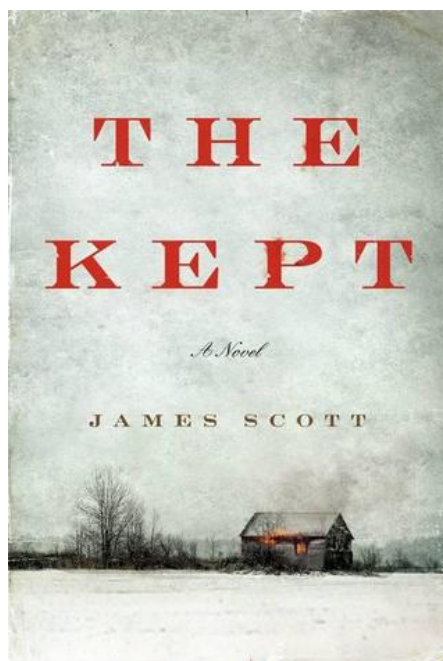




The Kept

James Scott

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The Kept

James Scott

The Kept James Scott

Set in rural New York state at the turn of the twentieth century, superb new talent James Scott makes his literary debut with *The Kept*—a propulsive novel reminiscent of the works of Michael Ondaatje, Cormac McCarthy, and Bonnie Jo Campbell, in which a mother and her young son embark on a quest to avenge a terrible and violent tragedy that has shattered their secluded family.

In the winter of 1897, a trio of killers descends upon an isolated farm in upstate New York. Midwife Elspeth Howell returns home to the carnage: her husband, and four of her children, murdered. Before she can discover her remaining son Caleb, alive and hiding in the kitchen pantry, another shot rings out over the snow-covered valley. Twelve-year-old Caleb must tend to his mother until she recovers enough for them to take to the frozen wilderness in search of the men responsible.

A scorching portrait of a merciless world — of guilt and lost innocence, atonement and retribution, resilience and sacrifice, pregnant obsession and primal adolescence — *The Kept* introduces an old-beyond-his-years protagonist as indelible and heartbreaking as Mattie Ross of *True Grit* or Jimmy Blevins of *All the Pretty Horses*, as well as a shape-shifting mother as enigmatic and mysterious as a character drawn by Russell Banks or Marilynne Robinson.

The Kept Details

Date : Published January 7th 2014 by Harper (first published January 1st 2013)

ISBN : 9780062236739

Author : James Scott

Format : Hardcover 368 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Mystery, Thriller

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From Reader Review The Kept for online ebook

Matt says

(2.5-star review) *The Kept*, James Scott's debut novel, is a blizzard of a book: oppressive, bleak, messy and (mostly) barren of humanity.

A snow-choked 1897 upstate New York provides *The Kept*'s setting and Scott's greatest exhibited strength is the book's sense of time-and-place. Locations and the difficulties of day-to-day life are vivid and evocative. *The Kept*'s atmosphere is robust and sensory – I *felt* the cold and *smelled* the heady mixture of hay, burning wood and horse manure in the streets. Ultimately, the strong atmosphere chokes out everything else...in fact, the atmosphere is the only thing that has stayed with me.

The modern Western genre's themes of vengeance, judgment and redemptive violence largely comprise *The Kept*'s story elements. I'll refrain from plot explication – those interested in reading it would find it spoilery, but that's not my reason. Ultimately, I find a discussion of the book's plot pointless because Scott could have made almost anything happen within his 350-odd pages and each action and outcome would have been equally plausible to what he decided on.

And therein lies the problem with *The Kept*: character action is solely dictated by plot demands. Mother Elspeth and son Caleb are the lynchpins of the narrative. We see the world through their eyes and perceive the events through their backgrounds and emotions. But both characters are only the sum of their past actions (as related to the reader). Neither has a coherent inner life. Neither is an actual person.

Scott (over) uses flashbacks (to often confusing effect, though I admit this could just be my problem) to fill in Elspeth and Caleb's backstories, but those stories ultimately do little to illuminate their actions...in some cases they obfuscate them. I never knew why either character was taking their respective actions except to move the plot forward and set up dramatic ironies.

Elspeth's motivations vacillated between guilt, revenge, self-preservation, and self-indulgence. But these weren't the result of a coherent, narratively-earned inner conflict, but rather of plot exigencies.

