

Signs Of Life

Chris Towndrow

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Praise for SIGNS OF LIFE:

“This is not only a gritty Western, it’s a love story. It has everything you could want in a brilliant read and more. I devoured [it] in two sittings as it took me to another time and place. A book that will surely bring the love of Westerns to a new audience.” *****

“This did everything that I was looking for in a Western novel. Chris Towndrow has a great writing style for the genre and I was hooked with these characters.” *****

“This was a quaint, charming book, perfect for anyone looking for a Western fix!” ****

“I don’t read very many Western romance novels but I really did enjoy... how the author described the characters, the way of life and the story was full of action and drama.” ****

“This is a very character driven story that is an entertaining read. The scenes of town life felt realistic, and the dialogue also felt appropriate to the period. Earl’s character growth and evolving emotions felt believable and his road to forgiveness is a major theme.” ****

“Everything about this book had me immersed in the story. The authenticity of the dialogue, the descriptions, and the characters all held me right there. I really enjoyed the romance in the story. A Western with heart that had me invested in the characters and the outcome, too!” *****

1



The flowers were dead.

He'd known they would be; all things wither without love and care.

Squatting down, Earl brushed away the fragments of plant, then used a tarnished hand fork to turn over the rectangular yard of reddish soil. A beetle scuttled away to find a new home.

He carefully unfolded a square of tan cloth to reveal three stems of yellow gaillardia, dug each a small hole and homed them, pressing down the dry earth with dirty fingers.

He rose stiffly and went to where his horse was roped to a dying saguaro. He patted the animal's chestnut-brown neck, returned the fork and cloth to the saddlebag, unhooked his canteen from the saddle and took a long drink. As the water cooled his throat, his gaze meandered across the familiar surroundings. The lone homestead was the only property in sight on the undulating Arizona prairie.

He wandered over to his companion, who had remained quiet, standing dutifully by his own horse. 'Fill you up?'

'Thanks.' Walter's lined eyes creased in long-practised empathy. He proffered his flask.

Earl took it and walked away.

He emptied both vessels onto the turned soil, giving the young plants a good drink to start them on a journey that wouldn't last

beyond summer. Still, his objective wasn't the journey, only the gesture.

A hundred yards away, the clear water in the creek ran slow and shallow, and he refilled the bottles. He stood for a while and listened to the burbling. The breeze tugged his straggled, straw-coloured hair as he recalled distant, happier days on this stretch of low bank. A picnic, laughter, perhaps amour. Hard ground pressing rocks into younger flesh which was busy in pursuit of affection.

Before the maudlin introspection became overwhelming, he strode back up the gentle slope to where the mounts waited patiently. He handed across Walter's canteen, affixed the other to his saddle, and returned to his sombre travail.

The two wooden crosses which headed the makeshift flowerbed weren't merely simple shapes. The work of an artisan, they were carved angels with arms outstretched, the folds of their robes intricate in the weathered mesquite. Long legs tapered down, driven into the hard prairie earth many years earlier. Even so, the winter's wind had pushed them off square.

Across the angel's chest, the taller memorial read, "MARY JOHNSON. LOST TO THE LORD 1859. EVER LOVED". The shorter, standing barely two feet to the crown, was carved with, "ALDEN JOHNSON. LOST TO THE LORD 1859. TAKEN TOO SOON".

Earl straightened the crosses, scooped up a rock, and, wincing at possible damage to his craftsmanship, gave each a few hard raps to regain their stability. Then he tossed away the rock, clasped his hands in front and lost himself in silent reflection.

After a minute, his dun horse whinnied, jolting Earl back to the present day, so he paced across to the ruined house seventy yards away.

Little had changed.

Weeds sprouted enthusiastically from crumbled brickwork, and the past year's wind and frost had eaten away more of the

scarred and blackened timbers. A jackrabbit sprang from the interior, startling Earl, and pelted away across the landscape.

At the rear of the house, nature had reclaimed more of the garden. Only the low tumbledown border wall marked out that it had ever been anything but another fifty square yards of anonymous scrub. The husbandry of past flora lived only in his memory. Mary's expertise with the hoe. The neatness of order before the chaos.

A thunderclap belched across the distant mountains. He surveyed the skies and felt for the direction of the breeze: they'd stay dry. Nevertheless, he strode back to the horses.

