

Payback: Tales of Love, Hate and Revenge

Steve Bassett

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Steve Bassett's *Payback* is a haunting mystery novel about love, hate, and revenge.

Living in blue collar, 1940s New Jersey and working along the Passaic River are two hard-nosed police detectives, Nick Cisco and Kevin McClosky. When two mutilated corpses are fished out of the river, and the detached arm of a third victim is found in the garbage, they are on the case. They learn that all three victims belonged to the German-American Bund, a pro-Nazi movement situated in the US before the country's entrance into WWII.

Then, Cisco is dragged into another gruesome case involving a child. A priest tells Cisco that the child was an orphan and was set to be adopted by a controversial magnate, M. L. Kraus. Kraus, much like the three dead men, has a connection to the Nazi regime: he helped to manufacture Zkylon B.

As much a sociological examination as it is a murder mystery, the novel follows Cisco and McClosky as they walk the mean streets of Newark and other industrial towns along the Passaic River. Their perambulations bring focus to divided, tension-filled New Jersey in the immediate aftermath of the war. While thousands of families mourn the loss of their sons on the battlefields of Europe and Asia, and while those who survived the war try to reclaim their jobs, Cisco and McClosky encounter situations rife with racial agitation. The moral issues associated with pursuing justice for dead Nazis are invoked within the otherwise straightforward police procedural.

Though it is the second volume of a trilogy, the novel functions well as a standalone. Its crimes are original, and it places enough focus and attention on Cisco and McClosky to equip audiences new to the series to understand them well. Every chapter includes important details regarding the triple homicide. And though the novel's beginning, which focuses on details not important to the central story, drags, the book concludes on a high note, with one solved case and a strong indication that more is in store for detectives Cisco and McClosky. Still, not all of this novel's villains face the extreme justice that audiences may crave.

With instances of hatred, violence, and vengeance, *Payback* is a classically styled detective novel that contains messages about healing, even the healing of wounds that are open and wide.

BENJAMIN WELTON (June 25, 2020)

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