In Caleb's case, his motivations were clearer but his faculties and intuitions were wildly discordant. One moment he was a sheltered naïf who had never left his isolated farm and never interacted with a human being outside of his parents and siblings. The next, he moves effortlessly within a city, employed at a saloon/brothel so he has a better vantage from which to find his targets and hatch his plan of revenge. And then back again...Like Elspeth's, Caleb's actions (and abilities to perceive a situation and competently carry out these actions) weren't logical manifestations of his character, but rather driven solely by plot concerns.

In *The Kept*, author James Scott slathers atmosphere with a garden trowel—effectively at times, but ultimately oppressively—to build a sense of doom and inevitability, yet fails to create fully-formed, coherent human characters that drive action.

The modern Western frequently provides heroes whose lives lead up to a decisive, near-inevitable act of redemptive violence. *The Kept* required decisive, violent acts and yanked around its two-dimensional, people-ish characters to make them happen.

Andrea says

This book had a lot of possibility. There were some very intriguing and thoughtful moments, but there were too many questions left unanswered and too many vital descriptions obscured like why was Jorah always getting beat up? Was Is black an Indian, I didn't get it. Was Charles supposed to be gay and why is that relevant? There were some very good descriptions, yet sometimes, I got confused and had to re-read a half page thinking I'd missed something.

Sadly and worst, I felt no attachment to anyone and I'm a mother of a thirteen year old son. I should have gotten something!

Lastly, the end felt like the author just got tired of writing, so he stopped. Having devised my own ending by the middle of the book, I felt cheated.

A lot happened in this book, I'm just not sure why.

Maxine (Booklover Catlady) says

Do not look past this book thinking it's not your thing, you don't like historical fiction or the plot is not exciting you. I overcame all these things and gave this a whirl and boy am I glad I did.

The book just blew me away, what a dark, atmospheric emotional novel this is, absolutely unique from anything I have read for a long time. It will stay with me for a while, I still keep thinking back on this book and it's characters. It's haunting and it's haunting me.

What's the book about?

It is the winter of 1897. Elspeth Howell returns to her isolated snow-bound farm to find her family brutally killed. Only her son Caleb has survived and, thinking that the murderers have returned, he shoots his mother.

With her chest bound and Caleb at her side, Elspeth sets out to find the men who committed this heinous crime. But as they get closer to the perpetrators, Caleb discovers his mother has a truly terrible secret and Elspeth finally begins to understand its hideous consequences.

My Review:

Where do I begin? Firstly, let me tell you this is not a fast paced action packed book, it moves slowly, beautifully, surrounds you, pulls you in and gently takes you with it. The writing is sublime, just magnificent. I am baffled at the low reviews this book is getting.

So Elspeth Howell and her only remaining child Caleb set out to hunt the men who killed the family in cold blood, Caleb is twelve years old yet has so much maturity and depth to him as a character, he has the heart of child, but at times the hardness of life makes him almost a man. He has his heart set on revenge, revenge for the slaughter of his family that were killed before his very eyes.

She sounded like death: as if her life was being pulled from her body forcibly. He imagined her

spirit like a wisp of smoke, but one with talons and teeth that it dug into her insides and the groan was those nails and teeth being dragged across her ribs, her throat, and her lungs as it fought to keep it's place.

Just let that sit for a moment. I loved every word of this book, I found the writing just drew me in and did not let go. For a debut novel James Scott has written an amazing book, I am a new fan.

Against harsh conditions Elspeth and Caleb trek to a town where they believe the killers to be. From there the story just blew me away, it's one of those books where there is so much hidden, secrets and spoilers that reviewing it is hard, I am busting to tell you what goes on, what they do but it would spoil the entire book. Best to read this with no expectation and an open mind.

The journey they both go on is described individually and together, Caleb is a young boy at times having to do things like a man, to step up and face a world he should not see. He's not giving up on his plan for revenge, it burns in him to kill the men who murdered his family.

Elspeth is a complex character, I had a bit of love/hate going on with her, some of the secrets she hides had me conflicted as a reader, but it was brilliantly written, she is a exceptional woman, a character that I will never forget. Her secrets are kept close to her chest, but they weigh her down heavily. She's made choices that will change both of their lives forever.

The town embraces the two newcomers, but there are those that see the truth behind the smoke screens, there is a need to watch their backs and be careful. Friends and enemies.

The book is full of scenes that just take your breath away, moments that shock and surprise. There were times reading this book that I teared up a bit and felt so heavy of heart, my heart was breaking for Caleb. Oh Caleb. Beautiful young man.

He worried the woman would hold him and feel within him the lies and the failures that stacked upon his chest at night and made it hard for him to breathe, as if maybe he'd be heavier to her, and she'd hold him at arm's length and wonder how he'd gotten so full of rot and poison, not knowing what he'd seen or what he'd had to do.

