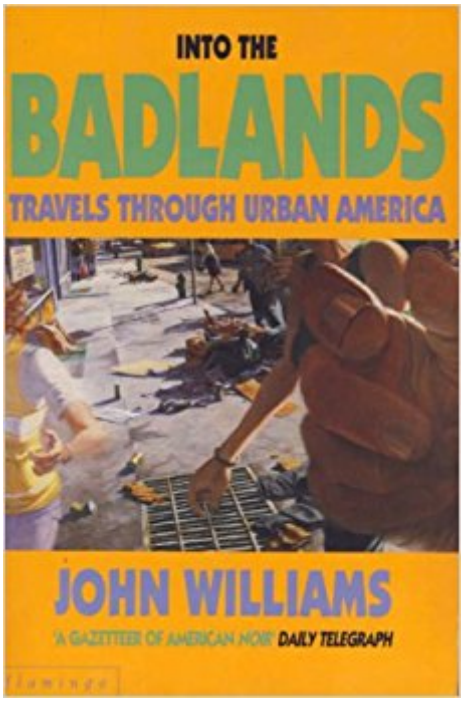
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Into The Badlands: Travels Through Urban America



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Synopsis

In "a vital mix of literary criticism, personality profiles, and imaginary geography" (New Statesman and Society), Williams seeks out the mythical America of the nation’s most astute chroniclers--the crime writers--to find Elmore Leonard’s Miami, Sara Paretsky’s Chicago, and Andrew Vachss’ New York, among others.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is an interesting book--part urban studies, part travelogue, part crime fiction interviews. The author (an English writer) takes out a couple months and travels to the U.S. of A, where he drives through nasty urban landscapes, eats great breakfasts, drinks bad beer and interviews a baker’s dozen of American crime writers, among them, Carl Hiassen, James Lee Burke, Andrew Vachss, Elmore Leonard, James Crumley, George V. Higgins, Sara Paretsky, James Hall, the late Eugene Izzi, James Ellroy and Tony Hillerman.His budget confines him to seedy hotels in scuzzy parts of town; the result is a distorted view of these cities but a personal experience which melds with the ethos and subjects of the writers’ novels.He meets Mike Davis, but Mike Davis’ own writing and his own experience underlines the difference between his work and the author’s. Mike Davis knows all of L.A. He is a scholar but also a former truck driver. He knows L.A. the way a London cabbie knows the alleys, mewses, courts and heaths. Mike Davis knows the laws of incorporation and he knows the precise ways in which L.A. (and most particularly its neighborhoods) has/have come to be. John Williams, on the other hand, knows next to nothing about the cities he describes. The sole exception is NYC, which he had visited on several occasions.In encountering certain sections of certain cities

he largely reconfirms his `noir' expectations and in interviewing specific writers he focuses upon those expectations. Many of the discussions are more political than aesthetic. We all know about Ellroy's mother and about Elizabeth Short; does Ellroy really compile 300-400 pp. outlines for his novels? If he is virtually storyboarding a novel, why does so much emphasis fall on the staccato narrative rather than the imagery that one expects from such planning? Williams' politics appear to be fairly predictable, English leftist. Ellroy's politics are far more complex. He is interested in the way in which secondary figures--almost exclusively white men--situated below the top positions of power, manage to do the many nasty things that they do. Nevertheless, the thrust of his politics is far more conservative than Williams' and far more conservative than one might expect from his novels' plots and themes. Missing these nuances, the author tends to ease nearly all of the writers' political stances into his own box and he highlights their politics to a greater degree than many of their novels do.Thus, this is much more of a `personal book' than a studied examination of American noir, American writers and the urban American landscape. It is interesting, however, and it holds our attention. In some ways, however, it is unlucky, since Williams' visit occurred in 1989. The late critic and crime novelist, Frank McConnell, frequently commented that we are now in the second golden age of crime writing. In 1989 we were not yet fully in the world of Michael Connelly, Jeffery Deaver, Don Winslow, William Kent Krueger, April Smith, Robert Crais, Jonathan Kellerman and a host of modern masters. Hiassen was just getting started with his black comedies and James Lee Burke and Robert Crais published The Neon Rain and The Monkey's Raincoat in 1987. Nevertheless, Lawrence Block was thriving, as was Sandra Scoppettone. Where is their New York? Williams mentions Gerald Petievich but he doesn't interview him. Where is his L.A.? Or Joseph Wambaugh's?The book is interesting, as I said, but very limited. Mickey Spillane's friend, Max Allan Collins, is now completing many of Mickey's unfinished novels. Max has been going strong since the 1980's and knows noir fiction at its core. The problem: he lives in Iowa and was not on Williams' to-see list, but Williams traveled to Boston to interview Higgins (neither of which--Boston/Higgins--he particularly liked). Why didn't he visit Bob Parker, arguably the most influential writer of his time?

