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Sanctuary: A Minimalist Novel

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SANCTUARY

NOW IN
OPLAH'S
BOOK
CLUB!

A minimalist novel
by James Floss

SANCTUARY

A MINIMALIST NOVEL

By James Floss

Dedicated to Robert Sheckley

(if you know Robert Sheckley, you know why)

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REVIEWS

“A story...”

—*Rick Shimes*, LA Times

“Post-pandemic picaresque...”

—*Joan Temple*, Poughkeepsie Lancet

“Mama Mia! Onomatopoeia!...”

—*Jonathon Snicks*, Wilborn Press-Reporter

“I laughed, I cried, I shat myself...”

—*Guy Jones*, St. Peterborough Gazette

“I didn’t read it...”

—*Richard Oplah*, AOL Online

“A cry for help...”

—*Dr. Louis Williams*, Psychology Today

1. Burro

She refused the next step, my curses unheard as the rest of them continued up. I dug in my heels swift and hard.

The sound she bellowed echoed as she dropped her hindquarters and let me know that that was the wrong move; I almost fell off.

Come on, Bertha, just over that next ridge!

She didn't care.

Velia and Stem kept moving forward on their own steeds. Mark padded quietly beside. Tex and Buck were somewhere.

We were close. One more ridge and we would be safe for a few more days.

Bertha squanched and I tumbled off.

I found myself among young thistles.

Bertha! I cried, thistles!

I don't know if she heard me but soon she was munching.

A few moments later I was astride and we moved again upward toward tomorrow.

2. Joke

You better watch it, Tex said and he meant it. We were five days from Sanctuary and the rabbit and bean stew wasn't great.

I'm sorry; I didn't mean it that way.

I didn't. I can be such a jackass. I was just trying to be funny.

Anyway, I didn't sleep well that night. In the morning, my attempt at cornbread seemed a hit. It helped. Thank goodness for acorn flour.

We saddled up and set out again for Sanctuary. Velia took lead on her thoroughbred; Mark padded beside her, followed by Tex on Buck, his pony. Bertha and I were in the rear.

The horse flies circled, of course. Dust kicked up with every step. I think I smelled honeysuckle or jasmine.

I actually fell asleep on Bertha as she clipped-clopped along, feeling for the first time in a while that everything might be OK.

3. Vilified

I never could sleep past daybreak. The sun was coming up just one mountain range and river crossing away from Sanctuary. I pushed my coverings aside and rolled out of my so-called tent.

Everything was wet and that was OK.

Bertha was happily eating grass with Buck, both flicking flies with their tails and ears. Fortunately, it was early, there weren't many, yet.

The last few days had been difficult treks over mountains skirting the steep down omnipresent river.

I yawned and stretched and went to Bertha. She kept munching. I put my arms around her neck and came in close and deeply sniffed her familiar smell. I scratched her mane and her snorfling acknowledged my attention. She masticated loudly with an accompaniment of lip ballet.

Hang in there, baby; a few more days and things will get better.

A hawk screeched, a shot rang out, Velia's horse reared, and Bertha broke her rope.

I hung on for dear life as my sturdy burro escaped me to safety.

They had found us.

4. Attack

Pa-twang!

Rock dust rained down as I pulled Bertha's bridle toward me and huddled her behind an outcropping. It was a near miss. She had just saved me and now it was time to save her.

Velia's horse, Chauncey, whinnied as another shot rang out. I had no idea where Stemley or tracker Mark was. Tex and Buck were somewhere.

All I knew was that we were under attack close to Sanctuary.

Bertha did not like being bridled. Another shot. She shriek-hawed loudly and my hands burned as the rope raged through and she bolted.

An exchange of gunshots, at least four more rounds. My ears hurt. The gun powder smelled bitter. Where did they get that ammo?

A hand gripped my vest and shucked me up.

Are you alright? It was Tex.

Come on; get on your burro; we have to go, now!

I ran towards Bertha.

5. Night

Later, we felt safe enough to build a fire. The canyon was secure. The fire snapped and crackled as sparkly fireflies pirouetted up.

Where are you from, Tex? Stemly queried.

Austin.

He pushed the remnants of old beans and rancid rabbit onto his fork and into his mouth. He used the last of my cornbread to scrape his plate clean.

An owl whooled as we finished our meager meal.

Why did you help us? Velia asked.

Dunno.

