Iron River (Charlie Hood) by T. Jefferson Parker

Hard-Boiled Mystery Meets Magical Realism. I Liked It

T. Jefferson Parker ranks among the very top tier of contemporary crime writers, and his new series has received some of the most effusive reviews of his already stellar career. In L.A. Outlaws, Parker introduced Los Angeles County sheriffs deputy Charlie Hood, plunging him into a glamorous, fast-moving world of antiheroes-and antiheroines. In The Renegades, Hood was ensnared in a major case of police corruption. BookReporter.com raved: And while, again, The Renegades is complete in itself, my gut feeling is that with L.A. Outlaws and a future novel, it will form a trilogy that will stand as the high-water mark of Parkers work. In the meantime, a year seems too long a time to wait to find out. The wait is over. Iron River is here.

This time around, Hood is running the California-Mexico border with the ATFE, searching for the iron river—the massive and illegal flow of handguns and automatic weapons that fuels the bloody cartel wars south of the border. Gunrunners by nature aren't exactly ethical, but the lengths they'll go to, and the innocent lives they'll risk, are shocking even to Hood. Most shocking of all is the close personal connection Hood finds wrapped up in events south of the border—a connection that shakes him to his core.

My Personal Review:
Sheriff Deputy Charlie Hood has been assigned to help the US ATFE Bureau stem the flow of guns across the border into Mexico. Swollen with drug money, the Mexican cartels and drug operations have built private armies, largely staffed by Mexican army deserters, armed with guns purchased from US dealers and smuggled across a largely unwatched
border, and threatening to overthrow the current Mexican government. Even slowing the flow of drugs, money and weapons is a tough and thankless job. But when a young ATFE agent accidentally kills the son of a Mexican druglord during an illegal arms bust, the situation escalates. The druglord strikes across the border, kidnapping Jimmy Holdstock and smuggling him to Mexico for torture.

Hood has no problem joining a rescue group, but the more he sees about Mexico, the more he realizes that the bandaid approach is not going to work. The system is broken and it grinds up any honorable man who gets in its way. Giving warnings to Hood is a man who claims he might be a near immortal agent of 'the prince,' one of two forces battling for the world. Certainly he knows more than anyone should. And Hood's project, young Bradley Smith seems to have taken a turn to evil, smuggling drug money and guns down to Mexico while gunmaker Ron Pace has invented a lightweight fully-automatic pistol that just might escalate the shooting war south of the border.

Author T. Jefferson Parker takes something of a mystical turn in IRON RIVER. Is Mike Finnegan really a prophet from the devil, or is he playing with Hood's head? The detailed description of Absinthe may be a symbol for the way Parker is playing with our heads, giving us visions of the world that may be more real than reality. I think of Parker as more of a gritty, hard-boiled mystery writer rather than a magical-realist. And the contrast is jarring. Somehow, though, it worked. Hood is an every-man, struggling with forces beyond his control, with a system so broken that both politicians and perhaps a majority of citizens deny the flaws. Finnegan sees more of reality than Hood does, yet Hood himself sees too much, yet is unable to do anything about it.

I suspect many of Parker's fans will find themselves confused or bothered by this book. While it continues Parker's theme of good men trying to do their best in a system that makes it impossible, it does so on a larger scale than many of his earlier novels. The introduction of magic confuses things, makes us readers scratch our heads and wonder if there's something going on that we don't get or if magic really is at work. Ultimately, I chose to forget about the author and concentrate on the story. IRON RIVER is thought-provoking, an extremely timely reminder of the consequences our self-delusion about drugs imposes on our neighbors, a reminder that the corruption we've introduced to Mexico can come back here, a thoughtful critique of our love of guns, and a pretty good story. I liked it.

Four Stars

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