



Payback

Ronald S. Barak

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Ronald S. Barak's latest Brooks/Lotello thriller, *Payback*, is a whodunit that takes place at the Thriller Jubilee, a mystery writers' conference on a Spanish island.

Cyrus Brooks, a retired federal court judge, and Frank Lotello, a homicide investigator from Washington, DC, originally arrive on Punta Maya for vacation with their wives. Cyrus is also attending the Thriller Jubilee, hoping to get pointers and make connections in the publishing world.

The men's relaxing vacations turn bloody, though. Four people, three of them publishing bigwigs, go missing, and Cyrus and Frank join in the fray, hoping to protect TITO (The International Thrillers Organization) and save the other attendees from a similar fate.

Themes regarding moral failings are invoked time and again, especially as TITO is shamed for deciding to keep everything quiet out of a desire to protect their reputation. The college admissions scandal and Larry Nassar are invoked in similar terms; the book's sense of America's weakening moral fabric is pervasive and didactic. However, the book's peeks inside the world of publishing are insightful and informative, full of clues for other would-be writers.

Among the cast, Cyrus proves insufferable. His language is highfalutin as he blusters about the importance of civility and bemoans declines in morality. Conversely, an amoral legal thriller novelist, Jonathan Connor, is an excellent foil for always-upstanding Cyrus and Frank.

The central mystery keeps the audience guessing thanks to a solid cast of potential killers. When the killer is finally revealed, it is a pleasant and satisfying shock. Despite a deus ex machina moment with a kidnapped person's escape, the conclusion is neat and nice, leaving the good guys standing tall.

Payback is an excellent murder mystery made colorful by its publishing industry insider cast.

BENJAMIN WELTON (March / April 2020)

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