This unpretentious literary travelogue provides an excellent window into a number of top American crime writers and the (mostly urban) areas they inhabit. Williams' 1989 circuit of the U.S. is a kind of crime fiction grand tour, as he visits thirteen established and up-and-coming authors (only one of whom is female) in ten locations, each of which gets about 20-25 pages or so, as follows:Miami >> Carl Hiassen (Lucky You, Stormy Weather), James Hall Louisiana >> James Lee Burke New Mexico >> Tony Hillerman Los Angeles >> James Ellroy, Gar Anthony Haywood San Francisco >>

Joe Gores (32 Cadillacs) Missoula, MT >> James Crumley (Bordersnakes) Chicago >> Sara Partesky, Eugene Izzi Detroit >> Elmore Leonard (Be Cool, Cuba Libre, Pronto, Pagan Babies, Riding the Rap) Boston >> George V. Higgins New York >> Andrew VachssWilliams is clearly a believer in detective fiction as social portraiture and commentary, and like myself, he's most interested in what is generally classified under the catchall terms "hard-boiled" or "noir." That is to say, crime novels about the everyday criminal world, as opposed to semi-mythical world of "The Godfather," the serial-killer world of Hannibal Lechter, or the cozy world of crime-solving cats or little old ladies. Williams tends to stay in the cheaper, and thus seedier, parts of the places he visits, and tries to get the writers to show him around, show him their world. In addition to touring the seedy side of America, Williams often takes side-trips of a musical nature--as befits his music journalist career. His contrasting of a (white) cajun fete with a (black) zydeco dance is one of the truly telling parts of his journey. The conversations with the writers are intermittently interesting, although it's interesting to note that many of them came from impoverished backgrounds and came to writing by accident. Another similarity is their rough treatment at the hands of Hollywood. Most of the writers are extremely forthcoming and open with Williams, the most notable exception being Higgins, who comes off as a pompous ass in comparison to the rest of the book's subjects.Some twelve years after Williams' trip, it's rather amazing to find that 12 of the 13 writers are still going strong, with a string of books to their credit from the intervening years. Indeed some, like Carl Hiassen, James Lee Burke, James Ellroy, and Elmore Leonard have gotten considerably more famous. The one writer who isn't still producing is Eugene Izzi, who was found dead in 1997, hanging from his 14th-story office window in what was ruled a bizarre suicide...Since writing this book, Williams has gone on to write crime fiction himself, including the 1983-set London novel Faithless, and a collection of stories set in the Cardiff underworld, Five Pubs, Two Bars and a Nightclub.

Reconfirms everyone's fears of America as a cesspool of crime...at least on the printed pages of crime novels. Interesting cross between a sort of "60 Minutes" like take on various crime writers but interviewing them about their lives in the cities they set their stories in. I found Andrew Vachss's New York to be the closest to his novels esp. his little tour of the streetwalker districts. You do not have to be a fan of any of these writers to get something out of this book. In fact, many of the vignettes turned me onto writers I had never heard of before. A good introduction into both the crime novel genre and the people and places behind these stories.

A great, no-nonsense look at how people actually live while writing crime fiction, heck, while writing

anything. This is the book to read while deciding how you're going to finance that writing career.

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