The ending was powerful and emotive, but it will not sit well with some readers, not all books have a happy ending, sometimes darkness prevails, it ends but leaves you hanging almost, I sat with so many feelings in me after reading the last few pages. I just had to process what had happened.

A stunning debut novel written exceptionally well, it's unlike anything else I have read, can't compare it to another book, nothing comes to mind. It's a special book and I loved ever minute of it. Again, I do not understand the low ratings and reviews. Magnificent.

I received a copy of this book via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

Issicratea says

I thought at first that James Scott's hyped first novel *The Kept* might turn out to be stunning. The beginning was strikingly well written, I thought—not so much the first few pages, focalized through Elspeth, as the longer subsequent section centered on her twelve-year-old son Caleb as he tries to cope alone with the aftermath of the massacre of his family in a remote farm in upstate New York. Some of the scenes here are genuinely haunting. The next section of the narrative, the beginning of Caleb and Elspeth's grueling winter journey to avenge their dead, was also pretty good.

Around ten chapters in, however, as mother and son head towards the fictional town of Watersbridge, where the remainder of the novel takes place, the quality of the writing takes quite a sharp downturn from which I felt it never recovered. This is apparent first stylistically, at the level of phrase and sentence. The prose goes from being highly curated to oddly lax, as though there were whole stretches that hadn't been properly revised ("Elspeth heard the thunderous stampeding of Owen and his friends, the wails and squeals they'd emitted [...], the closet full of rolled white bandages.") Some sentences even sound as if they had been—badly—translated from another language ("While her lungs and muscles coursed with the fight, her broken nose ached in the wind, and her ears rang from Owen's gun, she continued on.")

The narrative also crucially loses momentum in the long central passage in Watersbridge. Caleb and Elspeth go their separate ways, he to hang around in a louche and violent saloon-brothel where he hopes to discover his family's killers, she to work in the ice trade, which seems the main industry of the town. The novel becomes quite densely peopled with new characters at this point and loses focus, haring off after—to my mind—not especially engaging sub-plots, such as the developing relationship between a cross-dressed Elspeth and her implausibly characterized coworker Charles. By the times the threads of the novel begin to be pulled together in anticipation of a predictably violent dénouement—*The Kept* likes its violence—my interest had completely dissipated. Even if it hadn't, I think Scott's inert style of action writing in the final chapters would have probably been the nail in the coffin ("Shane got between them and the two men tussled before Ethan grew weary of it and flung Shane aside. Elspeth, too, tried to stop Ethan, but Owen pressed a hand to her midsection.")

Quite a few reviews, both in the press and on this site, describe this book as bleak, and I suppose it is, if you base your estimate of bleakness on the body count and the weather. There's a quite a strong element of sentimentality in *The Kept*, however, apparent in the treatment of Elspeth's and Caleb's relationship towards the end of the novel, and also of Elspeth's relationship with Charles. Stoner, which I read immediately before this, is much more genuinely bleak in all kinds of ways, even though no little girls are shot in the head and no hapless messenger boys get crushed under massive blocks of ice.

The Kept's flirtation with sentimentality reaches its apogee when the nice Jewish man who runs the "mercantile" in Watersbridge is shown giving credit—a lot of credit—to Caleb, despite the fact that he is twelve, has no obvious means of support, and has just arrived in town. Later, the same man and his equally nice dressmaker wife give away an entire wardrobe of expensive clothes and accessories to Elspeth, a complete stranger, on an impulse of human sympathy. This is not really how I would imagine the business model of shopkeepers in a tough, late nineteenth-century frontier town. I get the point that this "mercantile" household is supposed to represent some kind of positive extreme within the spectrum of mainly dysfunctional families, biological and otherwise, that Scott piles into the novel as comparative material for the dysfunctional-functional family at its core. Sacrificing plausibility for thematic symmetries is always problematic in a would-be realist novel, though. Scott does a lot of it, especially towards the end.

switterbug (Betsey) says

From the opening line of this striking debut novel, the mood and voice are both haunting and laced with shame.

“Elspeth Howell was a sinner.”

It is three years shy of the turn of the twentieth century, upstate New York, bitterly cold and snowy with grey, smudgy skies. Elspeth is trudging miles from the train station to her family’s isolated home, and she is carrying gifts for her five children and pious, Bible-quoting husband. She’s been gone for four months, not unusual for her midwifery practice. As she rises up the crest of the last hill, she sees her house:

“The small plateau seemed made for them, chiseled by God for their security, to hold them like a perfect secret.”

