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with hot peppers, or a biscuit with ham that has brown sugar and peppercorns sprinkled on it before it is fried.

At a time when African Americans are often recipients of a different brand of justice, a novel like this one is important. It becomes even more relevant when we watch some of our national politicians feed the hate machine. *Forsaken* is a novel that holds our attention as well as one that tells an important story.

Skull Fragments: Noir Stories

by Tim L. Williams

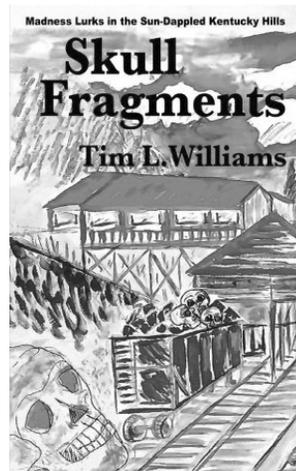
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Reviewed by Jacque E. Day

When American authors explore the darker facets of human nature in their own neighborhoods, the wondrous result is that their identities can become fused with a geographic region. H.P. Lovecraft's fictitious Arkham, Massachusetts is so fully realized that the writers who have carried on the Cthulhu mythos do well to keep it sufficiently reanimated. New England is so infused into the DNA of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" that it could have taken place on the common of the Vermont village where I live. Paul Tremblay, a relative newcomer, has brought a twenty-first-century reality-TV-era brand of horror to Boston's North Shore. And Stephen King has written his way all over Maine during his prolific career, with the occasional foray into places like Colorado and southwestern Pennsylvania, which may seem random until you look at the history. In the early 1980s King made *Creepshow* with George Romero in the outskirts of Pittsburgh, which happens to be where I grew up. More than a decade before *Creepshow*, Romero clearly saw the possibilities



for horror in that particular pocket of industrial-crumbling PA when he made *Night of the Living Dead* in my backyard. When King returns to western Pennsylvania, I like to suspect he is doing so in homage to Romero. Or maybe the region just scared the living hell out of him the way it did me.

With *Skull Fragments*, Tim L. Williams is on his way to carving out his own identity-of-region in the darker reaches of fiction: western Kentucky. A fitting choice, considering that to many who live east of I-65, Kentucky ends at Bowling Green and anything beyond is a no-man's land. Western Kentucky is *his* backyard. It is also rife with possibilities for exploration of the dark underbelly of human nature. To that potential, he leaves no stone unturned, no matter what might crawl out from underneath.

When you open this book, prepare to be surprised. You will feel empathy for and even familiarity with these people you meet, many who do horrific things. Take the opening paragraph of "Where That Morning Sun Goes Down:"

Four days after we murder Tiny Gardner, Donny Ray decides he wants pancakes. It's closing in on three in the morning, still as black as a slag heap, so we head for the Huddle House out by the Western Kentucky Parkway and Donny Ray pulls a thin, twisty joint from behind his ear before I can get out of the car.

Williams accomplishes a lot in this short opener. We meet the two primary characters: Donny Ray and the narrator, Frankie, in a setting familiar to most everyone in Kentucky, a Huddle House. We get an immediate sense of where they are geographically and most important, who they are. But the opener is a grabber independent of regional familiarity, which is merely a bonus. A skilled practitioner of popular fiction—you don't win the International Thriller Writers Award twice if you can't keep those pages turning—Williams is in control, not only of his sentences but also plot devices that transform readers into true believers. He does the hard work of instantly humanizing the people he writes about, a strength throughout the book. By the time we meet

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many of the people in *Skull Fragments*, it is clear that their life-defining choices are behind them. Yet Williams still manages to give them choices—often between bad and worse, and the choices bear heavy consequences. But it’s a gift for the character, a chance to exercise some free will and preserve a shred of dignity. A chance to remain human. In the final pages of “Where That Morning Sun Goes Down,” Donny Ray has cooked up another murderous rampage and has dragged Frankie into it. But when Donny Ray stops to take a leak, he presents Frankie with a choice:

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to hold onto this moment as long as I can. But what comes next always happens no matter what you do, so I let out my breath in a rush and open my eyes and aim the gun at the back of his head.

Don’t worry. I won’t spoil the ending.

Skull Fragments isn’t for the faint of heart. There is murder—a lot of it. There is necrophilia, exploitation of children, prostitution. The final story, titled “Tick,” is a particularly chilling examination into the genesis of a killer. It begins:

Yeah, I know what people say, what they need to believe. But get this straight. I didn’t get in the wrong line when God was bestowing souls on all the soon-to-be-borns. I wasn’t engineered in a mad scientist’s lab or promised to the Dark Lord Satan at conception. I came into the world just like every other glorified ape on the planet—shat out in blood and urine between my mother’s thighs.

Keep that in mind.

When you pick up this book, keep this in mind: be ready to meet a cast of characters who look like the people you see every day, who might look like you. Be ready to relate to them, even as they do unspeakable things. If you’ve never been to western Kentucky, get ready to know it intimately. If you do know the region, be ready to see it in a new darkness. Be ready for a self-examination in the process as Tim L. Williams walks you right up to that thin line, the line that a good person crosses to turn bad.