Walter replaced his grey Slouch hat, tucking the loose string under his chin. He nodded solemnly and held Earl's hat out. 'We could have done with that rabbit.'

Earl set the wide-banded khaki Western on his head. 'Not today. Not the time. 'Sides, we're home by dusk.'

He untied the reins and patted the animal's hide. The gelding pushed his head against the man's chest, puffing out comforting warm breath.

'Let's go, Jack.'

They mounted up, and Earl cast a final glance across the scene. He eased a heel against the horse's flank, and they moved away, with Walter riding behind.

They rode in silence at an easy walk for five minutes. The horses' tails swished at pesky flies. The abandoned property fell long behind, obscured from view by the undulating land.

Walter pulled alongside. 'I swear there's less of a year every year. Could be only six months we were here.'

'You don't gotta ride out. It ain't like it was. Say the word, and I'll do this my own self next year.' Earl remained grateful that his companion indulged him in this pilgrimage, deferential and understanding.

Walter frowned. 'Just because I don't lay flowers doesn't mean I forgot. But life moves on. A man looking over his shoulder doesn't see where he's heading.'

Earl tightened the reins. 'Well, you ain't got the guilt I got.'

He jabbed a heel, and the horse accelerated into a canter. Russet dust whipped up into a plume which washed over Walter, who spurred his mount onwards too.

The sun warmed Earl's face as they clattered on, the rap of hoof on dirt and grass, hard breaths pumping from the ageing appaloosa's mouth.

The brown landscape gave way to green, and more trees pockmarked their familiar route.

After half an hour, he sensed Jack's pace slowing. Not many years left for this longtime friend. Loss would come again, and the need to seek a new companion.

He steered for a clutch of four broad trees and brought them to rest. They dismounted in the welcome shade, and he hung his hat on the saddle and wiped sweat from his brow. They supped from their canteens, leaning against adjacent gnarled tree trunks.

He inspected the mesquite: this would be good to cut and fashion. It pricked his memory.

'That new shutter holding on fine?'

'Course. I wouldn't hire anywhere else,' Walter replied.

He flashed an amused query. 'Hire?'

'You get my meaning. You do it 'cos you feel a duty.'

'And that's so wrong? Trying to pay back?'

Walter chewed on a biscuit and gave a familiar look of mild disappointment.

Earl looked into his friend's lined eyes. 'I get that you had your fill of me, Walt. I had the fill of me a long time past.'

'I reckon you're as stuck with me as I am with you. Circumstance can better the strongest of men, and I don't

want to be torn up guilty from you seeking worse counsel—or drink—this time of year.’

‘You talk like this is the only day I’d wind up in the pokey again.’

‘You don’t aim to—I know that much. It wouldn’t solve anything. You quit on drinking, and even a stubborn fool needs a friend. I wish you hadn’t had to lean so hard, but what’s done is done. I said so last year and the times before. And I’ll say so next time. Maybe it’s only me you’re deaf to. Maybe one day a horse’ll kick you in the head, or Mary’ll come to you in a dream, and you’ll see sense and move on.’

‘Can’t say I don’t wanna. Wanting and getting ain’t the same, though.’

‘You didn’t die that day. Nor did you eat your gun on account of what went on. To my mind, means you got steel—even if it’s real deep inside. There’s always hope.’

‘For what? Can’t get ’em back.’ Earl’s head drooped.

‘Sure enough. I mean, hope for starting over. Wearing a smile, not a frown.’

‘My humour’s my own choice.’

‘And you know what I think to it.’ With a hard stare, Walter stowed his canteen and climbed into the saddle.

Earl knew the man meant well, beyond his ball-busting. A stern teacher you resent at the time but who gets results you appreciate in hindsight. A feller like Mr Morgan—though Earl had quit long before results could come.

Deep down, he did want to move past the loss, but the final mile of any endeavour was always the hardest. Could he help it if it made him a pain in the ass? Feelings can’t be turned off like a lamp.

He could never foresee a day when he wouldn’t do right by Mary and Alden—keep their memory alive. Yet, such an honourable task was inextricably linked to remembrance and thus to regret and pain.

They picked up the trail, heading for Walter's ranch as usual, and settled into an easy trek, lolling in the saddle over the bumpy ground. The long-dead riverbed meandered along a shallow valley, sporadically bordered on both sides by trees in varying stages of life.