Although the novel, stark and lean and elegantly written, progresses with a measured, lingering pace for most of the novel, it goes for the jugular at the outset. After a shocking tragedy that sets the premise for the rest of the story, the narrative continues languidly, but with terse prose, weaving in background information with current concerns. The momentum slows considerably, yet the writing keeps you absorbed, as the author delves into the deep-seated corners of character. Elspeth has morally wretched obsessions and impulses that underlie the events of this bleak and troubled tale. Guilt, shame, retribution, sacrifice, and the lengths we go to protect our family are mined with lyrical and somber mercy. Or is it merciless?

I’d rather not go further in describing this searing, harrowing story. As Elspeth and her twelve-year-old son, Caleb, journey by foot to search and avenge, the reader is immersed in the sense that the hunters are also the hunted. Scott’s descriptions are masterful, his extended metaphors gnawing and scorching. This is fine literature; if you don’t mind a slower-paced story, but one saturated in full characterizations, you will ride the suspense till the final, melancholy pages. I continue to contemplate this enigmatic story, its sense of deliverance like a ghost that trembles through the pages.

Matt says

The first time I came across James Scott’s *The Kept* was in a write-up in either the *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. I can’t remember which. I just know it wasn’t *The Onion*. The review, as I recall, was tepid at best. But the book’s cover – now that was striking.

If there’s one thing to know about me, it’s that I’m a borderline alcoholic. If there’s two things, it’s that I always, *always* judge a book by its cover. And *The Kept*’s caught my attention.

In the foreground is flat, snowy ground. At the horizon line stands a lonely, simple log cabin, the interior filled with orange flames – the only color in a monochrome of whites, blacks, and grays – that lick out the window and which have begun to travel along the eaves. There are some trees near the cabin, but their presence seems to heighten, rather than lessen, the cabin’s isolation. The branches are naked and scratch at the gray sky like delicate calligraphy.

The cover evokes many things. Coldness. Desolation. Solitude. In other words, it is a promise that within the

book there will be *atmosphere*.

The Kept takes place in 1897, in lonely upstate New York. The novel opens with midwife Elspeth Howell returning to the family farm with money tucked in her shoe and presents in her pack. When she arrives, however, she finds a cold house filled with her dead family. They have been murdered. By whom is the mystery that slowly unfolds in this unhurried narrative. The sole survivor of the massacre is Elspeth's 12 year-old son Caleb.

Together, mother and son journey to the town of Watersbridge, a tough, frontier village filled with hard and hard-drinking men. It is a place where violence at a bawdy house is an unmentioned occurrence. Where men make money the dangerous way, by carving huge slabs of ice from the lake. (If nothing else, this is the kind of downbeat story where you know – you just *know* – that someone is going to be crushed by an ice slab. It's like Chekov's ice).

Watersbridge, set on the frigid shores of Lake Erie, is Scott's great creation. It consciously evokes the boom towns and mining camps of the American West (as does the novel's straightforward theme of revenge). There are the usual gamut of stock characters: a friendly and fatherly hotel clerk; a suave and deadly pimp; a prostitute with a kindly heart. Scott works, however, to give these clichés little grace notes. If the novel does nothing else – and I would argue it doesn't do much – Watersbridge at least fulfills the cover's promise of a tactile setting.

I respected this book far more than I loved it, or even liked it. I understood exactly what the author was going for, but it never stuck with me. Partly, *The Kept* feels like a carefully polished artifact created in an MFA laboratory. Start with the first line:

Elspeth Howell was a sinner.

That sentence is self-consciously intended as a hook. It is supposed to pull you in with its carefully honed blend of bluntness and vagueness. Who is Elspeth Howell? Why does she think she is a sinner? A better book could survive that bold opening by proper execution. *The Kept* does not.

Oh, to be sure, it certainly tries. It is artfully constructed. Characters that slowly reveal their true selves. scraps of important information carefully elided until the proper moment. Scenes that are fraught with all kinds of unspoken meaning. Blurry flashbacks that are supposed to resonate with present meaning. The construction, however, is too obvious. You can see the creator's hands all over the structure.

In other words, I knew exactly what I was *supposed* to be feeling, but never felt it. I appreciated the novel on a technical level. I saw the author's skill, his craftsmanship. But I never connected with the characters at any emotional level.

There are certain things an author, and a book, cannot control. One of these variables in the book a reader reads just before he or she reads your book. Before *The Kept* I happened to consume Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. Flynn's thriller is not any better or worse than Scott's revenge tale. Indeed, the starred-review for both is the same.* But *Gone Girl* crackled with zany life. The characters were putrid people, but they felt like people. They drew from me an emotional response. I thought about *Gone Girl* when I put it down. I argued about it, both with myself, and with others.

