



Negative Buoyancy

Richard Burkhart

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Toxic dumping, diving, and death collide in the gripping thriller *Negative Buoyancy* from Richard Burkhart. The fast pace and enthralling descriptions of underwater terrain make for an exciting tale when an environmental reformer is faced with the wanton industrial exploitation of nature's bounty.

Biologist Jack Burrows works for McAlpine County's Department of Natural Resources. Part of his job is examining shoreline and field conditions, and his latest assignment is to inspect the isolated Wounded Horse Lake. Jack enlists his good friend Hank to tag along, much to his later regret; an underwater accident leads to Hank's death.

Jack tries to come to terms with his friend's untimely demise by figuring out whether or not Hank's death was preventable. It turns out there's more lurking beneath the glistening surface of the lake than meets the eye. When Jack discovers a toxic underwater dump, exterior forces work to convince him to perpetuate a slimy cover-up.

Jack has some tough decisions to make as the story progresses. Will he bravely expose the toxic cover-up, or will he fall to the temptation of letting the story slide for personal gain? There's a pretty good possibility that yes, there is major toxic dumping going on at Wounded Horse Lake, and the author deftly explores the various external forces at play on Jack's psyche.

This is both an environmental thriller and a portrait of an ordinary guy being tested with extraordinary circumstances. Secondary characters are all neatly rendered as well, offering precise case studies of men and women getting through life in a sleepy mountain town. Carefully placed clues throughout the novel provide both Jack and the readers the ammunition necessary to figure out whodunnit, yet each new twist easily appears to be the last stop for Jack.

This environmental thriller is written with experience; though it is Burkhart's debut piece of fiction, the author is a chemist by trade, and he draws upon thirty years of experience as an open-water scuba diver to create a convincing storyline sure to hook fellow scuba divers. Terms like "temperature inversion" and "decompression" pepper the book, and even the title is both a scientific term and a diving reference. Scuba enthusiasts will be impressed by scenes filled with Jack checking his PSI and depth gauges, though happily the terminology is not so technical that non-divers can't still follow the storyline with ease.

Playing with themes like biological disasters and corporate greed, *Negative Buoyancy* ably joins a growing subgenre of thrillers. Though the disaster here is local, it has the ability to wreck the lives of everyone in its path. Professional and amateur scientists with a drive to protect the planet will enjoy this environmental Cassandra.

BARBARA NICKLES (October 11, 2016)

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