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Roadhouse Blues

Baron R. Birtcher
Durban House Publishing (November 2000)
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In 1983 a boy is initiated into a cult. In 1970 a young woman named Kelsey has a sexual encounter with Jim Morrison of The Doors.

In the present, where this novel really begins, ex-L.A. homicide detective Mike Travis, “caffeine-free superhero for a new millennium,” is called by his ex-partner to view a body. From his yacht on Avalon, a city on Catalina Island, Travis flies to L.A. to be drafted into a homicide investigation. Before he retired he had been working a series of murders that seemed related. Now, one more body has turned up, and they want Mike to finish the case.

The murders involve a single stab wound to the heart, deep knife wounds to the back of the left hand, and either poetry or artwork that is only starting to seem related. Otherwise the victims seem to have nothing in common. Reluctantly Mike agrees to sign on as a consultant.

If it weren’t for Mike Travis’s charm, the easy confidence of the writer’s style, and the peculiar connection to the music of The Doors, this would be just another run-of-the-mill serial killer book in a genre overstuffed with them. Mike Travis, though, is pleasant company. Born to an ultra-wealthy family, rebelling by becoming a cop, then retiring to the family estate and yacht, all Mike really wants to do is hang out in a local bar, live on his yacht, and take out the occasional fishing charter.

His return to the policeman’s life unsettles him—old nightmares resurface.

Following a chain of realistic and well-researched forensic detail, Travis and his ex-partner, Hans Yamaguchi, track down the killer. The connections to Jim Morrison are intriguing, the police procedural aspects seem right on target, and the pace and style of the novel is just fine.

The biggest stretch of credibility is that the killer’s next and final target is someone connected to Mike. It’s a lapse in an otherwise well-structured novel.

Despite drawbacks, Roadhouse Blues is enjoyable entertainment.

Although Mike’s name, Travis, echoes John D. MacDonald’s classic series sleuth, Travis McGee (who also lived on a boat), Birtcher isn’t quite in MacDonald’s league. If, on the other hand, readers want a mystery/suspense novel with links to classic rock history and mythology, this novel is a good choice.

MARK TERRY (September / October 2000)

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