ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

SHORT STORIES

Hard Water Blues
Robert Wangard
Ampersand, Inc.
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Five Stars (out of Five)

What does one do when a long lost army buddy begins telling stories that can't possibly be true; like how he played guitar with Roy Orbison, who would have been four years dead at the time? Or how he killed Fats Domino, who is, at the time of the telling, still alive. What should one do when he notes how the hole in the ice outside of your isolated cabin looks like a grave and speculates about how long it would take a body to rise to the surface? The menace in his remarks is so slyly interwoven, the reveal so clever that the reader will gasp with surprise. Shirley Jackson move aside.

Jackson isn't the only homage in this collection of twelve stories, *Hard Water Blues*. Robert Wangard also gives a nod to the self-deprecating antiheroes of Raymond Chandler, the good-hearted but hapless heroes of O. Henry, and the wise narrators of Daphne du Maurier.

Wangard's stories explore the dilemma of ordinary people who are looking the other way while something sinister insinuates itself into their lives. In "Cash Affair," a police detective is called away from a tryst at a motel to investigate the murder of his bedmate's husband. In "Fly Like a Bird," a trusted and tragically disabled friend turns out to be a sociopath. In "Dominic's Art," a private investigator solves a crime, only to discover that his client is the criminal.

"The Night They Closed Baker's Bar," a tender mix of du Maurier and Raymond Chandler, begins this way: "…long after my marriage had ceased bumping along the bottom and had finally hit the Big Snag, I was in Baker's Bar again." The protagonist is preoccupied with his own ego and the charms of the woman he is trying to pick up. And he is annoyed by the unwelcome attentions of a neighbor who distracts him from his goal and, in the process, saves his life.

Wangard is the author of *Target*, a well-received debut mystery featuring Pete Thorsen, a retired attorney who "just got sick of calibrating his life into six-minute billable hour segments." Thorsen appears in a number of the stories in *Hard Water Blues. Hard Water Blues* ends with a

teaser of the next Thorsen mystery, *Malice.*

The short story has become a vehicle for artful angst and serious introspection. But Wangard's stories recall the tales of another era—the kind a reader might expect to find in the pages of Ellery Queen Mystery Magazines. The surprises in *Hard Water Blues* won't produce dread, but they will make you smile. The heroes are everyman characters, and the villains believe that Elvis still waits for take-out behind the Winn-Dixie and that, even though Fats was reaching for a voodoo doll, not a gun, "there's a lot more to voodoo than people want to believe…I was damn lucky to get my shot in first."

Marilyn Berry