

## California Fever

**John J. Jacobson**

Blackstone Publishing

(178pp)

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*California Fever is a classic, surfer-set whodunit in which all is revealed and made well.*

John J. Jacobson's funny, cozy mystery novel *California Fever* features surf culture and capers as a man gets entangled with oddballs during a harebrained summer scheme.

Dolphin, a Tranquility Beach surfer and community college student, is enchanted by Claudette, a brown-eyed beauty whose secret desire is to become a crime novelist. When he's short on cash and can't get his car out of a garage before their next date, he turns to his surfing buddies, the Dawgs, to help him rent out his Aunt Clemmie's Sandcastle home as a bed-and-breakfast while she's away.

But rival surfers don't like the plan, and the renters are unusual. They include a Texan-turned-sailor whose ambiguous caginess builds lighthearted suspense concerning his real aims. The eagerness with which the renters gather at the Sandcastle also raises flags that the Dawgs—in their excitement about their apparent success—fail to notice. This contributes to the high-spirited atmosphere, in which the audience knows more than the cast itself does.

Dolphin is an enthusiastic hero, and the surfers around him drop lingo and evince determination to act casual and be full of style. The book is narrated with good-natured humor, following as the Dawgs scramble to play the role of the impromptu inn's staff. Descriptions of their beach lifestyle and wave sets pair with surfing terms to create a thorough backdrop that dials up the silliness: the Dawgs are committed to their SoCal leisure, even while staging professional competence.

Dolphin's ease at roping people into his plans is endearing. His personality is upbeat, and he balances out high-strung Claudette, who, in quirky fashion, becomes an efficient butler at the inn. Miscues about how much they like each other also generate interest, as those around them contrive scenarios to help the hapless couple along. Meanwhile, threads about Aunt Clemmie, who is a formidable mystery novelist, fuel tension about her eventual return home—and her discovery of what has happened in her absence.

At times, though, the book's situations transform into overextended gags. The screwball comedy is at its sharpest when it focuses on the central cast. Elsewhere, a secondary story line about a group of rival surfers proves to be little more than a colorful detour, and a meandering tall tale that's intended to deal with the renters slackens the pace. Still, wit abounds, and the truth about people's real identities (and about what one person's off-page crime entailed) is a splendid nod to classic whodunits, in which all is revealed and made well.

*California Fever* is an entertaining comedic novel in which a surfer becomes an unlikely hero when he helps to capture a criminal.

KAREN RIGBY (September 7, 2022)

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