Lines and Shadows by Joseph Wambaugh

Impressive But Curious

Not since Joseph Wambaugh’s best-selling The Onion Field has there been a true police story as fascinating, as totally gripping as . . . Lines And Shadows. The media hailed them as heroes. Others denounced them as lawless renegades. A squad of tough cops called the Border Crime Task Force. A commando team sent to patrol the snake-infested no-man’s-land south of San Diego. Not to apprehend the thousands of illegal aliens slipping into the U.S., but to stop the ruthless bandits who preyed on them nightly—relentlessly robbing, raping and murdering defenseless men, women and children. The task force plan was simple. They would disguise themselves as illegal aliens. They would confront the murderous shadows of the night. Yet each time they walked into the violent blackness along the border, they came closer to another boundary line—a fragile line within each man—and crossing it meant destroying their sanity and their lives.

I’m both in awe and suspicious of this book. It purports to tell the true-life story of a group of undercover police officers, most of Mexican descent, who work stealthily to entice robbers preying on the heavy illegal alien traffic flowing into San Diego County from Baja California into attacking them, then turning the tables on their would-be victimizers. I’m in awe because it reads like fiction, with deep insights into the professional and personal lives of each of the policemen who are part of the BARF (Border Alien Robbery Force) team. We find out how they spend their off-hours, drinking and cheating on their wives with the sort of abandon of the cheerfully doomed. We discover how much they come to dislike one another, and particularly their leader, a hotshot in disco chains named Manny Lopez. The action sequences are riveting, and you get a real flavor for the desolate highlands these officers probe, and the desperate characters, both deadly and vulnerable, that they come across. But it reads too much like fiction. These guys either opened up to Wambaugh to a degree few ever do, not even to a very good, empathetic writer who asks all the right questions, or else the writer went the New
Journalism route and extrapolated a lot of the inner monologues each of these officers have from time to time. I wonder about the former approach (cops are notoriously taciturn, even with each other or someone like Wambaugh who's obviously skilled at drawing them out) and question the validity of the latter, if used.
Despite the numerous offenses against man, society, and God cataloged here, Wambaugh apparently didn't leave these guys so much out to dry that they got angry. It wouldn't be a good idea angering these guys, but how did he manage it, given the story we have here? I just wish there was some Authors Note explaining the access issue. All we have is the firm statement at the outset This Is A True Story. Yes, sure, but are these the real characters? Did he do one of those magazine-writer tricks of folding in multiple characters to create fictional hybrids? Did he use pseudonyms? I'd love to know.
The dialogue is brilliant, the writerly asides masterful and witty, and a crisp narrative pulls you through quickly while asking the question of when a good impulse (protecting aliens who are being savaged by gangsters while trying to illegally enter your country) become a really bad practice. By the final third of the book, the cops are strung-out adrenaline junkies probing into Mexican territory and looking for conflict, not the sort of characters you want representing your country in a sensitive border region. Was this really what they were like? And what happened to them after the book was published in 1984? I'd love to know.

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