

Dirt**Sean Doolittle**

Uglytown (June 2001)

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It's very rare for a first novel to be perfect; to have a great story, sparkling writing, interesting, layered characters, a carefully balanced and realized setting, a beautifully modulated pace, and not a single misstep. This first novel comes very close. The story begins with a funeral, which makes sense because this crime novel revolves around the funeral business. The main character, Quince Bishop, is attending the funeral of his close friend and former employer when a group of masked men crash the funeral waving road flares. The lead masked man proceeds to jump atop the copper coffin and rail on about how the funeral industry is stripping the rain forest of mahogany. Quince, not thinking about it, jumps into the melee and attacks the leader, catching the man's mask on a nose ring and scaring off the group.

So begins a spiraling bit of comic crime madness à la Elmore Leonard and Joseph Wambaugh. Shortly, Quince, a professional slacker with a trust fund, finds himself involved with a funeral rights activist, Maria Casteneda, while his ex-girlfriend, Melanie Roth, a reporter for the L.A. Times, attempts to dig up the real story behind the so-called terrorist attack. Throw in a funeral home director addicted to antidepressants who is running a dozen scams to raise money, a bumbling small-time crook, and a ruthless armed robber, and *Dirt* provides well-crafted entertainment.

Doolittle not only manages to balance the black humor with the sentiment, but his writing is colorful, crisp, and interesting. For example: "Quince wondered if the gods of wasted time were trying to tell him something. He was still looking at the photo when a nap sprang up and mauled him. He didn't attempt to defend himself." His sense of detail is wonderful as well, from a pocketknife Quince was given when he was six years old by his long-dead parents, to the crucifix Casteneda inherited from her grandmother. Like Elmore Leonard, Doolittle can write convincingly of low-lives, but his writing style isn't as idiosyncratic as Leonard's. Doolittle is a writer with a story to tell and the skills to tell it well—clearly a writer to watch.

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