

Tennessee Tremors

Jan Smolders

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Companies and corporate misdeeds become the main characters in this novel of mystery and scandal.

These days, many people almost expect corporations to cut corners and fudge data, but, thankfully, it still remains shocking when a business becomes involved in a missing persons case. Jan Smolders, who has experience running construction ventures, brings his knowledge to the table in *Tennessee Tremors*.

When Troy Mattingly of Dyersburg, Tennessee, disappears after becoming construction manager for a project sponsored by a Belgian outfit called Perfect Spring, everyone in the small town gets involved in the case: Troy's colleagues, Chamber of Commerce head Barbara Cummings, police detective Jack Beasley, and even a shady staffer from Perfect Spring named Alex Follon.

Smolders goes behind the scenes of the construction project, examining the greed and manipulation shrouding the truth. His omniscient narrator should help explain the major players' motivations; however, the only relatable character is Alex. And Alex, with his arrogance and objectification of Barbara and Janice, is odious, until a realization partway through the book puts him on the road to redemption, though he remains slimy. While he thinks he is suave and subtle, other characters, male and female, constantly think of him as a "creep."

Sometimes Barbara and Janice use revealing outfits or poses as a ploy to get information from Alex, even as they bemoan his behavior. For Janice, using her feminine wiles makes sense at the outset, because Smolders paints her as a bored housewife who longs for male attention when Troy is away on business. Barbara, however, represents a professional career woman with her sights on the mayor's office. It is hard to believe that such a smart woman cannot come up with a better plan than showing skin to extract information from Alex. Janice never stops simpering, but her mental fortitude waxes and wanes as the plot requires. With lines like Troy's lover Susan thinking, "I must wear something perky for my hunk," the women seem more suited to 1950 than 2014.

Jack's highly unprofessional detective work also smacks of a bygone era: yelling at suspects, including scared children, without lawyers present; having Barbara question people for him; and using Janice's sorrow to extort a confession. He comes across as a bumbling Barney Fife instead of the good guy. Little consistent information is known about Troy, and certainly not enough for people to care about him as a vanished person. Generally, one knows for certain what cars the characters drive and how they take their drinks—but less about their personalities.

Any thrills or mystery remain hidden under confusing dialogue about corporate minutiae and unattributed italicized thoughts. Inadequate foreshadowing also occurs, as at least three characters pop out at the last minute, and a romance is thrown in. Ultimately, companies and corporate misdeeds become the actual main characters in this novel. Anyone who enjoys traditional private eye stories and tales in which Big Business gets cut down to size may like *Tennessee Tremors*.

JILL ALLEN (May 1, 2014)

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