

I love C.J. Box's work. I firmly believe he's constitutionally incapable of writing a bad book. I love almost all of his Joe Pickett novels. I pick up each new entry in the series hoping for the very best "and lately, that "very best" is best defined as "a return to classic form." Sadly, in my opinion, SHADOWS REEL is not that.

There's also the loopy, zaftig plot, which feels like it wants to thoughtfully occupy a canvas at least twice as large this novel, giving every twist, development and character within it short shrift. Beyond that, there's a sour, dour reactionary tone that hangs over passage and page of SHADOWS REEL like the smell of spoiled, curdled milk. Everybody in the story seems tired and fed up and all but over it, disgusted with the world in which they live, and it's hard not to speculate about to which extent that sourness extend to its author, given the many politics rants spewed forth in an awkwardly expository talking-to-the-camera style.

Example:

"So you think you know Americans now?"

"Yes. They're always moving. Walking fast, talking loud, waving their arms around. They don't like to sit still ever. They're all like that. I don't understand why they're all so fat, the way they move around."

SHADOWS REEL takes a clunky headfirst dive into the politics of the moment, and while it would be a mistake to project the views of its characters onto their creator, a few things jump out:

1. The book seems to equate all anarchic violence with antifa and Black Lives Matter, never even mentioning the right-wing analogues to this: Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, Boogaloo Boys and the like. And its characters are given ample room to mock members of antifa "chapters" (no such thing, but it's mentioned twice) as callow trust-fund white doofuses out to play out their Che Guevara fantasies. It's not hard to imagine that this is the author's commercial calculation, a safe way of commenting on current events without alienating the far-right people who make up the majority of his home state of Wyoming, and, possibly, the MAGA-addled, white-male-centric, law-and-order types who might reasonably compose the bulk of his devoted readership.

Example:

"We're just gonna back out of here now," Antifa Two said.

Then: "Right, Tristan?" Tristan was apparently Antifa One.

"Shut up, Robbie," Tristan said.

"Tristan and Robbie," Nate echoed. "Couple of country-club names. Why am I not surprised? Shouldn't you boys be playing video games in your parents'"

basement?â€•

And:

"Axel was holding court. And it sounded to Randy like Axel was talking about antifa. 'They really donâ€™t have any realistic goals,â€• Axel said. â€œItâ€™s all bull***t from trust-fund militants with daddy issues. They say they want to abolish the police. They say they want no government and no capitalism and they want to return the country to indigenous tribes. But they all have the newest iPhone. Itâ€™s all just f***ing insane.'

"The Blade laughed. He said, 'But, man, they love you.'

"'Yeah, they do. Thatâ€™s how smart they are.'"

2. The characters seem to have a corrosive contempt for big cities, as it steers out of its way to take lengthy mocking sideswipes at Denver , Portland and Seattle. In this book's world, rural people and rural living and simpler, and, it's heavily implied, morally superior to urban-dwelling dilettantes (even as many of them are depicted as dolts, go figure).

Example: "One was a seventyish man with long silver hair and small round glasses who wore a tweed jacket. Joe thought of him as 'old Portland.' The other was a young woman about Sheridanâ€™s age with blue hair and elongated earlobe gauges that stretched nearly to her jawbone. She was clutching an overlarge teddy bear and she wore pajama pants and black combat boots. Young Portland."

Beyond that, there's the tired, dour quality of the cast itself. Joe Pickett barely registers here as a broken, wounded man in his fifties, leached of all interest in anything beyond what's immediately in front of him, steering away from physical exertion and phoning in a handful of scenes as the Watson to his wife Marybeth's Holmes. Nate Romanowski, Joe's series-long dark half, seems to be repeating an increasingly schematic arc on something resembling autotuned autopilot. The best characters are the Pickett's three daughters, all of whom have marvelously untapped potential as top-tier series characters that Box seems oddly reluctant to explore.

(Sheridan and April, especially, would make a marvelous next-generation Joe-and-Nate team, and I really think it's

time to hand the keys of this still-lucrative series vehicle over to them and allow Joe and Nate to slip into the emeritus-character roles they seem to have been inching toward for several novels now.)

On top of that, SHADOWS REEL contains one of the most cringey descriptions of a woman by a male writer I've read in quite some time: "Her hips were wide and they fit over the barstool like a hand gripping a tennis ball." And one of the most cringey description of the shoulder-wound cliché I've read in recent years (and C.J. Box has a robust catalog of this hackitude): "The slug from Nate's .454 caught Axel in his left shoulder and spun him around 360 degrees. Somehow, Axel managed to stay on his feet." (You can argue that's a spoiler, but come on. You knew when you opened a Pickett novel that this was the only place it would go.)

I wish the news were better. But I finished SHADOWS REEL feeling dispirited, drained and dulled by what I'd read. As I now realize I have been to a steadily growing degree with the Pickett series for a few years now. It feels like it's hard time for C.J. Box to acknowledge he's at a crossroads here and needs to commit firmly to a direction: pallid, brand-management fan-service stories, or something that infuses a once-soaring series with some fresh, female jet fuel.

Reference

[APA: The Easy Way! \(Updated for APA 6th edition\)](#)

[The Survey Handbook 2nd edition](#)