

there is almost a sense of hoping that particular characters are responsible for the murders in order to see them reap their 'just desserts'.

An interesting aspect to this book is the way Walters tells the story. Straight narrative text is broken up with the insertion of newspaper clippings, police reports and doctor's memoranda so that background information is delivered without the need for dialogue. Dialogue when used also operates on a number of levels, there is the spoken objective level and the unspoken subconscious level. The use of these parallel voices, as it were, creates a multi-layered text for the reader as you work your way through the maze of characters and plot twists. Just as you think you have reached a way out you discover that it's a dead end.

What is disappointing about this novel though, is the handling of the relationship between Jinx and her doctor. At times I felt I had swapped a mystery novel for a romance as the doctor/patient romance lacks plausibility and is at

odds with the previous personality and behaviour of the characters. The romance seems to have been thrown in at the end as an afterthought rather than serving any real plot function. Having not read any of Walters' other works it is hard to tell whether this is merely a one-off slip.

The strong points about *The Dark Room* lie in the fact that it is an interesting exploration of the dark side of human behaviour within a well plotted murder mystery. *The Dark Room* of the title clearly refers to the dark side of the human psyche and Walters is not afraid to explore the twisted lines of the psyche in creating this story. What let this novel down for me was the unnecessary add-on romance and the fact that I despised all the characters. Weak, nosy, selfish, spoilt or just plain irritating the characters detract from an otherwise enjoyable mystery.

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## Clockers

by Richard Price; Allen & Unwin 1995; 655 pp; \$14.95.

Strike is 19 and already earns between \$1500 and \$2000 a week. He manages a crew of workers and along with his boss Rodney epitomises the workings of the American free market economy. Identify a market and supply that market. Rocco Klein on the other hand is 43, jaded, drinks on the job and goofs off when he is on duty. He is cruising out the last years of his employment waiting to take his retirement.

In *Clockers* Richard Price juxtaposes the lives of Strike the crack cocaine dealer with that of Rocco the homicide detective in a gritty, no holds barred look at life in the projects of Dempsy, New York. The device through which the two are drawn together is a murder to which Strike's brother Victor has confessed. Rocco is convinced that Strike is the real killer and Price skilfully utilises the murder investigation to subtly confront the reader with a range of strongly drawn characters who flesh out the life of the street. The street life and the characters who populate it quickly grab the attention of the reader in a way which almost makes the narrative role of the murder investigation obsolete.

In *Clockers* there are no easy solutions, no white heroes, no black villains. The war on drugs as it has come to be euphemistically known is represented for what it is, a daily charade of arrests on minor charges amongst a litany of dealers, deals and cops on the take. The daily raids by the police on the crews, with their verbal and physical humiliations are represented as little more than shadow boxing for both police and clockers. In some senses the contact between police and crews is elaborately scripted dance although it is a dance in which a wrong move carries dangerous risks. The representation of violence in the book is at odds, however, with common myths of American urban violence. Violence on the streets and amongst the crews is represented not as random or as unexpected but as serving two major purposes: an effective method of social control by both dealers and cops and as a tool of revenge. Random 'undeserved' physical and sexual violence on the other hand is represented as occurring mostly within the structure of the justice system in police cells and in detention.

Price de-constructs the phrase crack cocaine dealer removing it from the

realm of myth and stereotype. Strike is a skinny and young 19-year-old, Horace is 13 and uses the money he makes to buy brightly coloured toys and stores his bottles in his backpack with his schoolbooks covered in his childish writing. Futon stores his bottles in the bottom of a jar of gummy bears. These are 'kids'. The stark lives of youth in the projects make the act of dealing not only a sensible, but perhaps the only, option available. For Strike and the others dealing is work, and difficult work at that. They do not see themselves as criminals; clocking is just what they do, *their best shot* at building a life, like going into the army or working for the United Parcel Services. Strike considers that he will leave clocking when he earns enough money but as his mother asks, how much is enough, how much do you need to retire? Strike's youthful desire to get out is mirrored in Rodney his boss, who also talks of getting out and getting into housing but for whom the power of being the man with the bottles is an addiction as equal to that of the customers he supplies.

Initially appearing to be a contrast to Strike is his brother Victor working security during the days and in the greasy Hambones restaurant at night in order to move his family out of the projects. When Victor confesses to the murder it allows Price the opportunity to portray a character who in many respects is the flip side of both Strike and Rocco. However, as the novel progresses, the reader becomes aware that the three main characters share many characteristics of which the desire for attention and affection is perhaps the most poignant. Price's rendering of his subjects is the highlight of the novel. His exploration of the lives of the main characters is a multifaceted one in which the inherent complexities in each of the protagonist's lives are drawn with insight and in a way that shakes up the reader's preconceived notions of victims and victimisers.

*Clockers* is a novel in which the journey the reader takes along the way is far more important than the end destination. If the reader regards the murder as a metaphor for American society than the culmination of the murder investigation cleverly leaves open as many questions as are answered. For the reader who wants to explore the dark side of the American dream *Clockers* is a fine place to start.

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