

Book Review: Dark Frontier  
By Matthew Harffy

Thanks to NetGalley and Aries Publishing for this advance reader's copy, in exchange for an honest review.

A recent podcast by Joanna Penn reflected on the many publishing options available to authors today. As a result, more books are vying for readers' time. That means craft is critical, and storytelling and pacing are going to become even more important.

With that in mind, Matthew Harffy's soon-to-be-released (July 2024) historical western "Dark Frontier" succeeds to some degree where storytelling is concerned, but its pacing is out of step.

It's 1890. The protagonist is Lieutenant Gabriel Stokes, formerly of the British Army and more recently an officer with the London, England Metropolitan Police. Stokes is haunted by the horrors of war experienced in Afghanistan, and more recently by brutal murders occurring in London. Alcohol and opium soon do him in, and push his marriage down the toilet.

A letter Stokes receives from Captain John Thornford, Stokes' comrade in Afghanistan and best friend, prompts him to travel halfway around the world to start life anew in Oregon where Thornford has built a thriving ranch. Stokes yearns for a calmer, more idyll life. But the day he arrives he learns Thornton has been shot and killed.

All signs point to Tom Grant, a wealthy rancher whose offer to purchase Thornton's ranch was repeatedly spurned. Stokes – together with Jed White, a grizzled gunslinger and one of Thornton's ranch hands, as well as Mary Ann, Thornton's widow –

sets out to avenge his friend's death. And he quickly finds that life in the American West can be just as dangerous as the violent streets of London.

The story's premise is not new. Wealthy, greedy land baron who already owns or controls half the town wants more – and won't let anything stand in his way. Sounds a bit like an episode of "Bonanza" or "Gunsmoke." But Harffy's occasional plot twist and character development do keep the story interesting.

The pacing, however, is problematic. For example, the four-day ride on horseback from the train station where Jed White meets Stokes to the Thornton ranch spans about four chapters, during which time nothing of any consequence occurs. I said aloud several times, "Get to the ranch already," and almost put the book down. The action does pick up a bit as the story unfolds, but there are too many (in my opinion) flashbacks Stokes experiences that interrupt the flow of the story.

The long-awaited climax is more than a bit convoluted. I won't spoil it here, but suffice to say the connections the reader is expected to just accept seem a bit far-fetched, as does Stokes channeling his inner Indiana Jones.

Harffy also seems to leave open the possibility of a sequel. Maybe, maybe not. But if he does, I hope he picks up the pace or reduces the length by about 100 pages.

I give "Dark Frontier" 2.5 out of 5 stars. It's not bad, but I can't highly endorse it either.