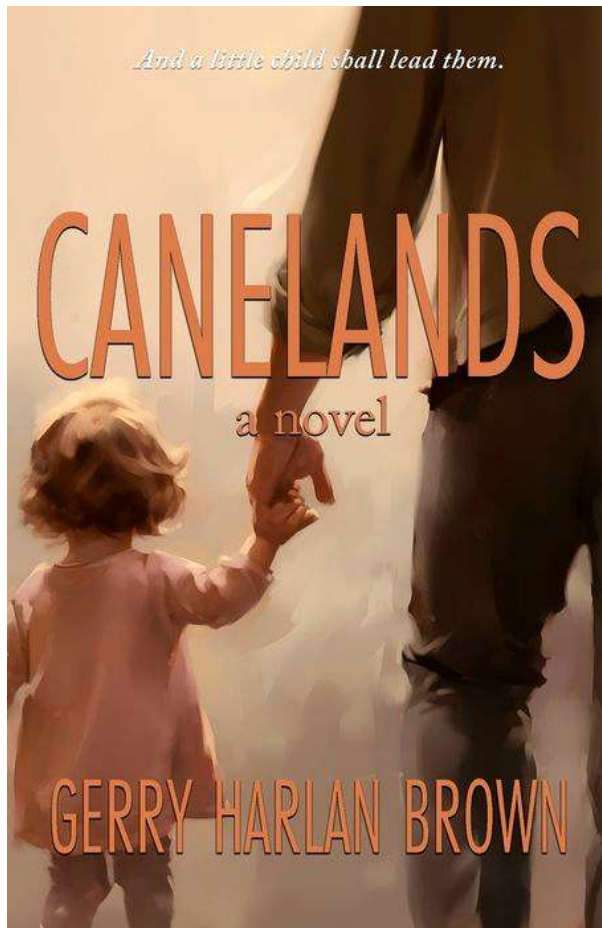


## ‘Canelands’ characters embedded in realism

Posted: Sunday, March 9, 2025

“*Canelands: A Novel*” by Gerry Harlan Brown. Cody, Wyoming: WordCrafts Press, 2024, 416 pages, \$19.99 (paperback).



“The shot changed from the reporter to a little barefoot girl in a torn, dirty dress,” Gerry Harlan Brown writes near the beginning of “*Canelands: A Novel*,” his latest contribution to a growing anthology of compelling storytelling. “She was standing on the other side of a section of chain-link fencing that appeared to be a warehouse-like building. The child was saying something in Spanish, her wide, brown eyes glistening wet. Suddenly, she burst into tears. Jennie’s hand reached out, found Paul’s shoulder. He lifted a hand to cover hers.”

“He squatted on the creekbank and scooped up a double handful of water, splashed it on his face,” Brown continues a few pages later. “The coolness gave a tiny touch of relief. Such was the state of his physical being. More important was the newfound state of his emotional being. A short while ago, in that moment when the faintest wash of pink touched the rim of the eastern sky and the deep blue just above it subtly shifted to a lighter shade, he had heard the voice. There was no mistaking it, no mistaking what was expected. For the first time since Sarah’s death, he knew with certainty the path before him. The knowledge brought peace to the

long, wrenching evening. It was time to return to the house and share the news with Jennie...”

So begins a journey that forms the architecture for a narrative that is both inspirational and heartbreaking at the same time. I’m not naturally drawn to works of fiction, but after a brief encounter with Brown - along with a couple other local authors - at Panera Bread, I was intrigued. The other folks had read the novel, and the way they described it sounded like something I would enjoy. That turned out to be an understatement.

The plotline follows the exploits of Paul, a Baptist preacher from rural Kentucky who believes God has put him on a mission to walk first to Brownsville, Texas, and then to Guatemala City, in order to help children survive circumstances that are often horrific by even the most conservative interpretation of that over-used descriptor. At one point, Brown points out, through Paul, that the distance from where he lives in Kentucky to Brownsville is 1,285 miles, the exact same distance from Brownsville to Guatemala City. Paul sees this as proof that God is indeed calling him to make this trek.

I mention this little detail to accentuate a key characteristic of Brown's literary style. He creates scenes that become very vivid in the reader's mind, without using extraneous language that could distract from the portraits he is carefully constructing. As each episode in this deceptively complex saga plays out, you can literally see what is taking place while simultaneously experiencing and understanding its significance on multiple levels. Whereas countless stories deal with the idea of being called by God to do something, Brown takes the format further than most writers laboring in the same genre.

A common theme throughout the novel is the consistent reiteration of Paul's calling. Witness the following, from chapter 48, where Paul has been asked to speak to a congregation in Tupelo, Mississippi:

"Paul allowed his gaze to roam over the assembly for a few seconds, amazed at its size – at least a thousand people – and gathered from it the strength he needed to go on. 'I trust you are familiar with the events that led me here, so I will not go into great detail. Simply put, I failed our Lord by lashing out in anger. Not until I gave myself up to His service did I find relief. Then, in His wisdom, He called me to walk to our southern border and pray for the children. I ask that you join me now in silent prayer, for the children.' Like so often, many of those close to Paul noticed how his hands clutched both sides of the podium, seemingly needing the support to stay upright."

Some of Paul's adventures are humorous; some have more ominous tones. A few reminded me of the Beverly Hillbillies, a favorite TV show from my childhood (older readers will no doubt get the reference). There is a "fish out of water" element to Brown's writing in several places as the guy from rural Kentucky encounters various folks from the proverbial big city. Alternately comical and upsetting, this tale serves as a parable of sorts, intertwining the lives of small-town church folk with big city hustlers, country music singers, and despicable politicians, all with a single-minded mission of simply praying for the least of those among us.

In addition to the central thesis of redemption through service, "Canelands" provides a glimpse into who we are as a nation at a time when we could perhaps benefit from more self-reflection. It is a microcosm of the common challenges we all share even though our individual situations may vary significantly, at least on the surface. Brown also highlights the role the media increasingly plays in shaping how we interact with the world and how reporting the news often evolves into creating the news. Consider the following from chapter 78:

"For a couple of months, stories of the preacher had held to an even keel, for the most part as only brief progress reports. Friends in the media had worked the angle that the man was a heartbroken father to be pitied, downplaying his stated purpose for traveling to the border as something akin to lunacy. Then came Houston. Only four days ago the preacher had appeared on Sunrise Cathedral's morning service with millions across the nation tuned in. Then the photo with the little children went flying like a rocket through the ether. Probably half the population had it saved on their phones. Suddenly everyone knew of Preacher Paul and his mission."

Sound familiar?

As his biography notes, Brown has lived most of his life in and around Bowling Green, Kentucky. His resume includes stints as a factory worker, farmer, house painter, railroader, and volunteer community crisis counselor. He is probably best known to most readers here as the retired Bowling Green Fire Chief, having spent 29 years as a firefighter. In fact, he credits his experience as a fire fighter as having the most influence on his writing style. In that role, he was exposed to real people from all walks of life – and he carefully observed how they responded to the conditions – often life and death – in which they found themselves. I see that insight reflected in "Canelands." There is a realism embedded within his characters that doesn't come solely from his imagination.

“Canelands” is Brown’s third book; his previous being “Ring the Bell: A Novel of Everyday Heroes,” in 2022, and “White Squirrels: and Other Monsters,” in 2020.

At this point, it probably goes without saying – but I’ll say it anyway - I loved “Canelands,” and I bet you will, too. Honestly, I think it would make a great mini-series or even a major motion picture. So stay tuned. Highly recommended.

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