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Sideshow of Merit

Nicole Pietsch

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You couldn’t call Mount Rosa Hospital a good place to be in 1957, when you were fourteen. But it’s where Tevan George was, and James Rowley too, “’convalescing” from tuberculosis. And it’s where both boys were abused by an older boy—although neither of them did much talking about it, then or later. Shut up! That’s what Tevan did. James too, but he never said much about anything anyway. Nine rocky years later, on the run together since they skipped out on a medical checkup at Mount Rosa’s in 1961, Tevan and James emerge early one morning from the ’55 Chevy they’ve been living in and come across Buddy Merit setting up his “Ten in One” sideshow on a fairground in Ontario. They can’t do magic. They can’t foretell the future. They can’t swallow swords. What Tevan and James decide they can do is a stunt they’ve done only in private, in the dark—a stunt that, performed in public for the marks, takes on a life of its own and surprises even the two young men who perform it. In the company of the misfits and reprobates and losers who make up Buddy Merit’s sideshow, Tevan and James act out the central trauma of their lives until they get to a place from which they can’t go forward and they can’t go back. Sideshow of Merit is a story of abuse and recovery, of friendship and trust, of survival, of repeated failure and ultimate success, set against a backdrop of human frailty, selfishness, greed, and vulnerability. Tevan and James’s journey is a coming-of-age story like no other.

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