

ARRT Literary Book Discussion
The Sisters Brothers by Patrick DeWitt
Thursday July 20, 2016
2:00-3:15 p.m.
Batavia Public Library
14 participants

Leader: Stacey Peterson
Notetaker: Elizabeth Hopkins

Stacey began by asking attendees to introduce themselves and share whether or not they have attended an ARRT Literary Book Discussion before. Those who had previously attended explained they make an effort to come if they find the title selection interesting and/or if their work schedules allow. Two participants explained this was their first ARRT discussion. Stacey then followed up with some quick facts about the author and readalike suggestions (listed below).

On to the discussion-

- Is this a Western?
 - The setting, timing/pacing, and characters are all classic Western.
 - But it's also a story about the bad guys, so is it the Anti-Western?
 - I would call it Western Plus due to all the genre blending.
 - I was thinking about using this title for a crime book club...not sure if it's crime enough for them. Perhaps it would work better as a mash-up with a traditional book club.
 - I would describe this as: "If the Coen brothers wrote a novel..."
- This led to a discussion of what makes a book a Western. Set during the 19th century, palpable sense of place and time, the plot involves unambiguous conflict with a resolution, the protagonist follows a code of conduct, etc.
- Were the brothers operating under a code? Do you need to follow the good guys to call it a Western?
 - I think their code was protect your brother and kill anyone in the way.
 - Good guys and bad guys is subjective. Were there any good guys in the Old West?
- Was this story more about characters or plot?
 - Characters! The plot falls apart at the end.
 - This was more about characters, not herding cattle (like a traditional Western). Brought in more layers/elements and wasn't heavy on gun fights and cowboys.
- More thoughts on the plot-

- I had a hard time with the fact that we have two criminals speaking like educated gentleman. Is this common in Westerns? (Several Western readers said yes).
- The gold formula felt thrown in. There was no hint that science was going on during the first half of the book.
- The intermissions were confusing!
- Wasn't it obvious that the water would kill them? Were people just that greedy for money?
- If you're smart enough to create a chemical that will detect gold, wouldn't you test it first?
- The plot didn't ring true. It started as a journey about two guys but then it turned into emphasizing why they were tasked to kill Warm.
- It almost felt like he didn't know how to end the book.

- Who hated this and why?
 - I didn't have any emotional attachment to any of the characters. My favorite character was actually Tub, the horse.
 - I don't like books where animals get abused. Horses died, a dog was poisoned...I don't find that amusing. I had zero sympathy for these guys due to the animal abuse.
 - I don't avoid reading books with violence, but I don't like gratuitous violence. Why did Tub have a gruesome death?
 - Isn't this the reality of the Old West? It wasn't a pleasant time.

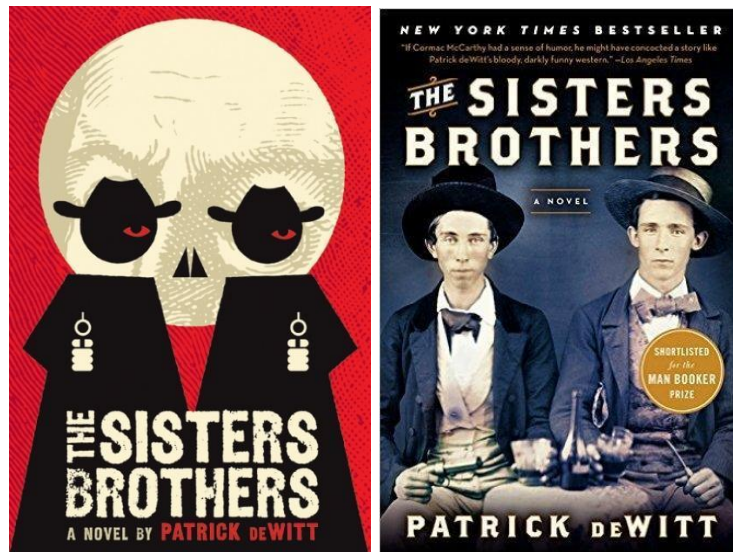
- Was it funny?
 - I thought it was funny the first time I read it and sad the second time.
 - The toothpaste bit was funny- especially the part about the Novocain.
 - Humor is personal- you'll either like it or not. It's a very dry humor...should we laugh about killing people?
 - Eli's delivery and the way he saw things was humorous.
 - This almost felt like scenes from *Fargo*. You're laughing but you shouldn't be.

- Which parts did you find sad?
 - The girl poisoning the dog. The intermissions...was that a dream? (A lot of people said yes. That's why he called it an intermission, it takes you away from the story).
 - When the brothers killed the stable boy. That was hard to read.
 - Tub. The whole story of Tub from his eye to his death.
 - Charlie in the bathtub with his monologue. I wanted to cry.

- Let's talk about the women in this book-
 - The women were not important, except for the mother.
 - (On the bookkeeper's abrupt death) This was a fact of the time. People died all the time in the Old West.

- Eli might have seemed indifferent to the bookkeeper's death because he was putting walls up. It was an act of self-preservation because so many people died.
- That blue ribbon...he just threw it in the grave. I kept thinking: What is the girl going to say about that?
- Eli had delusions about having a partner. It's all about who is around and convenient.
- Eli fell in love with so many women...and then promptly forgot about them.
- Which scene best reveals Eli's character?
 - The toothbrush scene. When he was brushing his teeth with Sally...it was very charming. That whole storyline also shows that he cares about people (leaving her money).
 - His interactions with Tub. He keeps Tub and sells the healthier horse. Does he have a soft spot or is he just naïve?
 - When Warm is dying and he pretends to be Morris. Also taking the time to bury them both and later regretting not marking their graves properly.
- Which scene best reveals Charlie's character?
 - When he hit that woman- very low point. With Charlie, what you see is what you get.
 - When his solution to anything is murder.
 - This would have been a very interesting story if we got alternating perspectives from both brothers.
- Will Eli really live a calm life?
 - I'm hopeful. He had no problem walking away.
 - Charlie's injury lends more hope that they will both leave the business.
 - Charlie might just drink himself to death.
 - Eli is hopeless with money. There might be a string of "one last jobs."
- Thoughts on the conclusion?
 - You don't have enough backstory about the mother to really appreciate this reunion.
 - I thought you get a lot of background from the mother's greeting.
 - Home is the place you go when you have nowhere else to go.
- Other thoughts?
 - I thought the dialogue was very well-written (a lot of agreement here).
 - The witch scene, like the intermissions, was very odd!

The group also spent some time discussing the novel's two different covers and how they would appeal to different readers:



Readalikes:

True Grit

Mark Twain

Elmore Leonard

Steve Hockensmith- *Holmes on the Range* series

The Pirates by Gideon Defoe