
CROOKED ROADS
ALEC CIZAK
ALL DUE RESPECT BOOKS

I began *Crooked Roads* having no idea what I was letting myself in for, other than it being a collection of short crime stories and it is certainly not for the faint hearted. Alec Cizak has captured a side of society that we would all much prefer to pretend didn't exist, but it does and Alec really wants you to understand the underbelly of the real world we live in, whether you want to or not

Each story has a similar tone, and there is a thin thread that weaves each story together in the form of police corruption and brutality and the less privileged side of society struggling to find the American Dream – and failing miserably. Each character felt like it was based on someone that Cizak had come across at some point in his life, the feeling of realism was hard to shake, which only made each story seem more haunting, as I sat at home in front of my fire in my cosy living room, imagining these people knocking on my door.

There is no end to the ferocity of the human nature that Cizak displays in his narrative, but there is something enthralling that sparks curiosity in you and just makes you want to keep reading (and then promptly stop when it gets just that little bit too gory). The reader is introduced (in my case for the first time) to the effects of crystal meth on an insecure, underprivileged and easily-led mind; the way desperation to prove one's self and the ability to convince yourself your actions are morally right can lead to losing everything; and a man of the church who displays only hypocrisy and irony in his daily work.

Despite all this, his writing still made me believe (somewhat naively) that at some point, in between the sadistic and brutal nature of the characters, that there could be a happy ending. This is something I found hugely admirable because I don't believe you can pigeonhole Cizak into purely being a crime writer. The realism comes into play here as we delve into the authentic lives of people in these small, American towns and one could almost imagine Cizak is speaking from experience in every single role. From the thrill-hungry war hero, to the teenage boy who's sick of living in a trailer next

to a neighbourhood of 5-bedroom houses, and the girlfriend who wants her boyfriend to commit to her. Each plot line was well thought through and completely different to the last, an impressive feat for a book containing 15 stories of the same genre, with similar themes.

I certainly wouldn't recommend this for anyone who can't handle cruel carnage or a story that is going to make the cogs inside the head turn in wonder, ending up confounded by what you've read. This is like nothing I have ever read before, but I'll certainly look out for Cizak again.

Beth McCarthy

**HAPPY HOUR: AND
OTHER PHILADELPHIA
CRUELITIES**
TONY KNIGHTON
CRIME WAVE PRESS

The novella *Happy Hour* is a lot like its main character; it doesn't pause for breath and it doesn't take a moment to think things over. It just keeps moving as fast as it can. The reader doesn't know much about its rather enigmatic protagonist at first other than that he's in a bad situation that only

seems to be getting worse with every page. Bob (the name seems purposefully bland) is between jobs, down on his luck, and he just stole a coat with a very suspicious wad of cash in the front pocket.

Knighton skillfully escalates the dangers surrounding the protagonist, pulling the net closer until escape seems impossible. Wherever this man goes, chaos and ruin follow. But how much of it is directly caused by him? More often he seems like a pawn trying desperately to find a way off the chessboard. The narrative also touches – albeit briefly – on the character's stigmatization as a drug addict, which only adds fuel to his many problems. It's a tightly wound tale that's difficult to put down. Knighton's writing is about as lean and fluff-free as it's possible to be. The 'who' and 'why' driving the events gets a bit muddled as event unfold, but the intensity of Bob's plight still feels real and pressing as he narrowly dodges cops and criminals alike.

Happy Hour also manages to convey a fairly potent sense of atmosphere. It's not just the gray, December streets of the city that the characters tear through; the significance of the season

plays a part as well. On the day before Christmas with snow clogging traffic and sidewalks, Philadelphia is filled with empty spaces and closed bars, making it seem even more lonely and confining. Although the ending rears up a bit hastily after a lengthy middle, Knighton writes with clarity and confidence that hopefully signals longer, more refined works to come in the future. The title story draws to a close with the impression of waking up from a very bad dream.

The rest of the short stories in this collection maintain *Happy Hour's* acrid tone and distinctive treatment of the world as a place that's gone numb to violence. It's hard to envision a more detached narrator than that of "Road Trip" as he coolly describes the aftermath of a crime: "Puncture wounds don't bleed much, not externally, so even there in the dark I knew I was probably clean enough."

A chilly calmness infiltrates much of Knighton's work. His characters do what they need to in order to survive, and then they move on. The effect is a bit frightening because it forces the reader to question whether anyone is capable of anything under just the right

amount of pressure.

Benjamin Welton

WHAT SHE LEFT

T R RICHMOND

PENGUIN

"Great Read or Your Money Back" proclaims the sticker on the front cover. I've always approached such books with caution or avoided them completely. A tad cynical perhaps but if a book's that good why the need for such marketing flim-flummery?

A woman is found dead in the UK city of Southampton, Alison Salmon, a former student at the University and now rising star-journalist in 'that' London. An accidental drowning or is there a more sinister motive? Eschewing ordinary writing norms Richmond stitches together a patchwork of emails, blog posts, texts, letters and social media mentions by a cast of characters as they remember Alice for what she was to them. A former Professor sets out to curate all communication regarding her life since 2004 and hence a gradually twisted and murky tale evolves: tedious undergraduate