

Beer and Gasoline

John Knoerle

Blue Steel Press (Aug 1, 2017)

Softcover \$16.00 (298pp)

978-0-692-90829-7

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John Knoerle's engaging historical mystery *Beer and Gasoline* blends 1960s Cold War spying and western counterculture.

The novel bills itself as a collection of materials (letters, diary entries, notes, and telexes) that army intelligence officer Dick Nolan left behind after his death. Its central mystery is about what happened to a government trash collector, Jeremiah McLemore, whose body was found in the Mojave Desert under strange circumstances. Nolan is sent to investigate, but he soon discovers that all is not as it should be. Signs point to his boss being involved in a cover-up. Nolan discovers the conspiracy has more to do with government paranoia than with actual Russian spies.

The mystery is fun to work through, and its various collected elements are an engaging puzzle to put together. The text's styles mix well: there are newspaper pieces, notes from interviews with suspects, narrative diary entries, and more. Different voices come to the fore through these media, with Nolan's voice as the guiding hand and filter. The text's variety is attention grabbing, and each new clue is doled out in a believable fashion, often through dialogue. Pivotal scenes are sketched in more traditional ways.

Some characters are set at a distance. Nolan's interactions with his boss come through faxes and official letters that keep the boss's motives suitably mysterious. Other secondary characters include a trusty police officer sidekick, a wisecracking Native American, and a washed-up Russian spy; each adds texture to the novel, since each defies stereotypes and is built up with dreams beyond their life stations.

Language tends to be straightforward, but humor is a frequent addition. Nolan's tone is that of a dispassionate, cynical spy who's seen too much and understands more than he'd like to about how government operates, but something about McLemore's story really hooks him, and his curiosity is revived, setting him out to chase down leads and break into houses. The real menace is the government itself, at war with its own bureaucracy.

Huge sections of the book are set in dialogue, either written as transcripts or as contemporaneous notes. It is distracting, though, that each element of the book is printed in its own font and style, and typos add to this confusion.

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JEREMIAH ROOD (December 13, 2018)

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