



A Shadow of Black Water

John Wilson

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Devastating plot twists and double-dealings result in continual suspense in the crime-led thriller A Shadow of Black Water.

In John Wilson's thriller *A Shadow of Black Water*, a Louisiana mafia crew faces a merciless international gang.

While contemplating retirement, the Dixie Mafia's leader, Deacon, prepares his nephew Abel to take over the crew. When Abel is shot during a bank robbery, he engages Deacon in seeking jobs with better payoffs to counter the increasing dangers that their six-member crew faces. Together, they decide to intercept a gun deal between the Aryan Brotherhood and an El Salvador gang; making more money in this way, though, is a setback to their efforts to leave mafia life behind for good. Further, the gang's sex-trafficking operations come to their attention via Abel's sister, Callie, a nurse who helped one of their teenage survivors.

Despite their illegal activities, the members of the tight-knit Dixie Mafia are characterized throughout as down-to-earth criminals by necessity. Unlike their bloodthirsty rivals, Abel and his friends most want to sustain their lifestyles; clout and bravado matter less to them than righting wrongs. They form a makeshift family that includes Tank and André, two brothers, and Harm, who harbors a lifelong crush on Callie. Even overconfident womanizer René has a human side: he drives "just the car a person stuck on himself would drive," and his blithe attitude gets him in trouble. Callie's characterization, however, is too archetypal: she acts as Abel's moral compass and becomes a semi-innocent victim of her family's missteps.

The book progresses in a way that honors the group's thoughtful strategizing as they plan to intercept the guns. It is tidy: each crew member plays an important role. Its tension resides in the fact that the group has blind spots when it comes to the consequences of their actions.

In the suspenseful lead-up to the mafia's attack, there are devastating plot twists and double-dealings that upend some of the established connections. Gang members sneak around dark corners and send bullets flying in pulse-pounding action scenes whose senses of panic, anger, and determination are palpable. Still, the prose is quite straightforward, both when characters are alone and brooding and when they brawl, argue, and joke with each other. Abel's bayou sunset-viewing spot and adoration of Cajun food weave some flavor into the Louisiana setting, though.

Spiraling toward catharsis but leaving elements unresolved to tease a sequel, the action-packed thriller *A Shadow of Black Water* covers a search for redemption after a life of misplaced ambitions.

AIMEE JODOIN (June 10, 2024)

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