

On the Fly

It's common for a writer to get stuck in a style rut where everything they pump out is just a shinier version of the book before. Will Ferguson was one of those writers. As much as I enjoyed the first few books I read, there seemed to be no point in pursuing any of his newer works as they all seemed very much the same. Fortunately, with his new novel, *Spanish Fly*, I was happily proven wrong.

Young Jack McGreary is stuck in Paradise Flats, a dustbowl town built by suckers. Watching his father be beaten by the depression and robbed blind by phony investments has taught him to live off his wits. When two smooth-talking swindlers pass through town, Jack is quick to hook up with them and hit the open road. They rob the southwest blind, with Jack learning every scam in the book (with great names like the Pedigreed Pooch, the Sweetheart Scam, the Tennessee Switch) and inventing some of his own. As the stakes get higher and the cons more risky, Jack becomes torn between his obvious talent for cooking up schemes and his desire to do some good in the world, or at least to try.

Ferguson's intriguing characters and rich descriptions of the depressed towns they inhabit draws you into the forlorn pre-war world of the depression. I couldn't get enough of their cons and was seduced by the romantic notion of a grifter's exciting life. From the coffee tins full of cash to the getaway car to the hot jazz clubs, I wanted it all.

Of course a book of Ferguson's isn't complete

without something out of the ordinary. For this one, it's the soundtrack that accompanies *Spanish Fly*. The songs are by Canadian singer/writer Tom Phillips, with some lyrics thrown in by Ferguson himself. Inspired by the novel, the album definitely has that '30s country-blues feel, with a little honky-tonk mixed in for good measure. It's the kind of music you can imagine drifting into the back of train cars as they roll past farm houses on dry dusty nights.

Spanish Fly is a radical migration from Ferguson's usual style of high comedy/low content, like *How to Be a Canadian* and *Generic*. There's humour all right, but not the usual political and social mockery we've come to expect. *Spanish Fly* is a compelling piece of historical fiction that brings Ferguson's writing to a whole new and exciting level.

—Sarah Gignac



Spanish Fly
by Will Ferguson
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