

Crossing Clayborn

Robert Willis

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Crossing Clayborn is a delightful, old-school story of the settling of scores by an injured party, dressed up and decked out with mobsters, Cuban freedom fighters, rapacious robber barons, and other seedy and unsavory characters.

Clayborn Redmond, a forty-one-year-old real estate broker in Miami, desperately longs to savor the sweet taste of revenge. Author Robert Willis gives his lead character every chance he can to set aflame his burning desire to exact payback from a business partner who cheated him.

While there are muddy business scams and murky stings aplenty, there is also just enough PG-13 sex and violence to keep the story moving and the action rolling. Willis, a World War II veteran, has obviously seen and stored up a lot of ideas from more than eighty years of reading books and watching movies, and he puts them all to use in his debut novel. There are many scenes reminiscent of the trysts and get-even schemes of classic black-and-white films.

As good as Willis is at describing motivations for revenge and getting inside the head of his hero, he is even better at making his readers loathe his slimy, greedy target, Ewan Leetboer—a seedy, slobbering “robber of retirement” incomes for whom “there’s never too much money” as he admits to his gold-digger wife, Vanessa. Willis also makes readers understand why Clay (as the hero prefers to be called) desires Vanessa so much. Bedding her is an act of revenge and of lust, and perhaps even love, something that is not hard to understand when the woman possesses such beauty that it strikes one dumb “with the sudden force of a truck bomb.”

Crossing Clayborn is a fun read, a delightful guilty pleasure akin to watching an old B-movie detective saga from the 1940s. Willis is very good about keeping a pot boiling without either exhausting his credulity or leaving his audience feeling like they are reading another cookie-cutter get-even fantasy. Whether in a fancy shopping mall in Miami or in the spare oxygen-starved mountains of the Andes, Willis makes his characters seem like they belong there, and he does so effortlessly and without obvious artifice.

Willis does not go overboard in setting his scenes or in trying to sell his characters or their schemes. Clay’s Cuban friends, especially the wily, corrupt, yet jovial Silvio Alvarez, are especially lively and engaging, and if the hero’s lusty lover Vanessa seems at times too good to be true, well, that is intentional.

Though Willis is in his mid to late eighties, he has a style and grace and liveliness in his pen that contemporary authors half his age rarely demonstrate.

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (June 20, 2013)

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