



Review by Julia Franks

Streets of Nashville

By Michael Amos Cody (Lake Dallas: Madville Publishing, 2025)
\$22.95, paper. ISBN 9781963695175, 335 pp.

Streets of Nashville is an atmospheric page-turner about ambition, music, identity, and sex. I tore through it in a few sittings.

I have to confess that I often begin Southern Gothic novels with a certain sense of dread, always aware of the genre's commitment to unveil men's most sordid depravities. The best novels of this tradition read like dark revelations about the souls of men (and yes, they're almost always men). Think William Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy and William Gay. But the weakest examples in this genre can feel like desperate imitations, as if, in order to prove themselves literary heavyweights, the stories have to shock the readers with wildly imaginative

and sophomoric acts of cruelty. When I'm reading such novels, my own mind sabotages the experience with a certain recurring vision: a young adjunct professor sitting in a Starbucks with his latte and his laptop, trying to dream up crimes that are more grotesque and bizarre than any ever invented before.

Thankfully, Michael Amos Cody is not that writer, and *The Streets of Nashville*, a whodunnit about a sociopath loose in the streets of 1980s Nashville, is not that novel. It is, in fact, much more. The story visits those old tropes and brushes up against them, but cruelty isn't the point of this story.

The setting itself is what first grabs our attention, a city chock-full of people competing for fame. Cody captures the rich texture of this land of opportunity: striving songwriters with spiral jot pads tucked into their shirt pockets, striving musicians sleeping on the streets, striving promoters resorting to acts of desperate destruction, an almost palpable churn of artistic creativity battling an almost constant fear of failure. The whole scene is juiced up by the sexual promiscuity of the 1980s: footloose flings with pool boys, homosexuality peeking out from closets, the specter of AIDS.

Ezra MacRae is a young rural songwriter who's come to the city with big dreams and is now on the cusp of breaking through. He's just signed with his first publisher and is in the middle of a lonely celebration, weaving his drunken way through the midnight streets, wishing his ex-girlfriend were by his side, befriending a homeless songwriter who also hails from the Appalachians, enthusing so much about his new employer that he can't help but wander by the man's closed office—at which point he serendipitously witnesses a double murder. Eerily, the killer makes long explicit eye contact with him, winks, puts a bullet in the head of Ezra's benefactor, returns his attention to Ezra, and tells him, "I'll remember you, my handsome young man" (40).

From there, the plot races forward. Ezra, who happens to look like Jesus, is one of four eyewitnesses. After the first two are dispatched, he awaits his fate with dread. But he's hungry enough for a contract that he won't give up

on his new career. He stays in Nashville and tries to figure out who it is that's coming after him.

A cast of richly engaging characters brings to life the particular rat race that is 1980s Nashville. We see the city through Ezra's eyes but also through those of the homeless man Benny Jack, several police officers, the killer, and some of his victims.

Eventually we follow the main characters back to Ezra's hometown in Madison County, North Carolina, a town that moves so much more slowly that it feels as if we've entered another world, where policing is conducted through personal relationships; where the local librarian holds the key to the town's history, its maps, and who lives where; where Ezra's beloved longtime companion farms his family's land. The town's sense of timelessness puts all that city striving into stark perspective, especially now that a sociopath is on his way.

The rural/urban contrast highlights the trade-off so many country musicians must have made when they left home to prove themselves in the industry's crucible city: the personal for the anonymous, the family networks for the transactional connections, the authentic for the hyped.

I raced through *Streets of Nashville* because I cared about Ezra and wanted to find out the answer to the story's mysteries. But along the way I also lost myself in the sounds, textures, and yearning of Nashville. And I'll say this about the ending: Cody doesn't follow the whodunnit convention of tying up all the loose ends. There are threads that aren't neatly resolved: not all the crimes in the book can be explained by one man's actions, the killer's motivations remain complicated even to himself, and the protagonist's final romance doesn't close other doors. To the very end, readers will fall for the novel's complexity, characters, and verve.