



The Fix

Robert Downs

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The Fix is a short but powerful book with the force of a right hook or a squeezed-off bullet.

Robert Downs's *The Fix* is a breakneck noir thrill ride wherein the booze flows freely, the bullets fly, and the casinos exude despair.

This decidedly retro novella follows Johnny Chapman, a sad-sack professional gambler with a penchant for bar-going and a lingering bouquet of liquor on his breath. When he gets into deep debt, a loan shark offers him a way out: inject a heavily favored race dog with a lethal dose of drugs just before the starting gate. The luckless Chapman finds that he cannot go through with it, though, and ends up on the lam, trying to survive vicious goons, bar fights, and deadly gunfights.

This is the type of book in which characters get punched—dozens and dozens of times. And in this dark world, the ability to take a punch is held up as a virtue.

The Fix has style, verve, and flair. Faces harden, knuckles drip blood, and drinks are pounded down. The book owes a debt to its hardboiled predecessors, but borrows techniques like strong action verbs and apt analogies without getting bogged down in clichés.

The prose crackles. *The Fix* pulses with creative energy, such as when the protagonist is described as betting on “a sea of pipe dreams, and a plastic ball bouncing around a wheel.” Though filled with historical anachronisms and faux profundities from the mouths of tough guys, like “futility won’t help you now,” the writing shines. Familiar but unique turns of phrase like “her expression was colder than Anchorage” abound. Dialogue also often straddles that line, landing somewhere between pulp fiction and literary realism while still remaining interesting.

Against its morally bankrupt backdrop, *The Fix* successfully alternates between wry comedy and high tension. Women characters are problematic, with especially risible scenes at a pool and a strip club that put the cringe in cringeworthy and do little to advance the story or enhance the mood.

Most characters are more memorably rendered. They might be certified types who lack depth, but they are not hackneyed or ordinary. Degenerate gamblers, ruthless loan sharks, hired thugs, and others straight out of central casting come to life. All suffer the unfortunate consequences of their decisions.

The Fix has the force of a right hook or a squeezed-off bullet: it’s a short but powerful book that dramatizes the peril of self-inflicted mistakes in a seedy environment of cutthroat immorality.

JOSEPH S. PETE (February 2, 2018)

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