

Bullet in the Blue Sky

Bill Larkin

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A mysterious plot and compelling characterizations make this a roller coaster ride of gritty thrills.

There's no shortage of rough-and-tumble action in Bill Larkin's engrossing new thriller, *Bullet in the Blue Sky*. The action is propelled in large part by smart writing, well-developed characters, and a plot that has more twists and turns than a California freeway.

The book is set in Los Angeles in the hours and days following a catastrophic earthquake. Kevin Schmidt of the Orange County Sheriff's Department is assigned to a special team of LAPD officers with the sole mission of finding a missing detective named Gavin Shaw. The six-member team navigates a city where rule of law has completely broken down. As violent skirmishes with gang members and looters put the mission in jeopardy, team members begin questioning why locating Shaw is so important.

The thriller adeptly switches between the first-person narration of Schmidt, who provides grisly details of quake-ravaged streets and burgeoning crime, and the third-person narration of supporting characters like Kira Boyd, the head of the California Office of Emergency Services who has a deadly secret of her own and moves like a shadow between the upper echelons of state government. These parallel narratives are important to the book's success. Nicely paced and interwoven, they provide enough backstory to make the plot's major turning points credible. What begins as a disaster story morphs into an international thriller with surprising geopolitical dimensions.

That's not to say there are no missteps along the way. A no-holds-barred interrogation of a terrorist suspect in a Palm Springs mortuary plays out in contrived, farfetched fashion. This and other scenes reach for some macho credibility the book doesn't need. Likewise, certain passages indulge military terminology to a fault, clotting the narrative flow with clunky acronyms. A tense air strike in the California desert, for example, awkwardly toggles between explosive action on the ground and jargon-rich description of aircraft weapon systems. Balancing technical exposition with the lean clipping style of good action writing proves challenging as the plot races toward its conclusion.

Still, the writing and characterizations are strong enough to maintain suspense. Descriptions of a devastated, crime-ridden LA are thoroughly creepy. Larkin does a fine job imagining Southern California in a post-apocalyptic scenario. Fortunately, there's more to ponder in *Bullet in the Blue Sky* than utter destruction. The book becomes an interesting tale about police department loyalties and teamwork in the face of a common enemy. Who or what that enemy is fuels the book's mysterious plotline and its roller coaster ride of gritty thrills.

SCOTT NEUFFER (July 28, 2016)

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