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Mystery

Unknown Book
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Only an experienced writer like Malcolm Shuman could write a mystery like *The Levee*, because it takes the confidence of experience to strip away the usual conventions and present a coming-of-age story with a dark whodunit at its heart.

With fourteen mystery novels to his credit, Shuman shrewdly, and for the most part seamlessly, weaves a simple but compelling story of how one night changes four teenage boys. But things are never quite what they seem, and the truth is packed away until the surprising conclusion.

There is a conventional underpinning—the older man returning to the scene of his boyhood to find answers to a troubling episode from adolescence—but the author uses it only as a springboard to create settings worthy of a Gothic thriller and characters who have the kinds of secrets readers won't be able to guess.

The book is set in and around Baton Rouge, both in 1959 and the present-day. Among other places, the action occurs at an abandoned slave plantation, a cemetery where a teacher is brutally murdered, and an old mansion spooky enough to scare the bejabbers out of the Hardy Boys.

Shuman's teenagers, Colin, Stan, Toby, and Blaize, have all the traits and differences you'll find in most teenage boys, though one has to wonder if the kids of 1959 were as foul-mouthed as Shuman remembers.

Colin is the narrator, both as a youngster and as a sixty-three-year-old crime writer who tries to face up to something that still gives him nightmares. The parallel narratives show Stan as the most mysterious, Toby the least likeable, and Blaize as the one you think you understand the best—but don't.

Part of the interest in *The Levee* comes from some of the secondary characters, an assortment of weird or troubled southerners who'd fit in some of Faulkner's stories: Rufus Sikes, the "meanest white trash S.O.B. who'd ever lived"; Bergon, a brooding Cajun store-keeper, and the eerie Darwin Drood, who could give Boo Radley a run for his money.

Based on a true story, *The Levee* at times is overly fanciful, and the ending includes a

somewhat strained politically correct twist on top of a revelation about the murder. But these things detract only a little from a well-paced, fun read.

Dick Cady