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The Mexican Tree Duck by James Crumley

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REVIEWS

The Eponymous Duck

The Mexican Tree Duck, James Crumley

New York: Warner, 1993.

Reviewed by Dennis Held

Recipe for disaster (or one hell of a good novel): Take one jukebox, loaded with the moronic wailings of Boy George. Nestle it firmly atop a set of railroad tracks. Add a destitute private investigator and his one-legged, meth-snorting lawyer—go ahead, name him Solly Rainbolt, while you're at it—and stir in a hard-running freight train highballing it for Spokane. “The collision filled the snowy night with an explosive rainbow shower of plastic and pot-metal, worthless quarters and inflated dollar bills that covered the pale parking lot like a hard post-apocalyptic rain falling.”

And it's a hard rain that falls throughout *The Mexican Tree Duck*, James Crumley's latest detective novel. C.W. Sughrue, the detective in question, is not averse to the occasional toot himself, and the fuel comes in handy as he's launched on a twisted search for Sarita Cisneros Pines, who, like everybody else Sughrue meets, is not who she seems to be. She is the mother of Abnormal Norman Hazelbrook, apparently, a psychopathic biker chum of C.W.'s, and she's at the center of a tortuous plot that somehow involves the eponymous duck, a piece of ancient pottery that exerts power beyond C.W.'s comprehension.

Along the way, Sughrue hooks up with a couple of old Vietnam buddies: Franklin Ignacio Vega, Denver cop, born “in El Paso to a half-German half-black father and a half-Mexican half-Samoan mother . . . with no place to call home, no race, creed, heritage, picked upon by everybody on the street with the slightest trace of ethnic purity”; and Jimmy Gorman, a “tiny Irish guy from Philly” with a postal job and an attitude.

The ensuing journey is fraught with gunfire, road sex and other explosive stocks-in-trade of a Crumley novel. It's also packed with astoundingly good prose, like his first three detective novels (*The Wrong Case*, *The Last Good Kiss*,

and *Dancing Bear*) and his searing proto-Vietnam book, *One to Count Cadence*.

But *Tree Duck* is more than just a bathtubs-full-of-blood shoot-em-up. It's got what good fiction's got: characters we can care about, superb descriptions of action and landscape, a plot that surprises, and that certain something—a sureness of command of language and story.

The book is peopled by characters who are running on cheap highs and desperation, outcasts who have nothing to lose. But these aren't trailer-house freaks the author sets up for us to laugh at. This is the knocked-about, heart-stung soul of America. Sughrue on Sughrue: "I looked out the window. On the interstate people were going places I'd never been, people perhaps with a future, people whose lives were lived without always looking backward."

Sughrue's peculiar vision, clouded as the nation's is by unresolved (and, perhaps, unresolvable) feelings about the Vietnam War, leaves him in a reckless search for redemption: "Above the small town, way the hell up among the rocky heights of the Collegiate Peaks, winter raised tufts of its cold, gray head. But down where we stopped to rest, the sun still worked. Even the broken glass scattered through the gravel sparkled like jewels, and the cafe smelled like the place they invented cheeseburgers."

This is a wise book, a deeply-felt book that reaffirms the value of friendship in an unstable world. It's also darkly funny, and Crumley's not afraid of tossing off occasional bon mots of cultural criticism—wait, Sughrue'd skin me and feed me to the lizards if he read that. He says some smart shit about how fucked-up America can be. And there's a surprise for dedicated Crumley fans to unravel at the end, one that makes me anxious for the next novel.

By the time you reach the last pages, you'll be punch-drunk and ready for more. *The Mexican Tree Duck* is a novel of excess, and, as usual, too much is not quite enough.

Indebtedness

Debt, Mark Levine, New York: William Morrow, 1993.

Reviewed by William W. Bevis

After Jorie Graham's megablurb of *Debt*—oh rare blurb, astute, as well as generous—what tribute to be paid?