

Bearskin

James A. McLaughlin

On the lam from a drug cartel after they killed his girlfriend, biologist Rice Moore has gone off the grid in Virginia, finding work as a caretaker at the secluded Turk Mountain Preserve. The forest is off-limits to hunters, and Moore's primary job is to monitor the vast acreage for disturbances. It's lonely and exhausting work but exactly what Moore needs, until he discovers a bear carcass left behind by poachers, who sell the gallbladders on the black market. His pursuit of the trespassers will shatter his solitude and resurrect the demons of a past life he's tried to bury. Other characters include Rice's predecessor, Sara Birkeland, who was forced off the preserve after a vicious attack, and a local biker gang that Rice suspects is involved in the poaching. But McLaughlin's most memorable character is the dense ecosystem of the Appalachian forest, which is explored in vivid and often dreamlike prose. These lush, hallucinatory sequences sometimes stunt the momentum of the central mystery, but McLaughlin gets it back for a violent climax. **VERDICT** This versatile debut is hard to pin down, successfully straddling the line between the evocative erudition of Gabriel Tallent's *My Absolute Darling* or Tom Franklin's *Poachers*, and the page-turning suspense of C.J. Box.

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