Mark snerffed for the first time in days.

Thank you, I said. And Bertha thanks you.

Silence followed.

As crickets chirped and forks scraped tin, the Milky Way blazed above.

6. Ambush

In the morning we mounted. Bertha seemed calm.

I watched Velia flang herself onto Chauncey, a magnificent thoroughbred at, what? I guess, 16 hands? 17? Chestnut brown, his blaze face was striking.

Velia was Nordic. A gazelle mystery; her sword work was—unearthly. Why she joined us, I still don't know.

Anyway, we slowly trundled toward Sanctuary together.

Stem snuffed the air. Tex seemed sullen. I was just tired, but Bertha soldiered on.

Sanctuary. We hoped for the best. When we still had radio, it seemed the only option.

Suddenly, Chauncey niffked. Mark stiffened and his hand went up.

Velia quivered an arrow in the blink of an eye as Tex shouldered his shotgun.

Me? I hunkered down on Bertha.

7. Stemley

Stemley had special gifts. S/he was from Yugoslavia and smelled smells none of us could. S/he anticipated the gun-smoke and then the thunderstorm.

We did not anticipate the thunderstorm.

Gunfire surrounded and sequestered us behind the rock face.

Marcus remanded us down and behind and over as illegal bullets flew.

Stay alive. So close to Sanctuary.

It was hard but I kept Bertha quiet.

Stemley snuffled the air and pointed left.

We crawled carefully away; difficult to do with a pony, a horse and a burro.

Bertha nearly lost it as a white dagger of electricity shattered the night. Her bucking hooves missed my forehead by inches

We crossed into Shasta County, me, Marcus, Velia and Tex

A black curtain of rain showered down.

8. 2nd Amendment

Ok, Tex had a shotgun even though Tex was not his name and the gun was illegal.

Yes, before the decline, Vice President Obama did come for our guns and ammo like they said he would and with the help of President Pritchard had the second amendment renounced.

Who needed a militia when it became every man for him or herself?

It was different up here. Sling shots and arrows weren't enough when you needed to bag that rabbit, raccoon or vole to stay alive.

Bertha didn't care. She was happily munching lupines, just miles away from Sanctuary.

It was finally quiet; the "Blam, blam, blam!" episode was over. How much illegal ammo did Tex have?

Anyway, he bought us time as we plodded, tired and disheveled toward Redding and sanctuary.

9. Rabbits

We passed what had been a place for big waters. Marcus Thunderbolt knew of a time before that it wasn't. (Tosh's allies did, too.)

We camped that night just outside of Whiskeytown. I really missed whiskey.

Valia was crackerjack not only with her swords and arrows but also her slingshots and rabbit was what for dinner.

Tex ate with gusto, cracking every little bone and sucking the marrow.

In the light of our little campfire he waxed nostalgic over rabbits. Due to the terrible rabbit hemorrhagic decimation in Texas of 2020 (true, that), he hadn't had rabbit since KOVID-23 reappeared last year.

I missed Guinea pigs. I blame Ecuador for that.

Chauncey semi-squatted and let loose a majestic streaming, steaming pee.

We were settling in for the night when Bertha cahouled and disturbed us all.

At that very instant, two brilliant falling stars streaked the sky.

Mark lept, Stem unsheathed s/her knife, Valia was gone and Tex and I were frozen with fright as *she* entered the circle of our firelight.

10. Toshua

She was six foot two and armed from toe to crown. No, literally. Every toe had a shiv, she had shin splades, knee shrap, bandoliers criss-crossed her torso with highly illegal ammo; she wore teat cheats and she was crowned with laser-emitting diodes. At least that's all I could see in the fire light.

Bertha, Chauncey and Buck made horsey noises as they tried to retreat into shadow as she stepped into our light.

Hungry?

Is that rabbit?

Shem nodded and held up a plate.

Truce? s/he asked.

Tosh (we would soon learn was her name) accepted and sat around our fire.

We wanted to know why they were hunting us.

Timidly, I asked.

Sanctuary, she said as she crunched the rabbit's head.

Then Velia's knife was at her neck.

11. Interrogation

What's your name?

Tosh.

How many?

Four.

Why!?

Sanctuary. We need you. We won't get in without you.

Call them off.

Done.

Why shoot at us?

To get your attention and to slow you down.

Velia lowered her knife and we all relaxed. I farted.

