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General

Billy Verit
Rick Harsch
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For those not already familiar with Rick Harsch, his new novel Billy Verité will be a surprising and pleasant discovery. The good guys are suitably bumbling yet resilient and determined; the bad guys are truly evil, and the dialogue is wonderfully self-conscious and funny. What the plot may lack in twist, the narrative more than makes up for in language, humor and a general craftiness that gives voice to the dead as well as the living.

As in his previous novel, The Driftless Zone, Billy Verité is set in La Crosse, Wis., where rival motorcycle gangs battle for supremacy. Lee Harvey Oswald look-alike and former physician Skunk Lane Forhension, an evil genius whose wit and observational acumen can inflict as profound a torture as his knife, has just arrived to take command of the B.A.D. motorcycle gang. Billy, local grotesque and failing private investigator, is hired to watch him. When Skunk enlists two corrupt cops in his power struggle, Billy, his friend Gerard and the curvaceous Lola find themselves at the top of Skunk's lengthy hit list. While Gerard attempts to take Skunk on directly, Billy and Lola hide on a wild and deserted island in the Mississippi. Together they must bear what they find most unbearable about each other and prepare for the final assault of Skunk and his henchmen.

War, sex, love, bluegills and Zeno's paradox all make it into this novel. A recent winner of the James Michener/Copernicus Society of America Award, Billy Verité can only be an indication of the creative work yet to come from Rick Harsch.

Paul Russell