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Mystery

Dixie Noir
Kirk Curnutt
Five Star
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Dixie Noir is a detective yarn that doesn't pull any punches, beginning in medias res of a cold-blooded murder somewhere in Montgomery, Alabama. Protagonist Ennis Skinner is a man with little to lose who is bent on "making amends" by any means necessary. The novel is populated by quick-fire dialogue, a liberal application of street nicknames, femme fatales, and seedy criminals, but it is Ennis's earnest search for redemption that elevates this gritty classic noir tale of sex and betrayal, murder and mayhem, to a believable journey of self-discovery. Behind it all lurks Montgomery, a city of stultifying heat and just-barely-repressed racial hatred.

Ennis is an ex-con returned to the city of his misspent youth with a laundry list of wrongs he intends to right. Yet the moment he gets out, both his criminal past and Montgomery's own slew of restless ghosts come calling, launching Ennis on a mission to find and save the mentally impaired teen daughter of a deceased lover. Through it all, he navigates a landscape of crooked politicians, two-faced friends, incestuous fathers, warped cops, thugs, and short order cooks-but most of all his own past of failure, addiction, and sex.

Each brilliant character distinguishes itself with a set of simmering passions and obsessions. Carrying their unique but always somewhat dangerous pasts close behind, this cast moves within a history-rich city that is flooded with its own ghosts. Perhaps Montgomery itself is the most important character in Dixie Noir-so fraught is it with memories of racial conflict and conflagration that it seems to infect its inhabitants, its politics, and even its sweltering climate.

Curnutt deftly produces the distinct language of the noir; his characters run the gamut from Raymond Chandleresque femme fatales to urban-hip meth dealers. An F. Scott Fitzgerald devotee, Curnutt infused the character of Red with a liberal dose of Zelda Fitzgerald. Each character has a way with words that borders at times on the campy, but Curnutt avoids that territory with believable emotions and motives for his characters.

Curnutt's first book, Breathing Out the Ghost, received critical acclaim and won the 2008 Best Books of Indiana Award for Fiction. Readers who aren't squeamish about sex, violence, and drug use will find Dixie Noir to be a quick, gritty read. (November) Leia Menlove