

Red Stick Two

Kenneth Kirkeby

Sharp Printing

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Red Stick Two is an appealing modern adventure that idealizes honor.

Kenneth Kirkeby's *Red Stick Two* is a gripping, action-rich novel about a CIA rescue mission that explores the nature of honor between heroes.

Virgil is a Wyoming cattle rancher and a former marine with recon experience in Vietnam. His biggest struggles are taking care of his family, dealing with faltering cattle futures, and protecting his livestock from predators. When life is at its toughest for Virgil, an old friend from the CIA reaches out to him with a covert job offer: to help an ops team retrieve a kidnapped American engineer from the rebelling Senderistas in Peru. The payment will help Virgil's family, but it could also end up costing him his life.

Red Stick Two gracefully straddles two genres. It starts as a Western and then shifts gears to become a military thriller. The switch works well as the novel stays centered on the theme that unites these genres—the respect among honorable equals.

This theme is clearest in the engaging and well-drawn characters. While Virgil is the strong, silent type, he is not necessarily the master of his world. He takes the rescue job because his ranch is faltering. Later, he admits to failing a tracking mission before. These faults humanize his character and make him more believable. They also create tension in some scenes where it isn't clear whether Virgil will succeed at his task.

Characterizations are also brought to life with jaunty, but realistic dialogue. This is clearest in exchanges between Virgil and Agent Creole, a Bronx-born ops agent tasked with rescuing the engineer. Whether they are planning their next step or disagreeing over the next move in their mission, the two men have an easy-going banter, barbed every now and then with jabs and humor, but clearly illustrating a quick friendship based on a life spent in the military.

Kirkeby's writing style is engaging and descriptive. The story opens as a mountain lion viciously attacks a cow and her calf. This mix of visceral detail and gut-wrenching action is consistent throughout the novel, creating a momentum that brings to vivid life Virgil and Creole's fight against the Senderistas in the Peruvian mountains.

The novel is incredibly well-paced. Whether the characters are hunting a rogue mountain lion or chasing kidnappers through the South American mountains, the plot points of the story tick off in an even, yet engaging way.

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KATERIE PRIOR (May 1, 2017)

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