After a slow hour, the trail morphed into grassy brush, and Earl pushed Jack into a lope. To the north, ahead and to the right of them, the land rose into a ridge. Atop it, maybe three miles distant, another pair of riders were making good speed. A third, riderless horse followed on a long tether. It was the first sign of other folk they'd seen all day.

They were heading westward, towards a boulder the size of a house, which perpetually teetered on the edge of careering to the valley floor. Folks around had called it Tipping Rock for as long as Earl could remember—a landmark aeons older than this annual pilgrimage. A burly man could move the boulder by a small amount, such was its curious fulcrum. Still, the topography meant it couldn't truly be toppled. He'd demonstrated it once to Mary, wanting to show his strength despite being weak with love. He smiled, recalling her amusement at his theatrical bravado. It certainly bested the old homestead's creek for a picnic spot. The view. God's wonderful world before it became less so.

As Earl watched the riders, curious, he strayed from the trail. As he corrected, Jack flashed past a towering cactus, uncomfortably close. He cursed, then checked behind to see whether Walter had noticed the other riders or was preparing to chastise Earl's near miss. Neither—he was riding single-handed and wiping his brow.

As Earl turned forwards, he was alarmed by a shape moving in the grass ahead and to his left. Jack saw it too, shied, and keeled to one side. Earl's hands took avoiding action, got crossed up, and yanked hard, veering them away from tall, gnarled shrubs. The horse's head tossed, and its front legs sought footing. Earl evened

his weight, dug his heels harder into the stirrups and hauled on the reins. Too late. One hoof rapped against an exposed root, gouging the ankle open.

‘Dang to hell!’

They stilled, horse and rider breathing hard.

Walter clattered to a halt in a shower of dust. ‘What the hell?’

Earl jabbed out a hand. ‘Over there.’

Ten yards away lay a young man, propped wearily against a small boulder, half-hidden in tall thin grass.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chris Towndrow has been a writer since 1991. He began writing science fiction, inspired by Isaac Asimov, Iain M Banks, and numerous film and TV canons. After a few years spent creating screenplays, in 2004 he moved into playwriting and has had several productions professionally performed.

His first published novel was 2012's space opera "Sacred Ground". He then focussed on sci-fi, and the Enna Dacourt pentalogy was completed in 2023. He has always drawn inspiration from the big screen, and 2019's quirky romantic comedy "Tow Away Zone" owes much to the Coen Brothers' work. This book spawned two sequels in what became the "Sunrise trilogy".

His first historical fiction novel, "Signs Of Life", was published by Valericain Press in 2023.

Chris now returns to his passion for writing accessible humour and is mainly writing romantic comedy novels. The first of these, "Floored", arrived in April 2024, under the pen name Chrissie Harrison.

Chris lives on the outskirts of London with his family and works as a video editor and producer. He is a member of the UK Society of Authors.

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ALSO FROM THE PUBLISHER

The Sunrise Trilogy

When a travelling salesman stumbles on an apparently secret town, he must choose between love and a long-held promise of untold riches.

However, this decision is only the start of his adventures in Sunrise – a place full of larger-than-life characters, mysterious secrets, and jeopardy.

Tow Away Zone
Go Away Zone
Stow Away Zone

“A gripping yarn - quirky characters, a pacy plot and a setting like you've never read before. A fun ol' read.”

- Paul Kerensa, Comedian & British Comedy

Award-winning TV writer – Miranda, Not Going Out

Science Fiction

As the long interstellar war ends, spaceship captain Rakkel faces a choice. If he captures the last rebel opponent, it means peace is complete—and the end of the only life he's ever known.

Sacred Ground

Mother. Father. Daughter. Son. Their own private nuclear shelter. They have survived the war. Now, all they have to do is cope with each other.

Nuclear Family

Kidnapped from an apparently doomed ship, wisecracking Lieutenant Enna Dacourt must find a way off a deserted asteroid, save her family, and foil the corporate espionage scheme in which she is an unwitting pawn.

Imperfect Isolation

Romantic Comedy by Chrissie Harrison

Sparky wannabe stand-up Hannah has social anxiety and a bad dating history. Drew hates lifts and has avoided love since the death of his fiancée. Providing they stay apart, it's a perfect relationship...

Floored

She could save their season... if he can win her heart.

Match Daze

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Wicket Maiden