

## South of Good

**Randall Reneau**

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*This intelligent, well-written drug thriller is also wickedly funny.*

Texas sheriff Hardin Steel becomes ensnared in a violent drug feud along the US-Mexican border in Randall Reneau's suspense-and-action-crammed *South of Good*.

When Steel's longtime friend, now a drug runner, kills three of Mexican cartel leader Frederick Ochoa's men, he sets in motion a deadly chain of events. Ochoa wants revenge. Ultimately, the conflict deepens to involve kidnapping, Russian henchmen, and plenty of bloody, testosterone-drenched mayhem that takes characters to the United States, Mexico, Cuba, and the Cayman Islands.

*South of Good* isn't a "chick" book. While there are a few female characters, including Steel's sharp-witted girlfriend, men are at the forefront. They smoke Cuban cigars, toss back good tequila, covertly crisscross international waters in muscle boats and off-the-radar seaplanes, sell drugs, try to bring down drug sellers, draw funds from offshore accounts, and pack a wide assortment of powerful weapons designed to snuff out the other side. There are subterranean torture rooms, topless women, and dockside shoot-outs.

One of the book's strengths is its scene setting. Reneau, who lives in Texas, does an outstanding job of placing characters in out-of-the-way restaurants in the United States and south of the border, where they savor interesting regional fare. Characters also deftly navigate US and international waters, airspace, and mainland and island terrain. When not in his sheriff's uniform, Steel dons an Aggies ball cap.

The interactions between Steel's local sheriff's office, international law enforcement, the US Drug Enforcement Administration, and those doing the drug trafficking are presented in well-researched, authentic detail.

*South of Good* is also wickedly funny. The wit flies fast and unpredictably, and is well incorporated so that humorous dialogue doesn't grow tedious or stale. "Buck and I caught some nice reds up the bay, before we were nearly run down by Suck My Wake," Steel tells the owner of a local marina. The conversation continues, "Rick laughed. 'No shit, that was the boat's name?' I smiled and shook my head. 'No, that's from an old John Candy movie. This boat was named HavanaNiceDay.'"

The cast of characters is small enough and characters are distinct enough in their identities, with clear demarcations between US and international players, that it's easy to keep track of who's who. The transitions between chapters told from Steel's first-person viewpoint, and those told from the third-person viewpoints of other characters, are smooth.

The plot clips along quickly and frequent and surprising changes in course keep it from becoming predictable. However, there are some plot elements that come up and then are quickly dismissed. Incorporating these more deeply into the plot would have improved the overall story. More drama could have been tied, for instance, to a hurricane that threatens the town in which Steel lives.

Additionally, some minor plot details, such as descriptions of characters deciding what to wear, eat, and drink, become repetitive by the end. So, too, are the book's repeated descriptions of airplane takeoffs and landings.

*South of Good* is an intelligent, well-written drug thriller. It will appeal to those who like big guns, sun-drenched women, and a healthy twist of mirth.

KARYN SAEMANN (October 29, 2014)

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