

The Schraft Street Historical Preservation Society: Still Blue Collar Boston Cool

Michael A. Connelly

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Local Boston color and lots of male bonding highlight this street-wise story.

Imagine the guys' basement hangout—the modern man cave, complete with sports television and a beer fridge—has spread over an entire neighborhood. That's the scene on Schraft Street, as imagined by Michael A. Connelly in this leisurely, place-based novel devoted to Boston's blue collar community. It's all about men who show their affection for each other by trading insults, giving each other nicknames, and sharing a cold one.

Connelly's earlier novel, *Blue Collar Boston Cool*, introduced "Boss" Jim Herlihy and his entourage; with *The Schraft Street Historical Preservation Society: Still Blue Collar Boston Cool*, Connelly returns to the neighborhood and sets familiar characters on a new mission: to get rid of the thugs who threaten to overrun their beloved street.

The working-class Boston atmosphere is palpable on every page of the story. Connelly grew up in a similar neighborhood and faithfully captures the friendly cadence of even business conversations. Jim's accountant at Herlihy's Hardcore Gym, for instance, addresses him with the informal, "Gotta talk to ya, Boss," and the gym rats at the weight machines josh each other with mild insults—"ya knucklehead!"—pretty much constantly. The language can get a little rough—one guy will regularly call another a "big dumb Mick bastard," for example—but Connelly keeps the overall tone friendly, and it's always clear these folks are not fighting but bonding.

The Schraft Street Historical Preservation Society of the title is born when Boss Jim and cohorts—with colorful names like Big Bill, Bouncing Bobby, and Fast Freddy—learn that neighborhood guys have been violently mugged by a couple of shady outsiders. Modeling their new project on New York City's Guardian Angels, Jim and crew make plans to head off any future problems by patrolling the streets and delivering their own brand of vigilante justice.

The actual action on the streets, however, gets less attention than the planning stages, which happen at various local haunts: The Schraft Street Diner, Joe Cetrone's Fine Italian Bistro, and Jim Marini's Italian Bakery. The downtown atmosphere is authentic, but the pace of the story itself lags. Those hoping for a taut action story may be frustrated by the limited street skirmishes that occur, while those looking for local color will be richly rewarded.

Local color, in fact, often overwhelms and impedes the story's progress as well as the deeper development of characters and relationships. Jim's friends' colorful personalities, though clearly Boston-born, border on caricature, with iconic characters like ruthless gangster Paul "Paulie Pags" Pagliarani and outrageously flirtatious waitress Fabulous Faye. Similarly, Connelly uses Jim's relationship with girlfriend Janice Cochrane less to explore their emotional connection than to compare Janice's upper-class, wine-sipping lifestyle with Jim's working-class, beer-chugging ways.

All roads lead back to Schraft Street in this sequel, offering fans of the first *Blue Collar Boston Cool* book a chance to visit some old friends and catch up on the gossip. More of an ode to the past than a true page-turner, *The Schraft Street Historical Preservation Society* is best read as a nostalgic look at a way of life that grows rarer each day.

SHEILA M. TRASK (September 16, 2013)

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