The Last Child

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Description

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Review by Jeffrey Barlow

**Warning: Plot Spoilers ahead.** The two books discussed below are excellent, and if you enjoy the genre of detective or mystery fiction, you should read them before reading this article. I am not reviewing the works for potential readers, but discussing them in light of their treatment of the Internet.

We begin this series with the Edgar Award winning work from each of the past two years. Reading them affirms my trust in the award jury; they are each, in their own way, excellent. While they deal with the Internet in somewhat different ways, they also reveal what may be an emerging trope, a common theme in dealing with the Internet in a modern setting in detective fiction, discussed below.

C.J. Box, the 2009 Edgar Award Winner for Best Novel for his work *Blue Heaven*, can appropriately be said to be an old hand in this genre. He has a dozen or more works out, and is said to be a “Wyoming writer” because so many are set there, his home. His most noted character, Joe Pickett, a Wyoming Game Warden, has appeared in ten such works to date [1].

The protagonist of *Blue Heaven*, however, is not Joe Pickett but Jesse Rawlins, a down-on-his-luck rancher trying to save the family spread from developers who would turn it into a subdivision. Rawlins is drawn through a number of coincidences into a very complicated series of events, beginning when two children who have witnessed a murder flee to him for refuge.

The background context of *Blue Heaven* is not an uncommon one in regional fiction: the threat posed by newcomers to the pristine wilderness—in this case, pristine after the Arapaho and the Ute were satisfactorily subdued, of course.

The looming threat is not simply outsiders, but modernity itself. The evildoers are a group of retired rogue cops from the Mother of All Evil Cities, Los Angeles. These “live in woodland fortresses with satellite television and Internet, wells for water, backup power generators at the ready.” (51)
However, things could have been worse. As the protagonist, Jesse Rawlins, muses, “Better ex-cops than actors or dot-com heirs...” (26) Jesse, by comparison, is a determinedly retro rancher on a spread started by his Grandfather. Jesse has preserved all the cowboy virtues and talents, including riding, roping, and when necessary, shooting.

One cause of the ultimate failure of the evil outsiders is to under-estimate the locals, seeing them “…as jaded Europeans thought of Americans: as child-like, boisterous, too insular to appreciate what they had...” (91) In short, the urbanites are too modern to appreciate the strengths of the primitive.

Along with the rogue cops, other potential evildoers are also present, including, possibly, sexual predators. (66) The rogues commit a murder—observed by the fleeing children—of one of their own group, but manage to divert suspicion onto a hapless walk-on character by painting him as a suspected sexual predator, and just possibly a child killer as well.

One of the cast of characters is Villatoro, a former cop from Los Angeles. Although retired, he has been investigating the original crime that brought the rogue cops together and financed their move to Wyoming, the robbery of the Santa Anita race track. While he is suspicious of the retired cops, he has no evidence.

Villatoro’s trusty female assistant in Los Angeles, who is helping him “follow the money” in the racetrack robbery, turns up the critical evidence on the Internet after he arrives in Montana. She does this by a “Simple Google Search” on two of the rogue cops which reveals a crucial connection between them and the stolen money, providing an explanation for the local crimes at the same time.

So the modern, including the Internet, does have its place, even in Wyoming. However, critical elements of the action, particularly plot bits that require having a good horse or two handy, depend very much on the lack of digital services, particularly cell phones.

*Blue Heaven* then, is a variant of the cowboy mystery story, a sub-genre within detective stories in general, but in this case, one that employs the Internet to further its plot. It also, however, removes modern digital culture from the scene at key points so that the plot can be sustained and the forces of traditional local values triumph over digitally enabled newcomers.

The winner for 2010, John Hart’s *The Last Child*, is quite a different work, but relies on a similar trope about the tension between the modern and the primitive, including the Internet. This book is very elegantly written and attracted a number of classy reviews, like that by the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* that it “…rises to serious literature.” Indeed it does. Set in a relatively isolated area of North Carolina, it has a brooding Faulknerian air about it.

As a writer, Hart presents himself as a good deal more cosmopolitan than does Box. Although he too lives in the setting of the novel under discussion here, he is not a regional writer. He has
written three *New York Times* best sellers, including *The Last Child* [2].

