



The Crackerjacks

Mike Dupont

FriesenPress (Dec 7, 2015)

Softcover

978-1-4602-6185-9

This complex story is full of looming moral questions and interesting plot twists.

The Crackerjacks is an engrossing page-turner by mine operator, maritime enthusiast, and photographer Mike Dupont. The novel deftly illustrates how one questionable decision can lead to much future trouble.

Having witnessed the grisly deaths of fellow miners years ago, Canadian mining supervisor Joe wants to shield his son and nephew from similar fates. His hope is that they can all retire from their dangerous work soon. But when the boss withholds the workers' deserved bonuses, the men decide to keep a secret from their employer: they've discovered a vein of gold. How can they process the metal into viable riches? Each step requires trusting that yet another person will conceal the scheme from the law. As their plan grows, everyone involved wants a cut of the shiny stuff. Nicknamed "the Crackerjacks" because of their legendary mining ability, Joe, Rod, and Simon begin to question whether concealing the mineral was a crackerjack idea after all.

The plot expands to include accidents, double-crosses, and dealings with career felons. Dupont offers a hard-hitting look at how one morally dubious decision can fast lead to another, and how quickly things spiral out of control. Yet the circumstances of *The Crackerjacks*, even when protagonists are engaged in illegal behavior, are morally complex.

Joe's iffy choices spring from the desire to protect his loved ones, which is universally sympathetic. The story avoids easy stereotypes: not all of the everymen are worth rooting for, just as not all of the power-brokers are sleazy. Unexpected characters have surprising nuances and complicated changes of heart. Strong characterization and storytelling choices help punctuate such ambiguities.

The prologue plunges into the day-to-day experiences of beleaguered miners. With economy of phrase, Dupont expertly conveys the graphic nature of a death scene without being voyeuristic. "A ragged piece of clothing drapes over a steel rail. A fragmented bone lies beneath it." Joe's first-person, present-tense narration adds a visceral immediacy to this scene. New perspectives are added in later scenes, and the chapters are certain to keep audiences guessing.

When it is concerned with mining, photography, and boating, the story excels, with Dupont weaving in his expert knowledge. Still, more clarification around technical mining terms could prove helpful to the uninitiated.

The plot unravels some near the end, with the overseas abduction of a seemingly minor character. This transition, from theft caper to far-flung thriller, is a clunky addition in an otherwise intriguing story. Last pages almost seem to belong to a different book and a different genre. Still, prior to this jarring change, there is much in the book to intrigue and captivate.

The Crackerjacks is a complex story full of looming moral questions and interesting plot twists, certain to engage those interested in dramatic encounters with issues of right and wrong.

JILL ALLEN (January 14, 2016)

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