

Chasing the Devil's Breath

George R. Hopkins

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Jesuit priest Jack Bennis is an offbeat, nuanced, and sympathetic hero in this fast-paced and engaging mystery.

George R. Hopkins's *Chasing the Devil's Breath* is South American noir with a rapidly unfolding plot as two brothers stumble onto the source of a deadly street drug.

Bennis, a former military special operations officer, knows his way around tradecraft and weapons, though he is now a priest in Colombia. There, he finds himself mired in enough trouble to call on his brother, Tom, a retired New York City detective on his first private case. Bennis is looking for the brother of Maria, a woman he loves despite his religious vows.

The brothers are drawn into a deadly conspiracy involving "a unique genetically-altered drug some call the Devil's Breath," a combination of a hallucinogenic and an amnesiac. A rogue individual, El Apredido, wants to use the drug to collapse the world's economy.

Characterizations are straightforward, with nuanced good guys and thoroughly villainous bad guys. There is a brief backstory of how Bennis came to love Maria, though there's minimal information provided about Maria herself.

Tom is cop-typical, and while his wife accompanies him to South America, she proves to be only a sounding board. More clichéd is an orphan youngster who latches onto Bennis and becomes central to the plot. El Apredido is a bad guy straight out of central casting, while a fugitive, Russo, plays a small but critical part in the story.

Dialogue fits the genre. It moves the narrative along and subtly defines characters, with the exception of Russo's girlfriend, whose speech consists of cornpone clichés like "He's sharper than a pocketful of toothpicks." Occasionally, conversational bits are overstressed, with quick bursts of temper in speech. Casual character interactions sometimes become volatile and combative without adequate motivation.

Plotting is entirely believable, with an intriguing red herring and a delayed "gotcha" bringing the story to a logical close. Unique details are well used, as with adermatoglyphia, a genetic condition whereby a person is born without discernible fingerprints. To establish setting, there are nicely defined and pertinent references to jungle flora and fauna.

The text also excellently employs references to New York history, with the revolutionary-era Old Stone House mentioned. Well-researched references to pre-Columbian civilizations are also included.

Jesuit priest Jack Bennis is an offbeat, nuanced, and sympathetic hero in *Chasing the Devil's Breath*, a fast-paced and engaging mystery.

GARY PRESLEY (May 1, 2017)

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