

Burlington Writer Portrays a Nevada Ghost Town

Jackson Ellis, *Lords of St. Thomas*. Green Writers Press, 2018

Henry Lord is born in St. Thomas, Nevada, a six-block town in the Moapa Valley. His grandfather, for whom he is named, was brought there as a baby; his parents live in Grandpa's house, near the local school where Henry's mother began teaching. The town, surrounded by the desolate beauty of the Mojave desert, sits near the confluence of the Muddy and Virgin Rivers, which ensure its water supply, irrigate its fields, and nurture the trees Grandpa's father planted to shade their yard. When Henry is two, an Act of Congress begins the construction of Boulder Dam, and surveys prove that St. Thomas will be covered by the dammed up Colorado River. Soon, federal officials appear in St. Thomas, offering the town's citizens market price for their land. Grandpa refuses to sell. It's family land, he says, and he will fight the dam for it. Henry's father, a mechanic in Grandpa's once-prosperous garage, takes a job working on the dam; the two never speak to each other again.

The most compelling portion of *Lords of St. Thomas* is the story of a boyhood spent in a doomed town and a divided family. The only child left in St. Thomas, Henry spends hours pitching balls against the wall of the abandoned school. His practice gradually ruins the ball, but Dad brings him a bag of new balls for his eighth birthday – and also shows him the safe he has hidden in the crawl space underneath the house, making him promise not to tell Grandpa it exists. Grandpa remains intransigent, even when neighbors move, leaving only foundations where their houses used to be and fields gone to waste. Henry watches as the cemetery is dug up and coffins are trucked out of town, all but the coffin of Grandpa's long-dead wife, which Grandpa has not allowed to be moved. When Dad is killed by a fall from his work on the Dam, Grandpa wants him buried in St. Thomas, too. Mom won't allow it, but she is as adamant as Grandpa when it comes to staying. There is, however, no arguing with the water creeping toward St. Thomas: after a thunderstorm and flash flood that catches them out fishing, Henry and Grandpa return to find the whole town flooded, and Henry is witness to the final stage of the loss that has affected his family all his life. After Henry and Grandpa's dramatic escape from their drowning house, the book winds down in a protracted history of Henry and Grandpa, and an ending (set up in the initial chapter) in which twenty-first century drought enables Henry, now an old man, to revisit the foundations of his house in hopes of finding his father's secret safe.

Lords of St. Thomas is the winner of Green Writers Press's 2017 Howard Frank Mosher First Novel Prize, and it is an extended tribute to Mosher's influence on Vermont writers. The patriarchal grandfather, the inconspicuous son, the nurturing but almost invisible mother, and the admiring grandson will be familiar to Mosher readers; so are the descriptions of a splendid landscape. That landscape and its history are both real, though the story is not; readers who wish to savor the scenery can search for St. Thomas online and join Ellis's meditation on man's ironic efforts to conquer the land. "You can build on it," says Henry, "and you can flood it out, but someday the Moapa Valley and everything in it will return to sand and saltbush."