

FRONT PORCH

Smonk

Tom Franklin, *Smonk*

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Woe to the faint of heart! The weak in constitution! Tom Franklin's second novel, *Smonk*, may be the most bloody and profane book this side of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. And while the novel's sundry perversions are enough to make Humbert Humbert blush, *Smonk* maintains a rare laugh-out-loud, read passages to your friends, humor.

Smonk is a western of sorts, meaning there are horses and gunplay and sheriffs, but all resemblances to that form stop there. Primarily set in the town of Old Texas, Alabama, and peopled as it is with witches, a one-eyed dwarf, Civil War refugees, and a group dubbed the Christian Deputies, *Smonk* reads more like a novel by Flannery O'Connor than it does one by Louis L'Amour.

Franklin centers the story on three dissimilar characters whose pasts are intertwined and whose fates head toward collision. E.O. Smonk is a one-eyed dwarf whose physical ailments include syphilis, the clap, gout, low blood sugar, neuralgia, ague, and malaria. Under his beard lies a goiter. A white glass ball, "two sizes two small," fills the void of his missing eye. As the novel opens, Smonk rides into town on his mule to attend his own murder trial. But there's foul play afoot. Smonk has walked into a trap. The angry mob in the courtroom—a saloon converted for lawful purposes when the need arises—has gathered to kill E.O. Smonk without the proper justice of the law on their side. Smonk, sniffing out the sabotage, fights his way out of the mob, not only by wielding his derringer and sword, but by spewing blood and shooting his glass eye from its socket. A massacre of Peckinpah proportion follows, and nearly every male citizen of Old Texas is killed, though E.O. Smonk walks out of town unscathed. But he'll be back, no doubt.

The book also follows the travails of a young androgynous whore, Evangeline. A tough gal—sort of an unholy version of Portis' Mattie Ross from *True Grit*—Evangeline kills a man then shoots an overgrown mole off his face to keep as a souvenir. Mistaken for a man and accused of homosexual relations, Evangeline is pursued for acts she did not commit by a morally-inclined, but not legally sanctioned, group of men called the Christian Deputies. Led by head deputy Phail Walton, a blue blood Yank, the Christian Deputies attempt to detain Evangeline in order to give *him* (Evangeline) "a whooping." But Phail Walton

knows, after all, that Evavangelina is no man. For his part, Walton is consumed with stalking the whore from some need that lies between religious piety and his own repressed sexuality. It's through Walton that Franklin delivers his darker passages of humor. During a struggle with lust that's thrown Walton into a spiritual crisis, Franklin describes Walton's relationship to his "member" as something

he wouldn't even touch...would merely let it protrude and perform its task; and if it ever betrayed him and became engorged in his pants, he would pinch the purple turtle's-head end, like Mother used to, and it would recede. When he has a night emission he would slam his fingers in the door come dawn and drink a pint of his own urine.

In such passages, you sense that Franklin is having so much fun with his characters, finding such glee in lurid detail, that it seems improbable that he'll keep up the manic pace. But, much like Charles Portis' *Dog of the South*, *Smonk* is entertaining throughout. And as the paths of E.O. Smonk, Evavangelina, and Phail Walton converge back to Old Texas, Alabama, each comic episode increases in hilarity. Each perversion drops further into baseness. And every act of violence is countered by another more horrifyingly brutal.

Smonk is a challenge to the reader's threshold for vulgarity and savageness. The more squeamish reader will simply put the book down, while others will revel in the book's ugliness. Either way, by allowing no room for ambivalence on the part of the reader, *Smonk* succeeds in eliciting a visceral reaction that rarely comes from modern literature. After all, what are we to make of such a world where redemption is scarce and the proclivity to kill is a prized virtue? It seems Franklin is laying waste to all things sacred in order to clear room for something new. Perhaps Franklin is calling into question the reader's own moral fortitude by forcing the reader into a world gone so wrong that he must either join the debauchery or face extinction with his archaic notions of right and wrong. Evavangelina seems to be making a case for this reading when she reacts to Smonk's sexual advances:

It's evil, she said. But when she looked at Smonk a strange thing happened. Somehow he didn't seem evil and he wasn't ugly and misshapen and old and bloody. He was her daddy...Her guts felt like they shifted in his direction...Her hair stood on end, her skin tingling. Her nipples hot knobs.

E.O. Smonk is evil, all right. And one thing is for certain: whatever Franklin is saying, he is shouting it loud, grabbing us by the collar and demanding we listen. In this, he succeeds.

Franklin's previous two efforts—the collection of stories *Poachers* and the novel *Hell at the Breech*—garnered praise from Richard Ford, Philip Roth, and Dennis Lehane, while amassing Franklin a rabid fan base. *Smonk*, too, is being met with praise. But even the most dedicated Franklin-head will be unprepared for the depths of depravity the author dives headlong into with *Smonk*. And from this

Franklin fan to the next, or to those considering investigating the hype, I say: this trip into Franklin's demented world beats the hell out of any you're likely to take anytime soon. After all, Peckinpah's dead. McCarthy's stopped writing westerns. And Portis hasn't put out a book in fifteen years. The time is right to usher in a new master of calamity: Tom Franklin.

- Bearden Coleman