*It should be noted that I give zero thought to the star-rating system. Literally zero. I can't reduce my thoughts on a book to little yellow stars. I can, however, reduce my thoughts to digressive, overlong reviews

filled with bad jokes and half-formed ideas.

The Kept kept me at a distance. It gives off a frosty, chilly vibe that is more a function of its delivery than its frosty, chilly setting. After I set it down, I began to forget about it immediately. A couple weeks later, I'm struggling to remember key events. Scott engineers several twists and turns. He also delivers a rather stark and brutal ending that might've come from the pen of Cormac McCarthy. The twists and the ending, however, are undermined by the simple fact that I didn't care about the people experiencing these events. Everything depends on the relationship between Elspeth and Caleb. I just never cared.

I don't read a ton of contemporary fiction. When I do, I probably tend to judge it too harshly, for that very reason. This is a novel that does a lot of things objectively right. In the end, that wasn't enough for me. Something ineffable was missing. I suppose it's kind of unfair to judge a book based on something I can't even articulate. But if life was fair, I'd have a different face.

Jackie says

This debut novel is a powerhouse of a time and place that shows very little mercy to anyone. The frozen land is just as much of a character as is 11 year old Caleb, who has to grow up much too quickly in absolutely horrible circumstances. He heard and/or watched the murder of his father and his four siblings, surviving by hiding in the barn. He gets a glimpse of the three men who did this, and he knows it is up to him to find them and get frontier justice for their horrible deeds. While trying to figure out what to do, he hears someone crunching through the snow. As the door opens, once gentle Caleb shoots the intruder. Unfortunately, it was no stranger. It was his mother, coming back from an extended midwife trip. Nursing her as much as possible, plus dealing with the bodies of the rest of his family, he becomes a man with a mission. Soon, his mother is (barely) able to travel, and both begin to track the killers. Everyone in this book has some sort of secret, even the dead. And slowly, as the hidden comes to light, the action and tension increase throughout this book until the very last standoff. It is hard to believe that this is a first novel--the writing is absolutely stunning. James Scott is truly a new voice to pay attention to.

Elizabeth says

This is really a 3.5 star book but since I round up...

Loved the pared down language and uncomplicated story of this novel. A young boy and his mother set out to find the men that killed the rest of their family. The folks they meet along the way are interesting and multifarious. It's a hell of a coming of age story.

The ending is not four stars. But the writing? The setting? The characters? Four stars.

Oh, vengeance.

Such a complicated and involved concept.

Arielle Walker says

3.5

James Scott's writing clearly evokes the bleak landscape and equally stark, isolated characters of *The Kept*, but there is a tendency towards unnecessary detail and the third person narrative is a little too detached from the story. It's almost like watching a documentary in which the camera is off panning over a frozen lake or icy field, while the action is taking place just out of shot.

[Full review here](#)

*Advanced review copy received from Random House through Nz Booklovers

Sara Nelson says

If someone were to tell you that *The Kept* involved cross dressing and serial murder, you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd stumbled on a new contemporary thriller. But James Scott's debut, while thrilling, is set in rural upstate New York c: 1900. It tells the story of a mother and son who set off for a rough, rural town in search of the killers who murdered their family; there, they make some discoveries, all right--not just about the criminals, but also about their own damaged selves. This debut is not for the faint of heart--look for reviews that compare it to the work of Cormac (The Road) McCarthy. But it will grab you from the first line--"Elspeth Howell was a sinner"--and haunt you well past the discovery that Elspeth's sins are both lesser and greater than you first thought. This is one profound and disturbing book from a writer to watch

Cynthia says

Redemption

Have you ever done something so wrong you felt you could never be forgiven and then set out to make things right, or at least as right as they could be, no matter what the cost? Almost every character in "The Kept" feels they have something to for which they must atone. No one is exempt and in an odd way this binds them together, brings them closer to one another.

After a family tragedy a mother and son, Elspeth and Caleb, go on an odyssey to try and seek revenge but along the way they encounter truths and find some answers to questions that have long haunted them. They also forge a truer relationship with one another.

Though as near as I could fathom the action in "The Kept" takes place somewhere in the 1880's in Illinois or Minnesota this book reads like a classic western replete with lawless frontier towns and amoral killers and wandering rootless, lost souls. It's a sad story but it's also filled with wisdom and compassion so ultimately it's uplifting. James Scott is an impressive new writer.