Bertha lowed in the background. Chauncey whinnied and Buck's nostrils flared.

Ok, Tosh. Prove your worth to us at Sanctuary.

12. Shasta

We came into Shasta. I imagined tumbleweeds blowing down main street but there was only a mamma skunk, peacock proud, strolling the white line with her three little kits, tails up, skittering behind her.

Mark signaled for us to stop. He dismounted and investigated. He knew what for, his DNA was from around here.

A rusted sign squeaked and squeached in the weak wind.

A squintle of light glinted off a shop window and startled me.

The flies were really bothering Bertha and she stamped repeatedly.

Tosh proved valuable as we cautioned through town.

Stem snuffled no one.

We decided to camp just outside the far side.

I was falling asleep and in that moment between here and there, a twig snapped.

Hail, hail, the gang's all here.

13. Prospect

We clumbled along through another day of rain and stumbled toward Sanctuary across the Sundial bridge wet, tired and hungry.

It was dark. We approached downtown wearily.

Kentucky Fried Chicken, Starbucks, Raley's; all shuttered, all quiet.

A rat slinkered by.

After several blocks, we saw the wall.

It was heavily fortified. A streetlight just outside the gate flashed an eternal yellow "Caution! Caution! Caution!"

Chauncey clumpled his front right hoof thrice on the cracked pavement.

Bertha snortled. Buck's nose snuffed up.

A flock of cedar waxwings (or maybe they were bats?) coruscated from below to above the fortification and out into the night.

A strong, strong light sliced the night; we flinched and claucned our eyes.

This time, it was Bertha that farted.

14. Sanctuary

More than a week of going up the 299 from Humboldt, through Trinity to Shasta with a burro as my best friend along with a dysmorphic super-smeller, an honest-to-goodness fearless Amazon on her big, big horse Chauncey, a sullen Texan who reminisced about rabbits while riding a ridiculous pony named Buck, a local tracker with uncanny knowledge of our whereabouts and now Tosh and her associates: Bruno, Laila, and Chetco, two of whom also from north coast tribes.

We have been hungry, sunburned, flash-flooded, hot then cold, dusty then wet, road-weary and some of us saddle-sore.

And here we were, blinded by floodlights at Sanctuary, finally. Eight or nine city blocks fortified by a high thick wall, barbed wire and glass shards.

The rest of Redding lay in ruins, the streets desolate and dark.

The blinking yellow stoplight turned green; a siren sounded and with a wrenching sound the gates began to open.

Bertha snuffled near my ear, then sneezed.

15. Opening

The sound of the gates opening and the siren wailing was deafening and we were all blinded by the light, revved up like a deuce 'nother runners in the night. (I once won a \$50 bet that I really knew those lyrics.)

The gates clanged to a stop and the siren was cut. We were all anxious.

After wiping Bertha's phlegm off my face, I glanced around:

Valia was stanced like a samurai warrior (where the hell did she get that Japanese sword?!) Tex was still on his pony, hand on his rifle in its saddle holster. Toshua, Bruno, Laila, and Chetco were huddled off to the right, whispering. Markus lifted his right arm, palm up. We froze. Someone was coming. Chauncey whinnied a low warning. Luckily, Bertha had no bodily issues.

A small form entered the circle of light. Tosh flicked on her Corona lasers and Tex snapped up his rifle.

A small girl, no more than eight, in tattered clothes, coughed politely and timidly said,

Hello...?

16. Closure

Soon she was joined by a raggle-taggle group of about 23 kids aged from maybe 5 to 15 or so. They looked emaciated.

Have you come from Haven? the presumptive leader asked.

What? I parried.

Haven. All the dults went to Haven after the rupture.

Everyone?

No. Nanna and Uncle Dick were left to project us. But Nanna fell into a well and we found uncle Dick dead after drinking smelly stuff from a white bottle. We buried him behind the school.

How have you survived?

With the rupture, we had no water. We learned to catch some from the sky and then from wet mornings.

What did you eat?

Well, what was left and then what we could find. First the chickens.

Stupid, one muttered as he squiggled.

Yes, Cluck; Jeez! I know that now! No more eggs!

Another plucky girl chimed in with:

But I'm good with rats; Chesslie over there finds snakes and Fatso here (he giggled) is an expert on worms, bugs and frogs.

We were astonished.

Are you coming in?

Absolutely, we are!

Chesslie came up to Bertha and scritchd her forelock.

