

The Wide Game

by Michael West

I hate the '80s.

In the interest of full disclosure, I thought that I ought to tell you my biases. I went to high school during the 80s, with all of its wonderful memories still scarred into my mind. So to pick up a book about high school seniors, set in the year that I graduated (with enough pop culture references to never let you forget it), in my home state of Indiana, let's just say that this book started out with two strikes against it.

The Wide Game, the debut novel by Michael West, is nominally about a group of seniors in Harmony, Indiana, who participate in a special kind of "senior skip day" tradition. The Wide Game in question is a race through acres of corn fields to a quarry where the seniors spend the day sun bathing, picnicking, and swimming. But the game goes horribly wrong, the repercussions of which the survivors are still dealing with even as their 10 year reunion comes upon them. But the story, at its core, is really a story of first loves and lost loves. A very personal, coming of age story that gets complicated by trying to be a horror novel.

At first I had trouble keeping all of the characters straight. The heart of the story revolves around the relationship between Paul and his high school love Deidre. Michael West does a great job developing these characters and the cast of male characters. Skip, Danny, Mick, and Robby become true characters, but with the exception of Paul's wife, Mary, none of the females quite escape the "I exist to be fodder" feel to them. Again, this may point to my anti-high school bias, since that is a time when everyone tries to act like each other.

There was a movie called Dead Presidents (by the Hughs Brothers, the directors of From Hell) that shared a problem with The Wide Game. Both seem like a series of well done scenes and sequences that don't quite come together for a cohesive whole. The book is slightly uneven and seemed like a story best told in a series of flashbacks, alternating between the present day dilemma and the past to fully allow the tensions to build. I say that mostly because horror stories have a certain rhythm that one expects. A building of threat that leads to a confrontation with the evil. I mention that because there is an odd lull after the initial encounter with the evil until the second encounter. The ending, thus, thwarts expectations and conventions. I know exactly what the ending reminded me of: there was an episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, during season four, when The First (the big villain of season seven) is introduced and it tries to turn her paramour, Angel, evil. There is a build up of escalating terror, then just over halfway through the episode, the story becomes about Buffy and Angel and the repercussions of their choices and their love. With The First kind of forgotten, until season seven.

But here's the bottom line: it was a good read. I breezed through this book in no time. Let's face it, this is a book mostly set in a cornfield. It kept my interest (I'm not above setting a book down). And I can't say enough about how real the relationship at the core of the story was. You can see this author's potential. He's definitely one to keep an eye on.

(2.5 out of 5 bookworms)