This review is based on an advance reader's copy provided by the publisher.
(Disclaimer included as required by the FTC.)

Stepheny says

LAME.

Elspeth Howell is a midwife in the late 1800's. She travels far to go help mothers bring their sweet babies into the world. She arrives back to her snowy home in upstate NY to find that her entire family has been brutally murdered. As she stands on the verge of pushing open the kitchen door, a gunshot goes off. Is the killer still loose in the house? Is she dead?

No.

Elspeth's sole-surviving son, Caleb is a terrified 12-year-old with a gun. Fearing that the three armed men have returned to finish him off, Caleb pulls the trigger before realizing it is his mother returning home after months of being away at work.

Caleb must nurse his mother back to health and soon thereafter the two of them go off on a quest for justice. They go searching for the three men who left a man and four children dead.

Sounds awesome, right?

It's not. The little blurb indicates its style is similar to Cormac McCarthy. The difference is, even when nothing happens in a McCarthy novel, you're still able to enjoy it. The writing is subpar in comparison and honestly the characters are dumb. The mother is despicable, and I wanted to choke her to death. Her crimes are worse than those of the three murderers. Yeah, I said it. There aren't many who may agree with me on that front, but I was more appalled and offended by her actions in this book than I was anything else that happens in it. It made my blood boil to even think of it.

If I've got you wondering what heinous crime could possibly be worse than murdering four innocent children, feel free to PM me. Otherwise, go ahead and pick up this book when you're ready for a nice long nap. It's a poorly written snoozefest.

Snotchocheez says

2.5 stars

Way too much ambiguity and author James Scott's unnecessarily ornate writing style stand in the way of *The Kept* from being a novel to savor. It's a shame, too, as this had plenty of potential to soar with the greats.

Try this premise on for size: Elspeth Howell, an upstate early 1900s midwife, trudges home through the snow in the dead of winter to her husband and five kids... only to find them murdered (well, all but one son, 12 year-old Caleb, hiding in the pantry, who, fearing the murderers have returned, mistakenly shoots his mom, then sets the house on fire. All of which happens in the first two chapters).

As you might expect, this is one frightfully bleak novel, that, unfortunately, never really climbs above anti-climax. The bulk of the novel alternates between explaining (with laconic pacing) how and why this

depravity was perpetrated, and what mom Elspeth (recovered from being shot) and son Caleb plan to do to avenge their family's murders..

Had Scott stuck closer to the advancement of the story and spent less time trying to dazzle with flowery, go-nowhere prose, he probably could've struck literary gold here, but instead flounders to provide an ending that's even remotely as interesting as the promising start..

karen says

a four-star that melted into a 3.5 by the end. review to come, if i ever get internet back at my place....

nope, still no internet, but it's fun to come to the office on weekends!

this book starts out strong - it is 1897 in upstate new york. a woman trudges through the deep snow to her isolated home after a prolonged absence only to find her husband and four of her children murdered, their bodies scattered all over the house and yard, the killers long gone. after lying beside her husband's body for a time, she realizes that she hasn't seen the body of her twelve-year-old son caleb in the wreckage, and goes to find it, performing small domestic tasks along the way in a haze of shock and guilt.

in the kitchen, she is also shot.

she comes to, much later, on the kitchen table, with caleb standing over her, removing the pellets from her body.

caleb had been hiding in the barn when his family was murdered, and saw the killers and in what direction they left. together, mother and son set out on a quest for revenge.

in this first act, there are two major reveals, but even though they come early, i am not going to mention them because i think they make more of an impact if you are not expecting them. and they are juicy.

it's a story of dark secrets and tangled family bonds. it's a little bit True Grit as caleb sets out to get vengeance on the men who took his family from him, but without all the middlemen. he is by no means a ruthless killer; he has always felt closer to animals than to people and is terrified of the prospect of killing but he is also convinced that "an eye for an eye" is the appropriate course of action. and on this journey he will learn about himself, his family, and the greater world.

his mother elspeth is a trickier case. a midwife by trade, she desperately loves babies, but seems to lose interest in them once they become children. she leaves the farm for months at a time, working in far-flung towns, and has to keep a list of her own children's names and ages in her bag so she doesn't forget any of them when she is selecting gifts for her homecoming. she has always been distant and aloof towards her children and her scripture-quoting husband, and has a midwife's practical, unemotional reaction to the bodies and blood of her family. this journey she takes with caleb will also be a journey through her own past, and the horrible decisions she made that have culminated in this situation. but it is also an opportunity to understand her son, to kindle the maternal impulses she has not been able to express until now.

