

Effigy

Alissa York; \$32.95 cloth 978-0-679-31472-1, 434 pp., 6 x 9, Random House Canada, April

Effigy is inspired in part by a terrible footnote in the history of the West: the Mountain Meadows Massacre in Utah in 1857, in which a group of Mormons and Pauites massacred a party of more than 100 exhausted men, women, and children en route to California.

York sets her second novel a decade later, in the household of Erastus Hammer. Although the family are prominent Mormons, there is little evidence of active Christian piety among them; the community's awful secret has drained it of grace. Hammer's home is a tableau of most of the seven deadly sins – sloth excepted, for these men and women are nothing if not industrious. They work long and hard at farming and raising horses.

Hammer himself is lustful, greedy, wrathful, and envious, but his greatest sin is pride. He has acquired Dorrie, his young fourth wife, not to bear his children but to stuff his animal trophies, the evidence of his marksmanship. York focuses minutely on the art of taxidermy: the poisons used in preservation, the skinning, measuring, and posing, all to restore Hammer's kills to the semblance of life.

As in her first novel, *Mercy*, York tells this story of love and hubris through multiple viewpoints: Hammer and his four wives, his sullen eldest son, the hired hand (a former circuit rider and contortionist), Dorrie's dying mother, the Pauite Tracker – even a crow, a witness to the massacre. It's a prodigious feat. The frequent shifts of viewpoint are less interruption than relief, for it's a grim tale, though a riveting one.

York's writing is graphic and impressionistic, sharp-edged and sensual. Though both style and landscape at times bring to mind Annie Dillard and Cormac McCarthy, York's voice is very much her own.

Reviewed by Maureen Garvie (from the April 2007 issue)