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City of Widows

By Loren D. Estleman

256pp. To Doherty Associates

This latest entry in Loren Estleman's Page Murdock western series shows once again the difference between mere genre writing and artistry displayed in genre form. There's a storyline here, launching Montana lawman Murdock into the Southwest to corral a mean varmint, but Mr. Estleman, a Pulitzer nominee best known for his Amos Walker mysteries, cares far less about plot than character and language. In prose as picturesque as the Painted Desert and clear as an Arizona sky, the jaded Murdock evokes wasteland "ablaze with that dry heat that opens your pores and sucks up the moisture like lemon carbonate through a straw," and shows us its people: "His features were crowded around a toothbrush moustache in the exact center of his big face like too little furniture in a huge room." The mythic frontier loner, Murdock is Sam Spade in sixshooters, hardboiled as a 12-minute egg. After a night with old flame Poker Annie, he says, "Taking her to bed was like playing a friendly game of cards with someone you once had much in common with and don't anymore; then the cards were just an excuse, and now it was just the cards." When Page Murdock shuffles the words, deal me in.