



Past the Line

E. T. Milligan

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Already a published poet biographer and YA author Milligan has only recently turned his skills to novels for adults. *Past the Line* is his first effort in the suspense/mystery category but his previous experience in captivating an audience serves him well in this initial book starring Blake Cutter. With earlier works including the “inspirational biography” *On Linda: The Case for Human Organ Sharing* Milligan clearly demonstrated how to draw audiences in with affecting portrayals of controversial subjects.

Again Milligan faces a wrenching topic head-on with *Past the Line*. When police detective Blake Cutter’s wife dies in a car bomb meant for him Cutter becomes a morose alcoholic.

Then he begins to investigate the drowning of a local real estate magnate in a small Georgia town. Strangely enough one of the women implicated in this web of homicide and lies closely resembles Cutter’s dead wife. Cutter pursues the woman Penney. His attraction to her jeopardizes his investigation and threatens to take him past the titular line from duty into the murky realms of obsession.

Milligan’s novel starts strongly with Cutter’s wife’s senseless death. Perspectives and focuses switch for the next few chapters with rough distracting effect. However readers absorbed in Cutter’s pain and pursuit of justice careen through Milligan’s early awkward patches to reach the smoothly paced compelling bulk of the book.

Milligan conjures up Cutter’s perspective right before readers’ eyes. In this excerpt the detective tries to rescue his wife. “Peering through the window [of the burning car] he began jerking at the driver’s side door handle. ...Then he heard a faint scream. ‘JENNIE!’ he screamed back in desperation. ...He tugged at the door in an attempt to pry it open oblivious to the scorching metal charring away the skin on his palms.” Vivid scenes such as this one compensate for some stylistic awkwardness.

Overall *Past the Line* boasts interesting writing and a well-constructed plot. Besides the engaging point of view the book’s strengths include tight pacing and sympathetic characterization of all players. Though the slimy dead real estate mogul and his conniving estranged wife may be rather stereotyped Milligan’s detailed treatment gives them a bit more richness.

Past the Line’s weaknesses are small compared to the book’s general strengths. Poor use of punctuation and capitalization plagues many pages. Furthermore the long descriptions of characters’ outfits interrupt the flow of the story.

The fact remains that *Past the Line* is an unqualified success for lovers of mystery thrillers police procedurals and flawed but heroic African-American characters. Readers who enjoy *Past the Line* may like to know that the book is the first in a series starring Detective Cutter.

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