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The Fighter

By Michael Farris Smith
Little, Brown and Company
256 pp.

Mississippi author Michael Farris Smith has made a habit of putting his characters in the direst of straits, pushing them to the limits of human endurance by subjecting them to psychological, emotional, and even physical torment. In his outstanding and gut-wrenching new novel, *The Fighter*, Smith does not shy away from this technique, but in fact doubles down in many regards. He shows that there is always something else to lose and that glimmers of hope and meaning can help guide the human spirit out of even the most dismal of places.

The cover of *The Fighter* shows a photograph of a gravel road running between two fields with a tree line in the distance. One appears perfectly normal, with crops growing; the other is a bit bleaker, with a fire on the brink of raging out of control, ominous black smoke billowing into a blue sky. The characters in this novel, particularly the main protagonist Jack Boucher, exist in the side of the world that is burning. Jack fits into the role of title character in a number of ways. He makes his living in the brutal world of cage fighting, his body broken from years of punishment in fights both legal and illicit. He has also had to fight to figure out his own identity; abandoned by his biological parents at a Salvation Army, Jack bounces around foster families until finding a semblance of normality with Maryann, who lives alone at her family home in the Mississippi Delta town of Clarksdale. And perhaps most importantly, as the action of the book shows, Jack has to fight himself, attempting to overcome bad circumstances and even worse decisions to avoid complete ruin.

Smith wastes little time throwing the reader into the uncertain world of Jack Boucher. The novel opens with him driving down a Delta highway with an envelope of money won gambling in Natchez, where he also had to fend off the goons of Big Momma Sweet, a Clarksdale crime kingpin to whom he owes thousands of dollars. A chance encounter with another of Big Momma's debtors and the subsequent wreck of his truck destroys any hopes of Jack reaching home smoothly, where the aforementioned danger and the imminent foreclosure of Maryann's home loom. Jack, with the help of booze and pills, is clearly a man barely hanging on, his best days as a prize fighter behind him and his future in jeopardy.

At this point, the other main character of *The Fighter* is introduced in the form of Annette, a young woman in her twenties that lives by a philosophy she terms the 'church of coincidence.' While living with a tattoo artist, she determines to cover her entire body in a variety of images, which she then uses to become the most popular dancer at a Memphis strip club. After tiring of that life, she moves on to work for a travelling carnival as a sideshow attraction. She unknowingly becomes intertwined with Jack's plight when the caravan happens upon his wrecked truck, where Annette and the owner of the carnival find the envelope of money Jack so desperately needs. In a way, Annette is the opposite of Jack; she never allows herself to become too emotionally attached to anything or anyone, which allows her to

avoid becoming trapped in any situation longer than she determines safe. However, when these two characters eventually cross paths later in the novel, both learn that they may have ties to something, or someone, they never truly anticipated.

As in his previous work, Smith does a masterful job of creating a deep and complex sense of place that allows the reader to form an emotional bond to the characters. These characters and the environment around them have suffered a long stretch of decay and all appear on the brink of falling completely apart at any moment. Both Jack and Annette are subjected to constant pressure from outside forces and exist in worlds that most would consider undesirable. However, both also understand the consequences of their choices, even if the things that happen to them seem to be random, unavoidable, or just plain bad luck.

Ultimately, the novel uses its characters, both major and minor, to ask important questions that likely mean something to all of us, no matter our situation in life. What ties us to this world? What keeps us going when we feel beaten and alone, with nothing but pain on the immediate horizon? Not to give too much away, but Smith's brutal and exciting climax to *The Fighter* provides a glimpse into the resilience of the human spirit when it is given a reason to persist, to continue existing no matter the odds.