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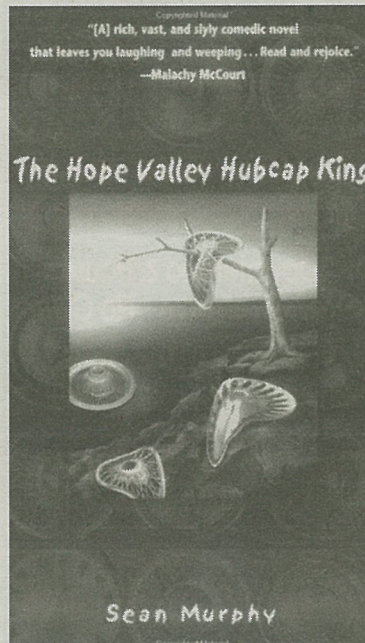
by Vince Darcangelo

The Hope Valley Hubcap King

Sean Murphy
 Dell/Delta Trade Paperback

Sean Murphy's book *The Hope Valley Hubcap King* is a lot like a hubcap: It's shiny, circular and all the lug nuts are aligned, but without a tire to wrench it to it ain't going anywhere. In this instance, think of the tire as character dimension, the missing element in *The Hope Valley Hubcap King*.

Why use a silly, post-modern observation to preface this book review? Because with Sean Murphy's sophomore effort, recently released in paperback, silly, post-modern observations are all you get. ("Sleep with your eyes open... So you can see in your dreams," "God isn't dead... He's merely taking an awfully long nap," "An unhinged mind is easier to keep open," "What is the color of a mirror?" and "Who created the universe, and was his name Bob?") Sadly, what could have been an engaging chronicle of one man's quest to overcome his ancestry is bogged down by inanities that will appeal only to pseudo-philosophical new agers who fancy themselves mischief makers and fans of Tom Robbins.



As a member of the latter group, I can safely say that Sean Murphy is no Tom Robbins.

Don't get me wrong, *The Hope Valley Hubcap King* is not a bad book, and despite its annoying silliness it has many redeeming qualities. The problem is that, unlike the work of Robbins, the flippancy isn't balanced out with well-developed characters. Aside from Bibi Brown—the first-born male protagonist born into a tragically brilliant family whose first-born males have committed suicide for 11 consecutive generations—no other characters are explored in any real depth. And even Bibi is more a passive vehicle through which the story occurs than a lead character that asserts himself into the narrative.

The Hope Valley Hubcap King is about Bibi's epic quest to overcome his tragic family legacy while seeking out his eccentric uncle who supposedly owns a hubcap ranch in the desert of post-industrial, post-modern, post-everything America. Bibi's journey takes him to surreal locales of the looking-glass variety, including a checkerboard town divided in two along religious lines (one half of the town believes God is too small to be detected, the other half believes God is too large to be detected). This thinly veiled commentary on the troubles in Jerusalem launches Bibi on a trek that involves stops in an insane asylum, a mansion, the limits of time, space and gravity, marriage and, eventually, the hubcap ranch.

Murphy's strength is his imagination, which he delivers in strong supply in *The Hope Valley Hubcap King*. His characters are brimming with quirks and peculiarities that would make them memorable if they weren't so one-dimensional. They express their idiosyncrasies through ironic one-liners that betray Murphy's years as a Zen practitioner, but rather than making them more human—per the intention of literary imperfection—these oddities turn them into a freakshow—entertaining, yes, but unsatisfying for lack of depth.

There is one character of intriguing complexity: the Terry Cloth Man, who, in keeping with the novel's theme of space, time and life being circular (like hubcaps, or rims, as the kids call 'em these days), appears at the beginning and end of Bibi's journey. As a fatalistic Hermes with bad skin, the Terry Cloth Man is a trickster of brilliant proportions whom I would have loved to know more about. The other characters fall in and out of place too easily. Bibi's mother—at times a vulnerable victim, at times a strong-willed mother hen—appears as a convenient plot device, then disappears for long, inexplicable stretches of time. Bibi's wife, Polly, falls easily into trouble-free marriage then leaves suddenly after years of wedded bliss because she understands that Bibi must continue his journey. Yeah, break-ups are always that easy, and the wounded party is always that understanding of the other's needs for self-actualization. Come on, there wasn't even a mild struggle to save their relationship. One day it came to a neat, tidy conclusion. For a book so intent on exploring meaning, it could start by explaining how Bibi searches for Polly his whole life, finds her and gives up on their happy relationship the first time the traveling bug bites. (Or perhaps I was expecting *The Hope Valley Hubcap King* to explain this trait within myself. C'mon, Murphy, 'fess up. What's the meaning? Why do I always follow the wandering itch when things get too comfortable?)

In the end, *The Hope Valley Hubcap King* is a book with a lot of potential that, like a hubcap without a wheel to spin it, goes nowhere. **Z**

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