You're cute! What's her name?

Bertha.

Come on, Bertha—you can come, too, mister.

She bridled us through the gates as the mechanism slowly wrankled them shut.

17. Beginnings

Finally, we were in.

It looked bad. Entropy had started its work years ago.

A few buildings were still fully intact.

Velia motioned our group aside.

Where do we begin?

Tex said, I'll take watch and scaffolded up the wall with his rifle.

Markus began walking the perimeter to assess its integrity.

Velia hopped on Chauncey and galumphed off in search of weaponry.

Stemley said s/he would snuffle around for food and set out.

That left me, Bertha and the outlaws.

And...you guys?

I have something to say, Tosh admitted. I killed someone here two years ago; it was a love thing. They ran me out and I needed to make amends. I knew I would never be let back in if I hadn't gained another's trust. We...uh...have been working on a special project for some time.

Chetco guffawed and patted his large leather satchel strapped to his side.

What's that?

Laila grinned, her ebony face radiant. That? That's tomorrow!

Seeds! Bruno gushed. Domestic, wild; you name it. Fruits, nuts and veggies from all over Humboldt, Trinity and Curry counties.

Collecting them wasn't always easy, Chetco muttered with some sadness.

Come on! said Tosh, we have gardens to build! They broke right.

And then there was just me and B, now inside, when it dawned on me.

My smile was a mile.

I loved my mom dearly but I liked winning better. All those chidings for spending hours and hours playing Fortnite, Minecraft and other civ-build-apps.

Incidentally, I do have a Master's from HSU in Sociology.

So:

We haven't just *made it* to Sanctuary, we were going to *make* sanctuary!

— Fin —

Acknowledgments

I had a heck of a lot of fun writing this story while hunkering in place. It was two weeks of joy for me. It started as automatic writing. I didn't care where it was going. And then I did. The last few chapters were difficult because I had created such a crazy world and I had to try to actually wrangle it all together into an ending.

I want to thank my wife for bearing with me as I performed each chapter. I did my best, but I cracked up every time. If you know me, you might get the jokes and puns throughout. It helps to read it aloud.

One great pleasure was using onomatopoeia to create new words/worlds. I hope you enjoyed them.

Thanks for reading! I would love your feedback.

Book Club Questions

Thank you for choosing SANCTUARY for your book club! The editors have provided a series of questions that we hope will enliven your discussions. Enjoy!

Discuss the gender of Stemley and why s/he needed super-smell.

Was there really a Covid-23 or was it just another mutation of the Asian bird/swine flu? Or just another Fox Conglomerate™ Construct?

Why does the author rely on bodily issues throughout the novella?

What is the process for actually removing an amendment from the constitution?

Do you approve of Toshua's use of teat cheats or shin shraps? Why?

Why did Velia join the crew? Was she actually Yugoslavian or an illegal alien from the planet Zelia?

Can a crown of laser-emitting diodes really help with social distancing?

Should the part of Bertha be played by a burro, a donkey, a mule, a pony or a camel in the movie?

What species of rats, snakes and frogs are the tastiest in Redding, CA?

What actual city in Northern California do you think Haven is?

Who is your favorite conspiracy Trumper?

Can you actually buy whiskey in Whiskeytown? Why not?

Sneak Peek: HAVEN

Note: SANCTUARY is the first and hopefully only installment of a nine-part post-pandemic epic-mini-series.

Doc, Sissy and Martha loaded the carts with our provisions. It would be a four-day journey up the 5 to Haven. We had to go; we had no choice. We had neither the manpower, tools nor know-how to fix our ruptured water main.

Sister Ann harnessed the goats.

We knew the kids would be fine with Nanna. We left them with enough food and water for the journey to Haven and back.

Now, Dick—we were worried about Dick. He was such a contrarian and a conspiracy Trumper that we voted he should remain behind.

The gate wrankled open and we set off, with the kiddos waving wildly.

Days one and two were uneventful. It was hot. The goats were not fast.

Then, on day three, surrounded by a verdant ponderosa forest, we rounded a high crest along the pocked and buckled 5, when we were startled by a loud air-horn as a triple-trucked 18-wheeler in low gear slammed to a halt, spraying gravel.

And that's when we met Maksh, The Mad Trucker of Novato.

To be continued in HAVEN... (not.)

SANCTUARY

is a Flobo Production 2020

