

The White River Killer: A Mystery Novel

Stephen Wilson

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Unrelenting action elevates this thriller, whose tone is set through the speech and behavior of its characters.

The action is unrelenting from prologue to postmortem in Stephen Wilson's *The White River Killer*, a mystery set in a rural area of the Arkansas delta. The story contains all the ingredients of a well-written thriller: a long-unresolved murder, small-town intrigue, a touch of national and international news events, and an assortment of individual issues, such as substance abuse, anger, and financial insecurity.

The protagonist is John Riley Hubbard, a small town farmer and part-time sports writer for the local weekly newspaper. When the publisher asks him to cover a murder and offers a much-needed cash bonus, Hubbard becomes a sleuth. For someone who has never done this sort of work, Hubbard is amazingly adept at investigating while staying mostly on the right side of the law, although he is at his most creative when adopting a rationale for pushing the law to or just beyond its limit.

There are serious inconsistencies, however. Early in the story, Hubbard declares that he is two years sober and peaceful, yet he continues to carry the long-held promise to kill the person who murdered his father many years ago. Hubbard gravitates toward violence as a way to resolve problems that occur in his investigation. When he thinks he knows who committed the murder being investigated, Hubbard admits he has no evidence to force the man to confess. He says: "I can make him. He'll tell me. No matter how long it takes, I won't stop. You see, I have *one* thing that I'm good at ... I'll [sic] going to beat the truth out of him." Showing Hubbard has not changed over the course of the tale, the novel ends in an act of reckless, lawless violence intended to purify his past. It could also have put him in jail for a substantial period.

The story is populated with a general assortment of small-town folks, who, unfortunately, are fleshed out with only standard details. The part-time sheriff is unschooled in police work and has a "receding hairline and an expanding waist." His deputy, Eddie, is equally inept. The state police are bullies, and the FBI agents are big-town wise guys. Wilson would have added more interest to his otherwise well-told tale by inventing less stereotypical characters. Late in the book, an improbable love interest appears for the protagonist, and even here there could have been more in-depth narrative bringing this relationship front and center.

Wilson's writing is unadorned, easy to follow, but, at times, almost naked, leaving a desire for more. Entering the apartment of the murdered student, Hubbard says: "The luxurious residence had an open floor plan. To the left was a high-tech kitchen, and just beyond was a well-appointed dining room." Colors, smells and texture would have clothed the room with life.

The author spends little time describing the physical setting of the Arkansas delta, instead setting the scene with the speech and actions of his characters. This is a difficult place to live, and these are difficult, hard people.

The White River Killer is well worth reading. Wilson shows promise as a skilled mystery writer.

JOHN SENGER (June 3, 2015)

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