

The Road Paved With Good Intentions

Walker Meade's Novel *Unspeakable Acts*

By Robert X Weaver

Every now and then, perhaps very rarely, the literary small press throws out a novel that begs to be noticed but causes consternation for the reviewer. The small press, because of its very nature, often turns loose books before they're quite ready. Not so with the larger presses, at least in theory: When a friend of mine published a biography with one of the larger publishing houses, it took nearly five months, several editors, and countless galleys just to decide on the typeface font.

The small press doesn't enjoy such luxuries, languishing over font styles and countless galleys, and often the published product suffers: odd misspellings, inconsistent syntax, punctuation problems and unnecessary repetition that would have been caught by a stronger editor.

Unfortunately for both the writer and the reader, these minor glitches detract and distract from the published work. And, in fairness, the reviewer cannot ignore these miscues and judge the novel on what might have been. A published work is supposed to be a finished work, and the reviewer cannot second guess the writer's or publisher's intentions.

Nonetheless, sometimes the talent of the writer and the strength of story itself overcome these inadequacies and thusly deserve special consideration. Walker Meade's debut novel, *Unspeakable Acts* (Upstart Press, \$12.95) may warrant such consideration.

To its credit, *Unspeakable Acts* is an intriguing blend of genres — part love story,

part mystery — all wrapped in the form of a memoir. Meade handles this ambitious form with aplomb. The rich details he lends the novel delineate his characters and move the story along well.

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The premise is promising enough. After witnessing human suffering and cruelty during his two years in Nicaragua, Dr. Forest Jamison returns to the calm and gentle nature of his hometown, Gatesville, Indiana. Concerning his service in the Nicaraguan mountains, Dr. Jamison notes: "Those grim and bloody years taught me more than I ever wanted to know about suffering. If it is something one human creature can do to another, I've seen it. I had good basic training in misery, but enough is enough."

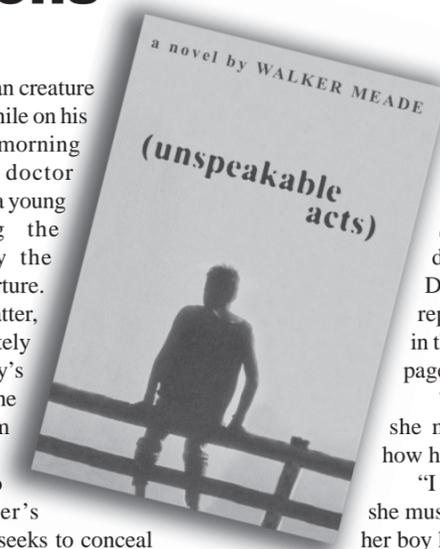
However, much to his regret, Dr. Jamison soon discovers that he hasn't seen

everything "one human creature can do to another." While on his way to make a midmorning house call, the doctor discovers the body of a young boy tossed along the roadside, evidently the victim of horrific torture. Complicating this matter, Dr. Jamison is intimately involved with the boy's family, particularly the mother, Miriam Dossel.

In order to minimize the mother's suffering, the doctor seeks to conceal the true nature of young Solomon's death, and he re-stages the crime to look like a hit-and-run accident. It's a deception begun with good intentions borne out of compassion, but it soon proves to be a slippery road to hell. Sinking deeper into a tangle of lies, the doctor learns that no good deed goes unpunished.

There's a novel, even an interesting novel, lurking in these pages, but this is a case where a lack of editorial input has sold both the novel and the novelist short. Sometimes the dashes are long, sometimes short; sometimes both long and short dashes are used in the same paragraph, sometimes even the same sentence. Not all questions end with a requisite question mark. Commas and periods are likewise displaced, ellipses often misused, quotation marks missing. A stronger editor would have caught these mistakes.

A stronger editor also would have caught some of the unnecessary repetition in the



novel, such as when the protagonist reveals his decision to hide the true details of Solomon Dossel's death from Miriam Dossel. This decision is repeated several times in the space of about one page:

"It came to me that she must not ever know how her boy had died."

"I decided quickly that she must not ever know how her boy had died."

"There was now no question in my mind that Solomon's mother must never know how he died."

Despite these distractions, *Unspeakable Acts* is a satisfying read. Murder mysteries don't get much better than this. *Unspeakable Acts* is truly engaging, and its ending is both surprising and inevitable, one of those rare 'natural' conclusions. Walker Meade undoubtedly will garner well-deserved attention for this, his first novel, and no doubt that many readers of *Unspeakable Acts* will hunger for a second novel from this talented writer.

My only hope is that the publisher of Meade's second novel will do a much better job of presenting it than Upstart Press did with this one. Meade's writing deserves better, as do his readers. Then we will be able to clearly see how good a writer Walker Meade really is.



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