

MONGRELS

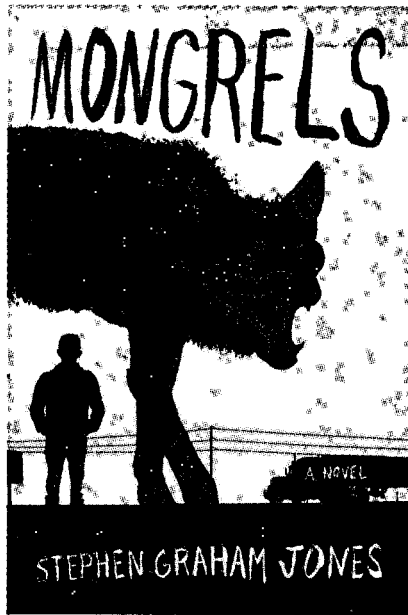
Stephen Graham Jones
William Morrow (\$24.99)

There's no avoiding it: *Mongrels*, by Stephen Graham Jones, is a book about werewolves. Not just a book that entertains the idea of werewolves, or one that uses werewolves purely as metaphor for something else, but a book that follows the multigenerational story of one werewolf family as they struggle to pay rent, put food (sometimes roadkill) on the table, and build relationships.

In this world, most everyone is human, but a special few have to hide their werewolf identities. While the narrator, an adolescent waiting impatiently for his werewolf puberty to kick in, struggles to stomach the raw meat that his family members wolf down in one bite, his aunt and uncle are changing every night to hunt down a sheep or a deer for the family table. The patriarch of the little clan is a werewolf veteran of World War II who takes great pleasure in acting out his tall tales in the theater of the living room—that is, before he's discovered dead in the kitchen doorway, halfway between his human and wolf form. His death launches the trio on a never-ending road trip as they search for

some stability in their unusual, but still recognizably human, lives.

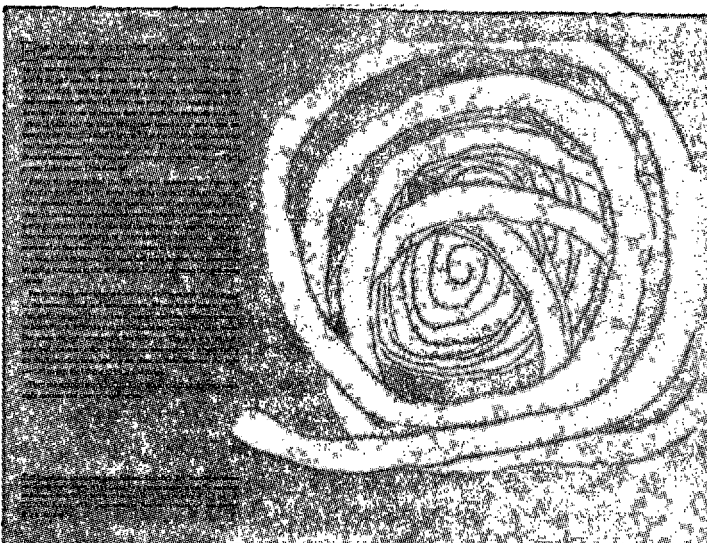
Jones gives us a portrait of a family that cannot escape their cruel reality no matter how hard they try—moving from town to town to remain undiscovered, scouring roadkill off the side of the highway for dinner, never having enough money because it's difficult keeping a job as a werewolf. It's a life that is both romanticized and made horrific through the bloody energy of Jones's writing. In *Mongrels*, cars don't just move the narrator and his family from point to point, but rather stab them "deeper into the night." When a faulty



oven explodes and "does its evil thing" in the kitchen, the little group is left "deaf against a wall, feeling each other's faces to make sure they're all right, and if there are any real answers about werewolves, then it's a picture of them right there doing that, a picture of them right there trying to find each other." In sentence after sentence, Jones perfectly captures a pattern of poverty and violence and occasional beauty that becomes easier to perpetuate than to try and overcome.

The most obvious example of this tension is the struggle of the narrator to reconcile his gentler bookish nature with the feral qualities of his family. The tenderness Jones achieves in showing us an aunt encouraging her nephew to stay in school and avoid an itinerant, violent life is somehow made more poignant by the fact that it inevitably fails. How does a werewolf stay in school? How does he make friends? Hold down a job? Find a spouse? These everyday obstacles become insurmountable, and as we watch the small family try and fail over and over, their struggles become more human, and we feel for them perhaps even more than we would if this were a story about a "normal" family. Undoubtedly, this is part of Jones's desired effect. Our current obsession with all things fantasy—werewolf, vampire, or otherwise supernatural—has been labeled by some critics as a scrim that keeps us from feeling deeply the human struggle all around us. With *Mongrels*, the fantastic is turned into a focusing prism, one that lets us see the humanity in others more clearly.

— Callum Angus



Signed Salman Rushdie Broadside

excerpt from *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, printed on the occasion of Rushdie's appearance in the Rain Taxi Reading Series on July 27, 2016.

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