Schmahmann's skill that we remain engaged in scenes that less carefully rendered would be simple accounts of tawdriness. Our willingness to become voyeurs following Buber's misadventures is made possible by Schmahmann's humor, facility with language, compassion for Nok, sympathy for Buber, and repudiation of his behavior. Discovering that Nok is trying to learn English, Buber runs out to buy her a better language book. "Mercy. Buber the educator scurries from the bar on his mission to spread Christianity to those who have recently orally serviced him." As in this scene, Buber's narration shifts frequently and deftly between first and third person. His shifts between past, future, and progressive tenses are almost as seamless, but their occasional bumpiness and the author's habit of mixing metaphors sometimes distract.

After a second trip abroad, during which Buber meets Nok's parents, who live in rural poverty in a hut on stilts, Buber decides to try to bring Nok to the States to live with him in his palatial home, "a fortress of marble and glass," outside Boston. As things turn sour at his law



firm, and we see the vindictiveness to which he is subjected, we almost root for Buber to achieve this goal. In the last quarter of the novel, people from his past show up who shed new light on the subjective world Buber has painted, and in the end he gets his comeuppance. But the satisfactions of this novel are sentence-by-sentence—the linguistically rich descriptions of Buber's mental states and (as viewed from there) the less important world outside.

(June) JUSTIN COURTER

Mercy Creek**Matt Matthews**Hub City Press
Softcover \$24.95 (218pp)
978-1-891885-77-8

Secrets can be toxic—kept too long, they can destroy a person or a whole community, as evinced in this Southern coming-of-age novel by first-time author Matt Matthews.

Sixteen-year-old Isaac Lawson is still reeling from the death of his mother less than one year earlier. His father is the local pastor and is well respected in their small town on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Rather than his usual summer spent playing baseball, Isaac has decided to work at a local hardware store.

It isn't long before a string of unusual break-ins begin occurring in the sleepy town. Someone has been flooding homes and drawing pictures of flames on the walls. At first, Isaac becomes interested in the investigation for the \$5,000 reward offered by a local community organization. Eventually, though, he comes to suspect that the homes that have been targeted are not random, but instead have something to do with a long-ago wrong that was perpetrated on one of the citizens. Isaac's curiosity is piqued, almost to the point of obsession, as he spends the summer investigating the connection between the break-ins and the town's shameful past.

The author introduces interesting characters, never resorting to stereotypes. Isaac works

alongside Eddie, who the town has labeled "Crazy Eddie" because of his unusual mannerisms. There is the half-lucid elderly woman, Mattie Thomson, who may have given Isaac the key to uncovering the town's secrets. And there is Hank Grady, the ringleader of the elderly men who sit around the hardware store, day after day, alluding to a sinister aspect of his own character.

The characters are authentically portrayed, the dialogue realistic, and the storyline insightful. The author's characterizations and descriptions are evocative: "He had something in common with the vandalized houses, their waterlogged walls and ceilings straining under weight they weren't designed to hold. Everything felt just fine on the outside, a structural catastrophe on the inside."

Isaac grows as a person throughout the book—he comes to see his widowed father in a new light, accepting his right to move forward; he also comes to realize that adults are not perfect, and, while they need to be held accountable for their actions, they should sometimes be forgiven.

Mercy Creek, a thought provoking read, is the deserving recipient of the South Carolina Prize for First Novel.

(May) HILARY DANINHIRSCH

• HISTORICAL

The Reservoir**John Milliken Thompson**Other Press
Paperback \$15.95 (368pp)
978-1-59051-444-3

The fluidity of the bonds of brotherhood and faith are examined in John Milliken Thompson's first novel, *The Reservoir*, which is based on a true story and focuses on the lives of brothers Tommie and Willie Cluverius in 1885 Richmond, Virginia. One early spring morning, the body of their cousin Lillie Madison—who was eight months pregnant—is discovered