

KIRKUS REVIEWS

TITLE INFORMATION

CLIMBING THE COLISEUM

Percy, Bill

Xlibris (322 pp.)

\$19.99 paperback, \$3.99 e-book

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BOOK REVIEW

A disenchanted, depressed psychologist finds himself caring for a rebellious teenage girl and helping police investigate a racist group in Percy's debut thriller.

Psychologist Ed Northrup is "burned out" and unhappy in Monastery Valley, Montana, and still feels guilt over a young patient's death from 27 years ago. His adulterous ex-wife, Mara, wants Ed's professional opinion on her 14-year-old daughter, Grace, who's twice attempted suicide. When Ed repeatedly declines over the phone, Mara defiantly shows up in person with her daughter in tow. Soon, Ed is dealing directly with Grace, an opinionated, stubborn teen who's terrified of abandonment. At the same time, he works with cops on a case that indirectly involves another of his patients, Maggie; her husband, Vic, who's suspected of abusing her, may be linked to a hate group that's posting flyers opposing an African-American gubernatorial candidate. Percy highlights the story's thriller components, such as the unsettling nature of the hate group, the Church of Jesus Christ of the American Promise, which offers its potential members assistance with tax problems before ultimately preaching racist sentiments. But the true focus, and the stronger subplot, is the tremulous relationship between Ed and Grace. It's tough to sympathize with the foul-mouthed Grace, despite her predicament; she's rude to nearly everyone, including a waitress who tells her she can't order a burger before the lunch service begins. But whether readers find Grace an object of pity or annoyance, she'll definitely ignite an emotional response. (The plotline involving Vic and the church is resolved well before the end, and the book closes, quite appropriately, with Ed and Grace.) Percy superbly relates much of the story with visuals: the recurrent image of Grace with her hood up and face in her phone; a belligerent church assistant's Stetson, which inspires a nickname; and Ed imagining his depression as a snarling black dog. The sole female deputy, Andi Pelton, is a laudable character as she adjusts to her new job, but it's somewhat predictable that she's Ed's romantic interest.

A light, breezy thriller, but its tale of a troubled man acting as a father to an equally troubled girl has exceptional dramatic impact.



Clarion Review

MYSTERY

Climbing the Coliseum

Bill Percy

Xlibris

978-1-4990-0960-6

Five Stars (out of Five)

Through the thrilling story of a psychologist in a small Montana town, Percy broaches complex topics with creativity and sensitivity.

Bill Percy's *Climbing the Coliseum* is witty, insightful, and at times heartbreaking as Ed Northrup, a psychologist always willing to lend a helping hand, finally learns how to help himself as well.

Ed contemplates dating, dieting, and, in despair, even stepping off the edge of the majestic Coliseum, a nearby cliff. But when faced with a series of shocking and troubling events, Ed is forced back into the land of the living. Simply going through the motions of the daily grind, even Ed's friends have started to notice that something is missing in his life. Montana's Monastery Valley is a close-knit community, and Ed is well-liked and respected. Sheriff Ben Stewart thinks dating new arrival Deputy Andrea Pelton will help, but Andi has a secret past and demons of her own. Then, in a flurry of anger, guilt, and hurt, Ed's ex-wife whirls through town, where she abandons her rebellious fourteen-year-old daughter, Grace. Simultaneously, local ranchers Maggie and Vic Sobstak become entrenched in a dangerous plot hatched by a crooked out-of-towner with a hidden agenda, and Ed and Andi end up right in the middle.

Often more character study than mystery, each player is well-drawn, flawed yet likable, and has a distinct voice. Percy, perhaps channeling his own experiences as a psychologist, broaches complex emotions with creativity and sensitivity. Ed refers to his own depression as the "black dog": "He preferred calling it the black dog to 'depression'...It was a rough cowboy phrase Magnus Anderssen had once used to describe a foreman's depression. 'It's a black dog, Ed, gnawing him like a bone.'"



Climbing the Coliseum

Bill Percy

Xlibris, 312 pages, (paperback) \$19.99, 9781499009606

(Reviewed: July 2014)

In this engaging novel, psychologist Ed Northrup struggles to cope with depression, his so-called "black dog."

As the book begins, Ed stands on the precipice of the Coliseum, a mountain above the Monastery Valley of Montana. Frightened by his thoughts, he pulls back from the edge and returns to his daily life. With depression lurking, he fulfills his obligations in the small town and soon becomes enmeshed in a hate-fueled criminal case that may involve one of his patients.

At the same time, his ex-wife shows up with her 14-year-old daughter from another marriage and abandons the girl, Grace, in Ed's care. Left to deal with a moody, sulky teenager, Ed turns for help to the new deputy sheriff, Andi Pelton. As Ed and Andi's relationship grows and Ed unexpectedly warms towards Grace, who thwarts him at every turn, he's finally able to tame his "black dog."

The author is a fine writer who does a wonderful job of capturing small town life. His dialogue is spot-on, and most of the characters are interesting and often amusing, especially Grace, who insists on calling Ed by his last name. When Grace learns there is no McDonald's in the Valley, she frowns. "No McDonald's? This place is, like, Death Valley."

The author is a psychologist, which may have helped him create characters with realistic daily concerns. When everyone in the Valley notes Ed's weight gain (in subtle and not-so subtle ways), Ed resolves to lose a few pounds. At the Valley Inn, Ed asks the waitress for cereal instead of his beloved high-fat breakfast. "'I'm on a diet,' he said, as if he were confiding a dire, perhaps fatal diagnosis."

Readers may find the hate-crime scenario set-up forced and the characters involved in it a weak link. Overall, though, *Climbing the Coliseum* is a highly enjoyable novel. Fans of Ed, Grace, and Andi will look forward to the author's planned sequels.

Also available as an ebook.

Climbing the Coliseum manages to be both reflective and action-filled as the men and women of Monastery Valley each deal with crises in their own way. Organized into five parts, chapters are headed and divided by a combination of months, dates, and times occurring over the winter and into the cold Montana spring. The time line enhances and orders the strands that weave the story together, allowing Percy to explore a town full of unique characters without overexplaining or being redundant.

An engaging and uplifting tale, *Climbing the Coliseum* will appeal to mystery lovers who enjoy characters with depth. The men and women of Monastery Valley will cause laughter, and maybe a few tears. Percy has promised at least two sequels that will be sure to appease fans of *Climbing the Coliseum*.

Pallas Gates McCorquodale