

Tequila Sunset

Sam Hawken

Serpent's Tail (Jun 10, 2014)

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The Texas-Mexico border makes for a thrilling, violent setting for this gritty novel of drug cartels, police dedication, and family.

If you live in the American Southwest, newspapers assault you with drug-war statistics. In other parts of the country, such news is buried on page 4. In either case, many readers suffer from compassion fatigue and guiltily slide their eyes away. Sam Hawken has this to say about the setting for his latest novel, *Tequila Sunset*: "The city of El Paso, Texas, is the safest city in the United States. Across the border in Mexico, Ciudad Juarez is one of the most violent cities in the world, with over 7,500 killed since 2006." Hawken takes this dangerous landscape and wraps it around his characters in such a way that the audience is compelled to keep reading.

While in some ways the towns could not be more different, where it concerns the drug trade and gang violence, El Paso and Ciudad Juarez are frighteningly the same. The cartels are cross-border operations. Guns are shipped south in exchange for the drugs that are shipped north.

Cristina and Bob, members of the Gang Unit within the El Paso Police Department, and Matias, a member of the Mexican police force, share the same goal: to break up the Azteca gang. Felipe ("Flip") is taken under protection by the Azteca gang while in prison. Once he is released, José Martinez, an Azteca gang leader, offers him a job. The pervasive power and violence of the gang has made it nearly impossible for anyone to stand up to it. But Flip's mother has instilled in him a strong sense of right and wrong, and he finds himself a member of the gang as well as an informer for the police.

The story is told through short chapters alternating between the points of view of the main characters. This gives the book a choppy quality that keeps with the jittery tone of the plot. The writing style is as simple and taut as that of hard-boiled detective fiction. As the various players converge on a plan to bust José Martinez and his gang, the tension builds. Amidst the violence, the characters struggle to lead normal lives. Normal is not possible for these characters, especially on the Mexican side of the border, where dead bodies in the streets are not even reported.

Tequila Sunset is Hawken's second book set on the Texas-Mexico border and was nominated for the Crime Writers Association Gold Dagger for best crime novel of the year.

KAREN MULVAHILL (Fall 2014)

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