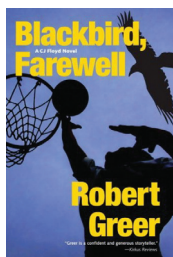


One of the zoo's most popular attractions is Lucy, a giant anteater. No cuddly plush toy, in zoo parlance, she is a "Code Red" animal: five feet tall, weighing a hundred and fifty pounds, with fearsome four-inch-long claws that can eviscerate a jaguar—or a human—in one vicious swipe. When the husband of a rich zoo benefactor is found dead in Lucy's pen after an evening fundraiser, Lucy has already stripped the body of most of its skin. Initially suspected of having killed the man with her fierce talons, Lucy is "imprisoned" by the zoo administrator in a small cage. Her keeper, Theodora "Teddy" Bentley, is upset by what she views as unwarranted cruelty inflicted on the pregnant animal and is impelled to find the true killer.

Teddy's search puts her at odds with her boss, a lecherous zoo administrator (who may be even worse than he seems) as well as the wealthy denizens of Gunn Landing, a California seaside community near the zoo, who do not appreciate her intrusion into their secretive affairs. When Teddy is shot at, slugged on the head in a swirling fog, and eventually becomes a suspect in another murder, her life feels more complicated than that of any of the wild animals she cares for. Resolute, she ignores the frantic advice of her over-protective mother and her fugitive father, not to mention her worried ex-boyfriend's (he's a sheriff) admonitions.

The author is a former journalist who now teaches creative writing at Phoenix College. Webb has published five mysteries featuring her fictional detective, Lena Jones. Her diverse writing background serves her well and is exemplified in the descriptive dialogue she constructs for her superbly developed characters. The author has crafted a refreshingly lighthearted murder mystery, using touches of humor and a briskly fun tone (such as the amusingly odd title). She also has a knack for scene-setting, and with the zoo as the center stage for a murder mystery, Webb offers an educational opportunity for any reader who loves learning about exotic animals—or who just enjoys smart storytelling. (December) *Alan J. Couture*



Blackbird, Farewell

Robert Greer

Frog Books, Hardcover
\$25.95 (362pp)
978-1-58394-250-5

When it comes to telling tales out of school, Damian Madrid is in the perfect position to sense who might know something about the murder of his best friend and teammate Shandell Bird. The college basketball superstar known as Blackbird was killed before he could cash in on his lucrative NBA contract. Damian takes it upon himself to start "running down angles" with the help of a "no-nonsense six-foot-one former combat

marine" named Flora Jean Benson who normally works with his mentor, a bondsman, CJ Floyd. But with CJ away on his honeymoon, Damian is able give into his "desire to play Superman, track down Shandell's killer on his own, and be a campus hero once again."

Although his heart's in the right place, his head is confused by the information which turns up—not only was his friend selling performance-enhancing drugs to kids in their Denver neighborhood, but he was apparently also shaving points in the playoffs. It takes Damian a while to figure out that the "game" he's involved in isn't basketball so much as a charade in which Blackbird was playing the part of the ultimate playboy, desired by women and envied by men for his supreme athletic abilities.

So who put him up to throwing the game? Who used him to push drugs? Damian's "disjointed investigation" brings him into contact with several unsavory characters including a Las Vegas mobster, a pothead reporter, a "double-dipping" girlfriend, a deadbeat father, a shady trainer, and a twisted sports psychologist who's writing a book on the "dark side" of superstar athletes, including Damian as "the gladiator athlete" known to be "competitive to a fault."

A pathologist and professor at the University of Colorado, Greer is the author of seven previous mysteries. Aimed at fans of African American detective stories, this series will also appeal to fans of college hoops and mysteries set in the west. Although billed as "a CJ Floyd novel," the book makes very little use of the bounty-hunting, antiques-dealing investigator, leaving the "snoop and probe job" in the hands of a less experienced stand-in who can't resist "insinuating himself into one of CJ's cases" and "sticking his nose into a dirty business like murder." (October) *Trina Carter*



Blood Island

H. Terrell Griffin

Oceanview Publishing,
Hardcover \$24.95 (248pp)
978-1-933515-21-2

Matt Royal has sold his share in the corporate rat race for enough money to live as a glorified beach bum in a Longboat Key condo near Sarasota, Florida. A former military man who's now an unofficial private detective, he doesn't really have to work for a living, but when his ex-wife asks him to locate her wayward stepdaughter, Peggy, Royal never hesitates. After all, he's still in love with his ex.

Upon that tangled emotional web, Griffin builds a tale of confused youth, domestic terrorism, and single-minded devotion on both sides of the good vs. bad divide. The book deals with personal loyalty, overcoming the warrior mentality to live in a civilian world, and not letting the

world's evils poison the soul. Royal's personal code of honor is sorely tested when his search for Peggy uncovers a murder plot aimed at him, and a terrorist ploy aimed at hundreds of innocents. Royal's response to these schemes has him walking a tightrope between the law and revenge.

Griffin is muscling in on territory claimed by John D. MacDonald and Carl Hiaasen (among others) in their popular Florida-set novels. Comparisons are inevitable, but Griffin is taking a tip from Ernest Hemingway (once a Florida resident) and keeping things simple and direct. The result is a successful ride on the shoulders of a man driven by his love for a woman on whom he no longer has any claim. Royal uncovers what Homeland Security is most afraid of: homegrown destruction of the most insidious kind, the kind that masquerades as community. Griffin knows his locales, from Orlando and Sarasota to the Florida Keys, nailing the tropical atmosphere comprised of weather, bars, geography and people. He has the good sense to not go the kitsch route, so that Royal and his friends are real people and not caricatures from a Jimmy Buffet song.

Blood Island is Griffin's third Matt Royal novel, and he seems to have settled into a niche unoccupied by other writers. General mystery fans and Travis McGee addicts alike should enjoy this book. It certainly qualifies as a worthy beach read for those who want something besides fluff while they're baking in the sun—no matter where they are. (December) *J. G. Stinson*



The Other Side of Silence

Bill Pronzini

Walker & Company,
Hardcover \$24.00 (224pp)
978-0-8027-1713-9

Rick Fallon's wife always preferred the hum and scurrying activity of the city. Now recently divorced, he wants to recapture what he loves: silence. What better place to find solitude than a hiking excursion through Death Valley. The quest for silence will have to wait, however, when he discovers Casey Dunbar in a remote area of the desert, near death from exposure and dehydration. Casey's eight-year-old son was kidnapped by her ex-husband, a seedy piano player; she was beaten for information in a fake exchange, before resigning herself to suicide.

Whether it's because his ex-wife accused of him giving up his life or simply because he wants to finish what has been set in motion, Fallon decides to help Casey find her son (a boy who reminds him of his own son, dead three years ago in a car accident). A product of East L.A., a former MP, and an elite security guard at Unidyne, Fallon has connections to information, law enforcement skills, and, above all, tenacity. They are all put to use, as he scours Las Vegas,