they set off in the direction caleb saw the killers leave and eventually find themselves in a rough town full of rough men. elspeth is still wearing her husband's clothes, which had been easier to maneuver into than a dress with her injuries, and dirty as she is from travel, with her hair cut short after an episode earlier in the journey, she is mistaken for a man; a ruse she chooses to sustain. this is a town with which she is very

familiar, and she knows it is safer for her to remain unrecognized. she finds work with a team of men hauling ice from the lake, and caleb lands a job sweeping and cleaning up at a brothel, where he hopes to run into the killers.

during their time in the town, they make acquaintances, many of them dangerous, all the while circling each other awkwardly trying to establish a more traditional mother-and-son relationship. but they are not traditional people, and their shared trauma tempers their bond into something unusual, but no less powerful for it.

this novel works very well as a coming-of-age story. caleb is a winning and sympathetic character as he emerges into the world, having only known his farm, his animals, and his family before this. he is exposed to the basest elements of humanity, and he takes it all in unflinchingly while shaping his own personality around it and still managing to retain much of his innocence. his yearning for family and love can be heartbreaking in such a cruel world, but he has a resolve, an inner strength, that leads him on his path.

elspeth is also a great character study. a woman with secrets and sins, much bolder than her son but capable of tenderness and sacrifice despite her cold exterior. there is a lot to celebrate in these characters.

i'm just not crazy about the ending. (view spoiler)

and that's why it's a 3.5 stars instead of a 4.

but it is still a great book, particularly for a debut, and i am very interested in what he will do next.

Kelly Hager says

It's best to go into this book knowing as little as possible. The summary listed is probably the absolute most you should be aware of. And, of course, that means that this will be an incredibly vague review because I don't want to spoil anything.

Here's what I can say: this book is GOOD. It's incredibly fun to read, but there's also a lot going on in this book (only 354 pages in my copy but a lot is packed into those pages). And the characters are very realistic. Nobody is 100% good or 100% bad, which I find incredibly refreshing. Some are obviously better than others (and some, then, are worse than others) but it's like real life---some people do horrible things and yet somehow I found myself liking them anyway.

I especially loved Elspeth. She's a unique and complicated character, someone completely unlike anyone I've ever read before. And I loved Caleb, who's been forced to become much older than his 12 years.

This is James Scott's first novel and I was incredibly impressed by it. I can't wait to see what he does next. Recommended.

sappho_reader says

The Kept started with a bang. A woman returns home to find her husband and children murdered by three unknown assailants wearing red scarves. The brutal murder scene during a cold New York winter at the turn of the 20th century sent chills down my spine. I was fully captivated for the first half of the book, but I felt

that the plot started to fragment and become less interesting when Elspeth traveled to Watersbridge to take revenge. There were hints of mainstream historical fiction which irritated me somewhat and I ended up skimming the last several chapters just to see what happened.

I think my reluctance to be fully engaged in the second half of the book is that Elspeth was such a despicable character, and not in a good way at all. I often like "bad" characters if I find them cunning or clever but Elspeth was neither. She kidnapped newborns and raised them as her own. I wanted to harm her in special ways. I wanted her to suffer. So because I never felt any compassion for her I was left not completely invested in her plight. Sorry.

This book was on my radar for some time and it took me awhile to get a copy from the library. It was worth the pursuit for just the first part alone.

Nicola Mansfield says

This book had me transfixed from beginning to end. I found it a slow read but I literally had to force myself to put it down each night and did actually fall asleep reading as it just got too darn late. Set in 1897, up-state New York, an amazing opening scene grabbed me and had me hooked that I knew right away this was going to be my kind of book. What starts off as a tale of vengeance ends up one of redemption. Caleb, a 12 year old boy, is always the main character and he pulled my heart strings from the get go. I have a 13 year old son and was able to compare and contrast the difference in the times but still be aware of the innate mindset of twelve years of age. Very shortly after the book starts it is often hard to remember that Caleb is only 12 and I often started thinking of him as 16 or so; the author seems to be allowing the reader to do so by only very infrequently bringing back a mention of his real age which throws the reader for a loop reminding themselves of this and what this boy is being asked to do and how he is coping with the situation. Much further on in the book, things change and we are constantly reminded of his age and there is purpose to this as well. Elspeth, the mother, is an unlikable character but one grows to understand her, wonder at a woman's lot in this era where no psychiatric help was available, where it was the woman's fault if no children were born, and if a baby girl came first she was told to have a boy next time. Elspeth is responsible for her own actions though and by tale's end redemption is all she can, and does, ask for. I loved this book. It was atmospheric, dark, moody, and well-written. However, as soon as I finished the book I knew it would get mixed reviews and even some bad reviews. Some readers can't stand dark stories that don't have happy endings. Personally, I think if a soul finds redemption, that **is** a good ending. If you want happily ever after, this is not the book for you! If you want profound beautiful writing that tells a tale about life's sorrows and redemption you'll like this book. James Scott is a name I will be looking for in the future.

