



## Red Stick One

**Kenneth Kirkeby**

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*Colloquial dialogue and adroit description provide a vivid sense of the physical world this fascinating character inhabits.*

Kenneth Kirkeby's richly descriptive, character-driven novel, *Red Stick One*, follows three periods of protagonist Virgil Cleary's life: his boyhood in the late 1950s and early 1960s where he obtains a mentor; his experiences as a soldier in Vietnam; and his postwar life as a twenty-six-year-old Florida fish and game officer who has slipped beyond the bounds of his job to pursue his mentor's murderer.

Virgil is biracial, with a Caucasian mother and a father from a Floridian tribe called the Creeks, colloquially known as Red Sticks. Because he was raised by his white grandmother and never knew his parents, Virgil's mixed heritage is referred to in nuanced yet frank ways. When Virgil's mentor, fish and game officer Tom Jay Harding, first meets Virgil's grandmother, she says, "Virgil's a family name, my grandfather. The boy didn't need no Indian last name. Ah'm raising him Catholic as he is." The grandmother's flippant racism regarding Virgil's last name sets the stage for more racially charged epithets that Virgil hears on his quest for the killer, as various enemies mistake him for either American Indian or Latino. Thus, Virgil's biracial status is intrinsic to who he is, though he is not defined by it.

The grandmother's dialogue also illustrates the masterful way in which Kirkeby captures the phonetic subtleties of the Southern accent. Most of the dialogue is plainspoken and minimalist. Although all characters speak in a laconic manner with similar accents, the author is nonetheless able to convey their differences in personality through adept word choice.

Kirkeby not only adroitly uses dialogue; he also crafts evocative descriptions to offer a vivid sense of the physical world Virgil inhabits: "Most of the long lake now held the sun. Beyond the lake the yellow plain of saw grass ran out to palm islands for miles before the sugarcane country. It was like looking at an inland sea."

The author effortlessly integrates the scenes of Virgil's childhood and postwar years into a compelling story. However, the strand regarding Virgil's war experiences feels shoehorned into the narrative. The author writes these war scenes using slang and lingo specific to the military and the Vietnam War without defining the terms for the uninitiated. For example, he talks about "columns," and it takes a while to discern that this column refers to a group of soldiers instead of a column of steam. Additionally, soldiers yell Vietnamese phrases that the author does not translate into English. Because they offer inadequate context for laypeople, the Vietnam segments break the flow of the plot.

Also, minimal description of Harding's murderer and the killer's motivations prior to the showdown with Virgil fails to give the book's climax the urgency and suspense that it should. Earlier mentions of the killer would make the bad guy seem like a well-thought-out part of the story instead of a plot device used simply because the protagonist needs an enemy.

There is enough rich material here that Virgil's struggle with identity and coming of age could have come together in

two well-developed plot threads to make a fascinating story. One wishes, though, that the Vietnam sections and Virgil's foe were as deep as the protagonist's struggle to navigate through the world. However, at its core, Kirkeby's *Red Stick One* is a gem of a novel.

JILL ALLEN (February 17, 2014)

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