

The Last of the Smoking Bartenders

C. J. Howell

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The great American road trip takes a dark turn in C. J. Howell's moody debut thriller. As we hitch a ride in a musty Malibu with an off-the-grid drifter called Tom, we travel not only the reservation roads of the Southwest but also the paranoid twists and turns of Tom's own mind. Is he really on a mission to stop terrorists from blowing up the Hoover Dam? Or is belief that "The Network" is constantly tracking him a psychotic delusion that Tom is playing out in the real world? Howell keeps us guessing as Tom adds a homeless rafting guide and a band of burned-out meth dealers to his posse. Each person he meets is less stable than the last, and it's easy to believe that the world has spun just as far out of control as Tom believes.

As bleak and violent as Tom's trail is—Molotov cocktails and crossbows wreak destruction everywhere he goes—he's also a bit of a poet. "The sky lavendered," Tom notes at the end of another day on the road, seeing the beauty in his otherwise grim world. Howell presents Tom's inner moments, like the dialogue throughout the book, without quotation marks, effectively emphasizing Tom's ascetic, renunciate frame of mind. Howell gets us thinking like Tom and compels us to follow his lead down a very rocky road.

SHEILA M. TRASK (Winter 2014)

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