Sarah Beth says

I received an Advance Reader's Edition of this book from HarperCollins.

This novel is grim: tiny blonde children are shot in the forehead, bodies fly through the air and land in the snow, noses crack, the thud of bullets meeting flesh is heard, and giant blocks of ice crush skulls. This novel feels cold both in setting and characterization. Snow falls endlessly and mothers are separated from their children. Scott has imagined a desolate setting for his characters.

Set near the turn of the twentieth century, the key players in this novel are Elspeth Howell and her son Caleb. Elspeth is a midwife, who leaves her husband and five children for long stretches of time on their isolated

farmhouse to travel long distances to earn money. Upon returning home in the winter of 1897, Elspeth finds the cold bodies of four of her children and her husband. Only her 12 year old son Caleb survives. Caleb and his mother decide to leave to seek revenge on the men who shot and killed their family, however, along the way Caleb learns the truth about Elspeth and the lies he was told about his family and is exposed to the gruesome reality of a world filled with deceit, murder, and a multitude of sins.

Early in the novel, it becomes obvious that Elspeth and Jorah's family is not what it appears: "They look nothing like us,' Jorah said, [...] 'Whose children are these?' (54). However, this novel shows that family relationships are more nuanced than simply blood relatives. "Instead of giving thanks for what she'd been spared, she grew angrier at what had been taken from her, and a hunger grew deep in the pit of her - in the imaginary womb where she carried and bore the children she'd taken as her own - to find the men responsible" (69). Even Caleb, whose relationship with Elspeth has always been distant, and who perhaps more than anyone has a right to be angry, comes to the same conclusion. "They were my brothers and sisters. They were to me" (315). No matter how many wrongs were committed in creating it, to Caleb and Elspeth their family was what they made of it and they could not forget the murdered members of their family tree.

At heart, this novel is about how one mistake can multiply to create a vast number of acts. It is about family ties above all else. It is about the cruelty of a world that robs children of innocence. It is about what it means to be a mother. Elspeth, who came from a cold, cruel family and who could not have children herself, yearned to create a family through the miracle that is a new child - a new opportunity to start over; because when new parents' eyes first see their child it "made Elspeth understand that no mistake existed that this joy could not undo" (141).

In the end, this novel was too dark and gruesome for me to truly enjoy. There's very little redemption in this book. Furthermore, despite the emphasis on family, no deep relationships seem to emerge in this book, although Caleb and Elspeth do grow closer after their ordeal. However, it was not enough for me to be able to relate to the characters or the dark, cold, murder-filled world in which they live.

Diane S ? says

This is a very dark story , set in the late 19th century, in rural upstate New York. The beginning is very brutal and very explicit and it is this that will set Elspeth the mother, and Caleb who is still very young, twelve or thirteen, on a quest for vengeance.

Extremely well written for a first novel, it is very atmospheric and hard to forget. The scenes, the dialogue all are so vividly portrayed, what they have seen and what they go through so hard to forget. A boy, who had to grow up quickly and way to soon. A mother, who I really did not like until the end, when she finally figures out what it takes to actually be a mother. A story of guilt and justification. The cover is so perfect, the barrenness, the starkness, perfectly fitting for this novel.

Reminds me a little of Bonnie Jo Campbell and her writing. The comparison to True Grit I can also see but like I said I had a hard time liking and forgiving Elspeth. Not sure that I ever did. A good, solid first novel, brutal in nature, but unforgettable.

ARC from publisher.

Diane says

Meh. I read about one-third of this novel before I decided I just didn't care enough to continue. It's historical fiction, set in late 1800s in rural New York, and the story involves a midwife returning home to find her husband and children murdered. She and the son who survived set off on a journey to seek revenge.

The book was atmospheric, with lots of description, but it felt like a writing exercise that was all flash and no substance. The characters felt flat and shallow, and I couldn't buy into their dilemma. Not even the mystery of who killed the family kept me interested in reading it.

This is two novels in a row for me that were mediocre and I had to abandon. Hopefully my next book will be more rewarding.
