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Assumption: A Novel (review)

Joe Weixlmann

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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**Percival Everett. *Assumption: A Novel*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2011. 236 pp.
\$15.00.**

In 2004, Percival Everett commented to interviewer Forrest Anderson

that, when the author's students at the University of Southern California ask him if he can teach them to write a novel, "I say no. I don't know how to write a novel. I know I've done it, and I'll probably do it again, but every time I do it, it's brand-new." So it should surprise no one that Everett's most recent literary offering, *Assumption*, offers both a structural and a subtle conceptual departure from his previous seventeen novels.

Presented in three substantially self-contained sections, as opposed to a continuous narrative, *Assumption* provides a series of discrete murder mysteries investigated by the book's protagonist, Deputy Ogden Walker, along with fellow deputy Warren Fragua, and Sheriff Bucky Paz. The geographical terrain will be familiar to Everett devotees—the fictional Plata County in north-central New Mexico, which also serves as the setting for several of the stories in Everett's *The Weather and Women Treat Me Fair* (1987) and *Big Picture* (1996), his well-received novel *Watershed* (1996), and his little-known, and therefore underappreciated suspense novel *The Body of Martin Aguilera* (1997). In fact, in the first and longest section of *Assumption*, "A Difficult Likeness," the informed reader occasionally hears echoes of *Watershed*, for instance, in *Assumption's* depiction of intraunit tensions within the FBI, and watches Everett recycle a few names and one notable plot element from *The Body of Martin Aguilera*—e.g., Fonda's Funeral Parlor, the Archeletta and Hireles families, and the theft of a dead body by a group of Penitentes, a small, lay confraternity of Roman Catholic men in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado given to self-flagellation.

The voices of deceased male elders, fathers and grandfathers, often infiltrate the minds of Everett's male protagonists—and Ogden Walker is no exception. In the two-page section of the novel which precedes "A Difficult Likeness," we learn that his deceased black father regarded Ogden as "a fool" for, among other things, leaving school, loving the desert, joining the military, and "working as a deputy in [a] hick-full, redneck county," but we also find that Ogden is strongly supported by his white mother, who lives nearby. This maternal support, however, along with the support of members of the Plata County sheriff's office, does

not quell Ogden's oft-expressed self-doubts about his skills as a detective. Nor does their support soften his concerns about his father's presumed feelings, expressed only "in Ogden's dreams" and "tinged with the language of race and social indignation," that he was "somehow . . . a traitor" because of his affiliation with decidedly *American* institutions. At one especially low point, when Ogden's failure to act upon a gut instinct unintentionally facilitates an elderly woman's murder, he muses that "he wouldn't know a clue if it jumped up and bit him on the pecker." He works hard at his job, but can't totally shake the feeling that he's "wasting [his] time . . . in this town" and living "a stalled life." He recognizes that he isn't a hardened man, "like a lot of people who became cops, . . . but then [his compatriots] Fragua and Paz weren't like that either."

Ogden's retreat from death, dying, and detective work is fly-fishing, a passion that connects him positively to his father and one of the things that bonds him to fellow deputy Fragua, "the only Native member" of the sheriff's department. Ogden is deeply wedded to the landscape—"the place, the mountains, the desert, the rivers, the fish." **[End Page 511]** But these pleasures can be short-lived amid conspiracies, mistaken identities, the intrusion of FBI agents, and members of hate groups. The mystery undergirding the narrative of "A Difficult Likeness," set in the winter months, moves briskly among these weighty elements before coming to an abrupt, revealing, and deadly resolution, leaving both readers and the sheriff's staff ample opportunity to question *their* assumptions.

The season has...

Reviews

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Reviewed by Joe Weixmann, Saint Louis University

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
muse@press.jhu.edu



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