What novelist T. Jefferson Parker does so well in Where Serpents Lie (and in such previous high-octane outings as Laguna Heat and Pacific Beat) is to bind his characters tightly to the territory in which they live and die—the mostly scorched and urbanized but occasionally still pristine turf of Southern Californias Orange County. When hes not running the Crimes Against Youth unit at the Orange County Sheriffs Department, Terry Naughton sits in a cave in Laguna Canyon, drinking tequila, smoking cigars, and trying to understand the twisted mind of a particularly vicious child molester called The Horridus. The serpents of the title are real, as is the terror Parker manages to evoke with the intense power of his writing. I knew that there was no way that Lauren would ever have her childhood replaced with a better one, Naughton says about a 9-year-old girl sold for sex by her parents. Lauren had the resigned eyes and the aura of passive invincibility found in nearly all children who have escaped to the last place they can go—to the private, silent cave of their own selves.

My Personal Review:
I first discovered T. Jefferson Parker in Silent Joe, a carefully crafted and intriguing story with a twist. Joe, a sweet man with a damaged face, is one of Parkers great heroes. Naughton, in Where Serpents Lie, is another. Hes a self-acknowledged flawed character who lives with regret and sorrow and deception while struggling to do his job as head of the Crimes Against Youth division of the Orange County Sheriffs Office. I liked him immensely, perhaps because he is flawed enough to be real. The crimes against children which he investigates make your hair stand on end, partly because you know they really happen. But Parker appears to have done his research and presents the cases and circumstances with compassion while creating a villain who is both monstrous and yet sympathetic. This is an exciting if long read, maybe a trifle overwritten. The novel contains one glaring error that no other reviewer has commented on, so I will. After Naughton sees photos of himself that he knows are doctored, he goes to a friend and asks the friend to doctor some photos himself, of a woman
bathing a child, a woman and child who have never actually met. Apparently, Naughton means to use this doctored photo as proof that the photos which resulted in his suspension from CAY were also doctored. As readers we get on board with this idea and wait to see what happens. But we wait in vain, for this entire plot line and the requested doctored photo is never heard of again. The photo never materializes and the friend is never again mentioned. Its an editors job to catch these things so I blame him or her more than Parker himself for this big ooops. Other than that, Serpent is another winner in the Parker ouevre. I put Parker in the company of Dennis Lehane, James W. Hall, and Carl Hiassen--all gifted writers and good storytellers.

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