As in *Blue Heaven*, the plot is initially driven by a mystery involving missing children. One of these, a girl, has been missing for almost a year, but Johnny, her increasingly troubled and troublesome brother, has been searching for her block by block through the small town in which he lives, and its rural environs by local bus and bicycle. This area is to an extent, timeless in that old prejudices and ancient hatreds are more salient than cell phones or computers, which are not mentioned at all for most of the book.

The characters are deeply troubled; the woods about them are dark, the rivers slow and murky. The bloody past, including the post-civil war extinction of a local colony of freed slaves, weighs heavily on the region. Males drink too much and abuse their wives, and even the good-guy policemen resort to vigilante justice when the law gets complicated.

For much of the book, the time frame itself is indeterminate. Then, finally, a reference to “Amber Alert” reveals that it is set after 1996, when the child for whom the alerts were named was killed [3]. This point sets the stage for additional material dealing with the Internet and computers.

Although a number of children are missing from the surrounding area, no clear pattern has evolved, because most of them are runaways or girls not known to be in the area where they were taken. Johnny finally uncovers one predator, in the time honored detective tradition of blundering in at just the wrong moment, but this man turns out to be only one of two, collectively acting out a dark evil that goes back to their murder of “Small Yellow” in the Vietnam war.

The real organizer of the serial crimes turns out once again to represent, in a sense the evils of modernity. He has picked his victims through his position as head of security at a mall with elaborate closed-circuit TV surveillance. His attempt to destroy his home computer while under surveillance finally betrays his trove of child pornography and he is brought down.

The plot is far more complicated than suggested here, as the Southern Gothic nature of family life and race relations continually figures in plot twists and turns. But once again, we see the Internet as a sort of *Deus ex Machina* [4], both a source of key information and a key MacGuffin in the plot itself. However, as in *Blue Heaven*, it is kept carefully in the wings until it is needed.

We must, of course, be careful not to draw too many conclusions from these two works with regard to the impact of the Internet, but one possible trope is revealed by even this limited analysis. The Internet is unavoidable in even relatively isolated plot settings provided that the time period includes it. But plotting often demands that it be carefully restricted in its use until crucial moments. The trope then, requires some explanation for the failure to employ the Internet until the necessary moment.

In *Blue Heaven*, for example, it was critical that neither the Los Angeles retired cop Villatoro nor his assistant run the critical Google search on the rogue cops who had moved to Montana until
well after he arrives in the region. He knew they were there—it was their presence that brought him to town. But he did not know that they were in league in circumstances that enabled them to wash the money from their robbery until the search is run from Los Angeles. In the meantime, he has become friends with Jesse, the heroic rancher, and the two can engage in the action together.

Without the delay in the Google search, the solution would have been reduced to the simple one of contacting local law enforcement authorities. However, this plot could have driven only a brief police procedural, not a heroic struggle between the traditional and the modern.

The author solves this dilemma by locating the Internet firmly outside the arena of action, implying that it is not really that accessible in the Wyoming setting in which the work occurs. The Internet user—the timeless trusty detective’s assistant—who turns up the critical information is working in Los Angeles at the time, and is a very minor character.

The 2010 Edgar Winner, The Last Child, does not really even tell us the Internet has in fact been developed. We transit from the eternally timeless brooding south into post-1996 North Carolina, but we are never certain precisely when, according to my own reading. The assumption, however, is that it is the present. Computers are available and some of the plot turns upon them.

The police have law-enforcement computer networks, there are any number of worried adults missing friends and children, but nobody sits down at a computer to run searches that may well have revealed the pattern of missing multiple victims. The kids themselves, who carry much of the plot, are all very active, athletes and outdoors types, immune to the many appeals of the computer.

Both of these works then, are presumably set in a time when the Internet is as influential as it is today, but the authors provided effective means of setting it largely aside as a factor in the plot until it was necessary to them. Those means are somewhat similar too, in that both regions are isolated and it is implied, backward. Whether this is indeed an internet-related trope will depend on much more reading in this series.

Endnotes


[3] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AMBER_Alert. As I am interested only in the date, this site suffices, but in addition it is very thorough and well documented.

[4] “(Latin for “god from the machine”; plural: dei ex machina) is a plot device whereby a seemingly inextricable problem is suddenly and abruptly solved with the contrived and unexpected intervention of some new character, ability, or object.” From
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deus_ex_machina Although this site contains a warning that it may contain some undocumented original research, it serves well for my limited purpose here and is in fact quite generously documented.

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