San Antonio Review

Berard Reviews "Fair Trade"

Peter Berard

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Book Reviewed: Fair Trade Jack Mahoney (2020)
Rating: Four Stars	

I'm not one hundred percent certain I know what a "thriller" is, and especially where the line is drawn between thrillers that depict crime and conventional crime fiction. As it happens, I know the author of this new thriller, so I asked him. He said "Fair Trade" and its predecessor, "Clearcut" (which I read as a manuscript — it's good to know writers, sometimes!) are both crime fiction and thrillers, but what distinguishes "Fair Trade" from his other, non-thriller crime novels are the emphasis on generating the emotion of suspense and de-emphasis on figuring out a puzzle. Thanks for the clarification!

"Fair Trade," the second of the Adrian Cervantes series, certainly does deliver suspense and thrills aplenty. Adrian is an Army Ranger whose unit was betrayed in Iraq during a delivery of cash. None of his squad survived a helicopter crash in the northern hills except Adrian. Nursed back to health by some friendly Yazidis, Adrian goes back stateside with a mission: deliver a fair share of the cash his squad got fucked over for to each of his squadmate's families. He exists in a liminal space, not formally dead or alive, existentially AWOL, living off his share of the cash and his sense of mission.

This installment brings him to New York. It doesn't look like his buddy Barry's family needs the money — Barry's widow has married a rich agribiz dude who works "fair trade" deals in Central Africa. But just as Adrian meets the family, Barry's son gets kidnapped by some very professional operators, who demand an oddly specific ransom amount out of Mr. Fair Trade's price range. Adrian and Barry's post-collegiate daughter Lori go into action and discover betrayal by a hipster-douche boyfriend, narrowly escape death at the hands of mercenaries, find out terrible secrets of the

agricultural business, and have a fling. Adrian is a badass but not a superman, Lori is resourceful and insistent, and the action is fast-paced and more-or-less believable. The author provides the sort of interesting explanations of both combat situations and Adrian's social engineering feats that make a feature of this sort of writing (think "The Bourne Identity") without dragging the pace. In the end, Adrian is prepared to make another "fair trade" — him for the boy, as it seems whoever did the kidnapping might be tied in with whoever betrayed his Ranger squad, and wants Adrian for their own purposes.

One thing I wonder about thrillers, based largely on the Cervantes books and movies and TV I've seen: they seem tied to a realism so stringent as to verge on blandness, sometimes. Adrian moves through a world of high-end hotels and apartments, office complexes, abandoned lots and parks, among people dedicated to tasks. Their relevant attributes are largely those of tactical significance. Sometimes, this can be revealing of the character of a given person or place, as with the big bad in this installment. I understand that the thriller mode needs to be stripped down to deliver the pulse-pounding goods, but I did find myself cherishing the descriptive and character moments in "Fair Trade" and in other similar works. Michael Mann is good with this, often giving little background tid-bits on his characters that flesh things out within the attention economy of the stories he tells. How much color can a thriller hold before it ceases to be a thriller? I guess I'd ask if I had to frame it as a question. My impression is that some thriller writers "color" by throwing in a lot of gun-pedantry and militaria, which I'm glad the author does not, but I think the answer is "more than the Cervantes novels presently have." Still, the core of the experience is there: if you like the experience of being thrilled, you should pick these books up.

Peter Berard is a writer, historian and organizer in Watertown, Mass. He serves as San Antonio Review's book review editor.