ForeWord Reviews

Fiddle Game

Richard A. Thompson Poisoned Pen Press 978-1-59058-455-2 (Jan 15, 2008)

Music is written in layers—bass, baritone, alto, and soprano—one upon the other. Like music, author Richard A. Thompson has layered beautiful language, charismatic characters, and witty dialogue to create a symphony of a mystery.

Herman Jackson is a bail bondsman in St. Paul, not because he wants to be a bail bondsman but because it's the best he can do after losing his shirt as a bookie with a gambling problem. Amy Cox appears to be a young, innocent musician relinquishing the ownership of a centuries old, priceless violin as bond for her repeat-offender brother. Within minutes, Amy Cox is brutally murdered and it's clear to Jackson that this was no common transaction, but the beginning of an elaborate con game, a genuine *fiddle* game, and he's one of the main players. Jackson's search for answers takes him on the road and on the run from the police, a killer, and a band of Gypsies.

Fiddle Game is told from Jackson's point of view with his tough-guy colorful and succinct language.

The characters are the highlight of the story, quirky yet believable, starting with Jackson himself. "I grew up in a neighborhood where people thought *The Godfather* was a sitcom," the character says. "Becoming a bondsman was a way of graduating, not running away, from my own violent past." Helping Jackson in his quest is sharp-tongued, quick-witted Angie, his own PA Friday. There's also Wide Track Willie, the 300-plus-pound local pool hustler and bounty hunter; Prophet, the enlightened homeless man; and Rosie, the diner waitress cum arms dealer who wields her own products a little too well.

Author Thompson is himself a unique character. Though *Fiddle Game* is his first novel, he recently retired from a forty-five-year career in construction. He's a building official and professional engineer who's worked as a carpenter, a short-order cook, an apprentice surveyor, a folksinger, a part-time maker of stringed instruments, a member of the U.S. Coast Guard, and a boat builder.

These years of diverse experience shine clearly in the informative yet appropriate details interspersed throughout the book. *Fiddle Game*'s plot, while sometimes stalling and other times spinning on its tail, finds redemption in the end.

Thompson's debut novel offers much more than a foregone conclusion: the spin become a trilling flourish; the long notes, the climactic finale of a virtuoso.