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General

Eight Dogs Named Jack: And Fourteen Other Stories From The Detroit Streets And Michigan Wilderness

Joe Borri
Joe Borri, illustrator
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They may go by handles like Carmine "Sausages" Burmanzini or "Black Jack" Talerico and live in places called Copper Corner or Starvation Lake; but no matter what name they answer to or where they hang their hats, the characters in Borri's graphic, atmospheric debut collection of noir short stories personify Detroit's gritty urban enclaves or Michigan's isolated forests.

Their hometown is a badge of honor they wear, one they proudly display should they be forced off the road by a misogynistic drunk in the tony suburb of Grosse Pointe, as in "Twin Pines Savior," or backed up against the wall during an escalating confrontation with a tyrannical bully deep in the state's northern woods, as in "I'm from Detroit." Physical threats and character aspersions mean little to Borri's proud protagonists beyond the opportunities they provide for flexing a little muscle and throwing a little body English into even the most benign situations. In "The Raccoon Killer," just making a sandwich can become a sinister operation:

> *Nero started laughing—a building, resonating, out-of-place laugh holding all the warmth of a bucket of dead eels. He produced a wicked folding knife that extended to a foot in length. Upon further inspection, Frank noted it was actually a folding saw, the kind hunters use to cut small limbs that obscure their shooting lanes. Nero attacked the loaf of hard bread with the skill of a sushi chef.*

In this example, one also glimpses Borri's nimble blending of city and country that resonates throughout a collection where each haunting location provides a gripping backdrop for the dominant theme of innocence-versus-intimidation. Stark, severe, surreal, Borri's own

powerful black-and-white illustrations furnish the perfect accompaniment for the menacingly taut current of tension running through each story.

The son of an Italian-American Detroit policeman and member-by-marriage of a large Sicilian-American family, Borri once freelanced as an illustrator for Detroit's two daily newspapers. He soon realized that the stories his relatives told around the Sunday supper table were not only escapist entertainment for a young boy growing up during the turbulent 1960s and '70s—they could do the same for anyone who worshipped *The Godfather* or revered Mickey Spillane.

Consistency is a hard standard to master when writing a collection of short stories, and though Borri sometimes relies too heavily on a recurring cast of characters, mostly young men named Nick who are all seemingly interrelated, he emphatically succeeds in providing the reader with an armchair journey through Michigan, perhaps guided by a man named Guido who not only knows the best place for cannolis, but also where the crappies are biting.

Carol Haggas