

WESTERN NEWS

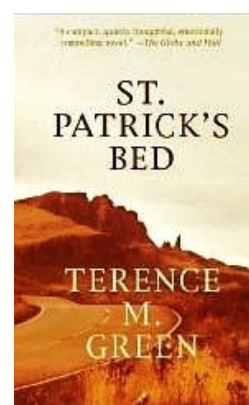
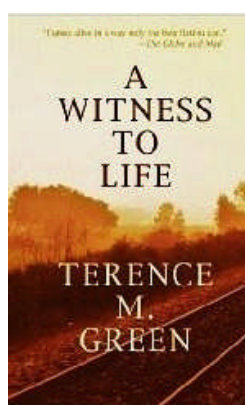
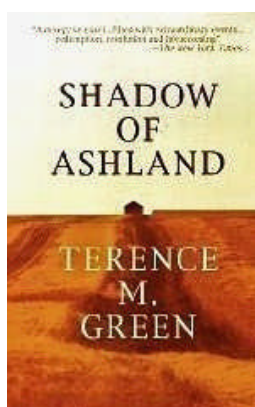
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Shadow of Ashland

A Witness to Life

St. Patrick's Bed



by Terence M. Green
E-Reads, rereleases 2012

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When these three books were first released between 1996-2001, they received their fair due of critical acclaim, thematically interweaving family, death and the borderlands of experience. In their reissue under **E-Reads**, which specializes in books that have fallen out of the publisher's backlist, Green effectively pens a rolling family saga spread over three books that may less qualify as a trilogy and more of a troika of blended familial tales, if one can envisage such a thing.

Shadow of Ashland introduces us to the Radey family by way of letters from Leo Nolan's uncle, Jack Radey. However, as the story is set in 1984, the letters are postmarked from 1934. Leo Nolan takes it upon himself to investigate the source in Ashland, Kentucky, and finds himself in a kind of temporal *trompe l'oeil*, experiencing the area as it might have been during the Great Depression. Not quite *Life on Mars*, it is the haunting of a deeply emotional period that is vividly lived by Nolan. The premise is more subtly integrated into the plot, so do not expect Green will fully exploit the resources of this semi-psychological trip back in time; the traction of the story requires

their subsequent complementary volumes where Green's exploratory prose will throw out its elbows. Only afterward does the reader come to realize the visit to Ashland is the definitive pivot upon which the saga turns, and that *Shadow of Ashland* is more of a launch-probe into the diegetic deep. Stylistically, the prose is clean, and the switching between different times is smooth and not jarring, if also showing fidelity to the vernacular of the times and places.

A Witness to Life opens with Martin John Radey, 34 years after his death and in ethereal attendance of his daughter dying in hospital. The simplicity of reflection carries in it the profundity of insight as Radey patiently unfolds the events and people in his life to gain a vividly rich grasp of human relations. The poignant reflections of death in terms of a journey to acceptance, that does not guarantee its understanding, is of a piece with a metaphysical view of existence itself as lacking teleology (or, perhaps, that such knowledge is not readily attainable). In the sub-genre of posthumous reflection fiction, one is reminded of Will Self's *How the Dead Live*, with which Green's work shares a commonality: a brutally honest exploration of life and the long hereafter. The curious positioning of memory as something celibate or bracketed off from the temporal gives this novel a kind of philosophical kick, perhaps in a way reminiscent of Henri Bergson's reflection on time, duration and memory, if not also recalling Martin Heidegger's "thrownness" into the world of *Das Man*. Martin John Radey's self-exploration is inextricably bound with the unfolding of his family's narrative, forming points of convergence and divergence that maintain an undertone of suspenseful tension. However, for all the intriguing philosophical issues this novel furnishes, this operates in the background and focuses instead on a tale of everydayness raised to the level of the literary extraordinary. Seamlessly woven, making well-sequenced use of document intertextuality (newspaper clippings of obituaries, letters), the reader is privy to all the little details that make up a life, but as a Gestalt where the whole is much more than the sum of its mundane parts, and the posthumous narrator will never reach the full horizon of meaning even if the journey extends forever.

St. Patrick's Bed returns to the foot of the narrative circle. Leo Nolan takes it upon himself to investigate his stepson's biological father to ensure he is a good man. However, this opens up another classic literary convention of the reminiscence: Nolan reflects on his own relations with his father. Nolan does not actually travel back in time as he did in the first book, but expect that the 'journey' will prove a bit more vivid when memory is used as a conveyance. In what is now County Mayo, Ireland, in the fifth century St Patrick is said to have slept on the summit of a mountain for forty nights where he prayed for the people (but not without being attacked by snakes which legend has it he later banished). In some ways, Nolan's story shares a similarity with respect to theme of sacrifice and reflection. And perhaps it is best left to the reader what metaphorical snakes Nolan banishes from the family history.

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