



Fragile Brilliance

Eliot Parker

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Parker renders his action scenes with visceral aplomb in a neo-noir thriller with a twist.

Eliot Parker's crime novel, *Fragile Brilliance*, is as addictive as the street drug "krok" that his hardened cop protagonist tracks down like a bloodhound. Parker delivers complex characters and a riveting whodunit plot.

Ronan McCullough is a smart, tough, sometimes ruthless police sergeant working undercover and patrolling the streets of Charleston, West Virginia. When he tries to break up a fight outside a bar, he's beaten senseless by two thugs. After recovering, at least partially, McCullough begins investigating the incident and, by doing so, becomes slowly enmeshed in the cruel machinations of an ambitious drug cartel that threatens to destroy the city of Charleston and everyone he loves. One more thing about McCullough: he's gay and in a committed relationship with a handsome ER nurse named Ty Andino.

This last detail is important to the plot and adds complexity to Parker's characters. In trying to keep their relationship private, McCullough and Andino find themselves pitted not only against organized crime, but also against the bigotry of colleagues and family members. Scenes involving McCullough's homophobic sister are especially devastating. "He doesn't know what love is, so he thinks this is love," she snaps at the two men during a tense fight. "This isn't love. It's something sick and unnatural." Parker makes McCullough's sexuality more than a simple attribute of his character. It becomes a source of conflict as McCullough confronts the backward attitudes of the people he serves and protects.

Some of the plot twists strain credulity. For instance, it's not clear why a new crew leader of the drug ring targets Andino in the book's third act. The character's motivation seems to serve the plot more than anything else, a gimmick to make the inevitable duel between the bad guy and McCullough more personal than it already is.

This minor criticism is not to say the book's ending isn't thrilling—it is. Whatever the contrivances to get there, Parker renders his action scenes with visceral aplomb: "Bright red castoff streaked the cabin floor as the man circled his late associate—the knife still held firmly in his meaty hand."

Fragile Brilliance is a gritty crime thriller with an added dimension of serious social commentary. Part of a series, the novel will leave fans of police procedurals, not to mention neo-noir, wanting more.

SCOTT NEUFFER (December 9, 2015)

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