

**The Long Black Veil**

By Robert Cooperman

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*Reviewed by Steve Glines*

I am rarely speechless but this little volume left me in just such a state. I have had this thin poetic novel on my desk, glairing at me, for several months. I have read it and reread it and read it again. I rarely do that. It's a moving, nuanced novella in poetry. I am haunted by the story and have found myself, at odd times, breaking into the chorus of the original tune on which this story was based, "The Long Black Veil." By Marijohn Wilkin and Danny Dill.

**Long Black Veil**

Ten years ago, on a cold dark night  
There was someone killed 'neath the townhall light,  
There were few at the scene, but the all agreed  
That the stranger who fled looked a lot like me

Refrain:

Nobody knows, nobody sees, nobody knows but me  
The judge said son what is your alibi,  
If you were somewhere else, then you won't have to die  
I spoke not a word, though it ment my life,  
For I'd been in the arms of my best friends wife

Chorus:

She walks these hills in a long black veil,  
She visits my grave where the night winds wail.

Refrain

The scaffold was high, and eternity near,  
She stood in the crown and shed not a tear.  
But sometimes at night, when the cold wind moans,  
In a long black veil, she cries on my bones.

The Kinston Trio sang it 1962. Joan Baez recorded it, and The Band put a folk-rock version of it on their first album, Music from Big Pink, in 1968 but Johnny Cash did the definitive version at Folsom prison. Since then everyone has gotten into the act. It's an inspiring song, inspiring enough to Robert

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Cooperman to create an entire novella in poetry from the story.

Cooperman takes this simple but haunting song and gives voice to a cast of characters that inhabit this confined little world. Miller Waggoner is taken in by his friend the sheriff for the murder of Banker Edwards an act he knows he did not commit because he was “thrashing in the heaven of Emma Richfield,” his best friends wife. Meanwhile, Tom Whitby, the man who ran, explains his hatred for the banker and gives us a good reason to feel sorry for him, his wife is dying and he needs money for a last ditch attempt to save her. The banker refused the loan.

I won't give away the plot but it is as compelling as any novella. Were Hemingway a poet he could have written this story with its twists and turns and haunting, heart wrenching pleas from the grave. This is a love story, a tale of a love triangle, of blackmail and murder most foul. It yanks at your heart yet tells a universal story of passion. On her deathbed Emma Richfield thinking of both her husband, Conner who forgave her on his own deathbed, and Miller Waggoner, dead ten years, exclaims:

“Stupid to speculate: just worms and dirt  
Yet, like a child who still believes  
In Christmas, I long to see them both  
Their friendship and our love sealed  
Not in children's innocent blood oaths  
But in Heavens mild and honey.”

To which Miller Waggoner replies,  
“...  
our souls soaring together,  
all our weary wayfaring over:  
a lamp ablaze in a cottage window.”

Robert Cooperman is a masterful poet and storyteller. In less capable hands this might have become a full-blown novel but Cooperman resists the temptation to write prose and the results are remarkable. A story this powerful could only be told as poetry. I liked it.

Steve Glines  
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