

Book Review

Crime | Marilyn Stasio

Twisted Trails

It's getting harder and harder to tell the good guys from the bad guys in a modern western, of which Urban Waite's first novel, **THE TERROR OF LIVING** (Little, Brown, \$24.99), is one fine specimen. Phil Hunt, thoughtfully described as "a good man, made up of all the bad things in the world," did a 10-year stretch in prison for killing a shopkeeper during a dumb robbery. But this flawed man was rescued by a strong woman who became his wife, and in the 20 years that Hunt has been out, they've made a quiet, decent life together on a small farm south of Seattle where they raise and board horses.

The thing is, Hunt can't make a living without doing a little drug smuggling on the side. "It's not all cigarette boats and fancy parties," he tells a new recruit, referred to only as "the kid," while they make their laborious way up a mountain trail on packhorses to collect a delivery being dropped from a small plane. But their scheme is ruined by another good man, Deputy Bobby Drake, whose father, a former sheriff, is serving time for doing exactly what Hunt is doing. The kid is caught, the drugs are lost and, although Hunt manages to escape, he's now in deep trouble.

You probably think you know where this story is going: Hunt will try to make up the loss by taking on a dangerous assignment that will go terribly wrong. A hired killer will be dispatched both to retrieve the goods, which are somewhere in the intestinal tract of a Vietnamese drug mule, and to get rid of Hunt. And be assured that Deputy Drake, still trying to prove he's a better man than his father, will show up to lend more drama to the manhunt.

While Waite delivers the story you expect, he does it with more artistry than would seem possible in a conventional thriller. His descriptions of the stark beauty of the mountains have a calming effect on the intensity of the cinematic action scenes. And the surprising delicacy of the writing also makes it easier to bear the raw violence done to man and beast.



The hero of Urban Waite's Western crime novel can't make a living without doing a little drug smuggling.

Waite is most eloquent when he's probing the interior lives of the men locked in this contest of will and endurance. One minute it's Hunt, turning over memories of his prison days. Then it's Drake, remembering his father's face in the "church light filtering down through a patchwork of green forest branches." No matter who fails to survive, these characters all deserve to be mourned.