



Blood Money

Stephen Russell

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Russell expertly interweaves his medical knowledge with suspense to start Mackie's series of books off with a resounding bang.

Blood Money, the thrilling debut mystery from Stephen Russell, plunges into an intriguing ride of murder, synthetic blood compounds, and shady practices of the military's top brass. Dr. Cooper "Mackie" McKay finds his plans for a quiet retirement shattered when he discovers the body of his ex-wife, Sarah, stuffed into his car with her veins full of H-BOC, the synthetic blood replacement they patented together. Convinced he has been framed, Mackie sets out to find the real killer, only to stumble on a cover-up more dangerous than he ever imagined.

Mackie and detective Libby Pham, with whom he teams up to solve the case, represent likable characters who are easy to root for. Refreshingly, they are both experts in their fields, so Mackie teaches Libby as much as she teaches him. Even better, Libby remains strong enough to be more than a love interest who needs saving. In fact, she and Mackie rescue one another equally. Their relationship grows subtly and slowly, almost unexpectedly, and it's a breath of fresh air to see an older Caucasian man develop a relationship with an Asian woman that doesn't exoticize Libby. Russell also fleshes out the secondary characters of the deceased ex-wife, her lover, and Mackie's best friend. What's more, Sarah and her adulterous partners are easy to sympathize with because, although they have wronged Mackie, they end up being caught in a conspiracy much larger than themselves.

This is a thinking reader's mystery; the novel explores hard-hitting themes as it entertains. The investigation into the military industrial complex and its dubious reasons for perpetuating war will strike a chord with anyone, no matter how they feel about the conflicts the country is engaged in. Moreover, the idea of a synthetic blood compound will intrigue the scientific minded. Russell presents a convincing case for why society could use such a compound, so that even readers uninitiated into science will wish that a safe version of the compound were widespread.

The plot moves along swiftly because the novel is composed of short chapters and short paragraphs, which ramp up momentum. The novel's many twists and turns make sense, with none being too far-fetched or outlandish.

Ironically, Russell's knowledge of medicine, while grounding the novel in reality, also becomes a weakness, as Mackie routinely uses complicated medical jargon and doesn't adequately translate it into layman's terms. The audience who can get beyond the technical lingo, however, will understand enough to enjoy this novel. This book will likely find its most devoted fans among those with some knowledge of or interest in the field of medicine.

JILL ALLEN (Spring 2014)

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