

The stuff of nightmares

Tales for a harrowing Halloween

Suspended Sentences

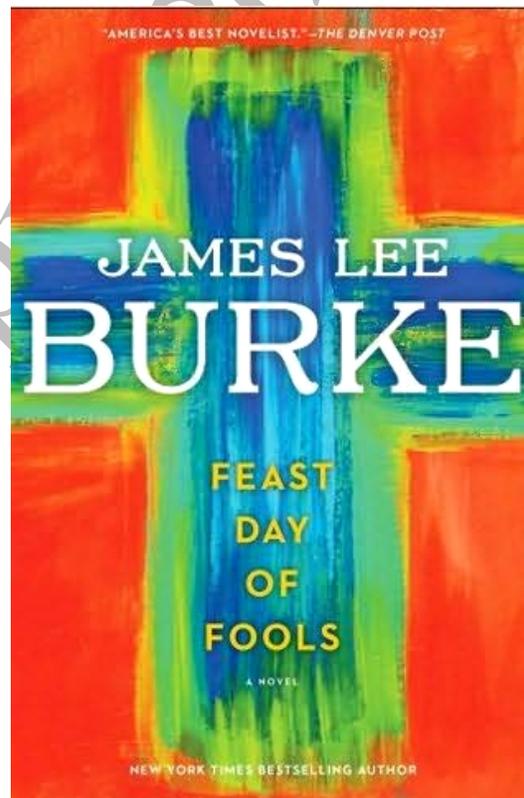
by Jim Napier

Halloween. These days the word conjures up images of costumed kiddies with funny masks, expectantly holding out pillowcases for goodies bought in bulk from Costco. The tableau is completed by cutout silhouettes of black cats and gravestones and witches riding broomsticks. If we are lucky it will be a stormy night, with nature supplying a light-and-sound show to match.

But these are mere clichés, good for indulgent smiles on a single evening, memories soon to be put away for another year, or even forgotten. Genuine terror, the sort that makes your blood run cold and your skin crawl, that returns unbidden in the night and lingers in the back of your mind during the day, comes when the world of everyday events in which most of us live out our lives is suddenly turned upside down, and nothing can be taken for granted. Rooted in one's familiar surroundings there is danger at every corner, and it seems there is no escape. It is the stuff of nightmares.

This week's picks illustrate how, in the world of fiction, setting can in fact become character, and take on a terrifying life of its own. There are no ghosts nor goblins here, no vampires, zombies, nor aliens; the terror is rooted in the stark and ominous settings in which ordinary people find themselves confronted by the extraordinary. Isolated from outside help they are forced

to confront the danger facing them, and their survival is not at all assured. Plotting and character aside, it is a strong sense of place that gives these stories their impact. It all makes for very harrowing reading. Happy Halloween...



James Lee Burke,
Feast Day of Fools
(Simon & Schuster, 2011)

In a sleepy border town in Southwest Texas an aging sheriff, Hack Holland, is confronted by an account of a man tortured to death in the desert. The witness is an alcoholic ex-boxer known

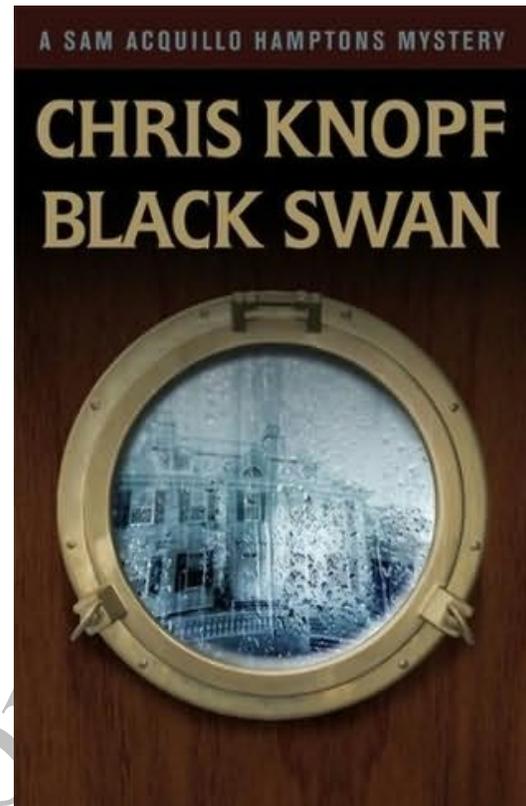
for having visions, and the sheriff reluctantly drives out to look into things. The landscape shelters a rogues' gallery of misfits and miscreants, including a Chinese woman who is known for sheltering illegals and a born-again lay preacher with demons of his own. Holland soon learns that there are other, even less-welcome, species inhabiting the remote region: they include a government engineer who has attracted mercenaries eager to sell his knowledge to terrorists, the FBI trying to find him, and a serial killer Holland had thought was dead.

Gritty, graphic and intense, *Feast Day of Fools* is also a powerful, unforgettable tale of a man who, haunted by his late wife's death, is unable to forge relationships with the living. Burke expertly mines the Southwest landscape to create a stark backdrop for a chilling tale that will remain with readers long after they've finished the book. A superb example of what a crime thriller can become at the hands of a master writer.

Chris Knopf, *Black Swan*
(The Permanent Press, 2011)

Journeyman carpenter Sam Acquillo and his girlfriend are delivering a sailboat to its new owner when a sudden storm snaps the steering gear and they are forced to seek refuge on a small island off the northern tip of Long Island. Limping into port they soon discover that the island is the private enclave of a group of moneyed and insular island-dwellers, and their sudden appearance is not at all welcomed. A wealthy visitor is found murdered, and when the only island cop is attacked and a second storm seals off the island, it falls on Sam to get to the bottom of things before more people die.

Living only a few miles from his setting, author Chris Knopf draws on his own



considerable expertise, both as an experienced sailor and someone intimately familiar with local island culture, to serve up an atmospheric and all-too-believable tale of ordinary people forced to rely upon their own resources in order to survive. The fifth outing for Sam Acquillo, readers who have not yet discovered this talented author will be drawn to his other works.

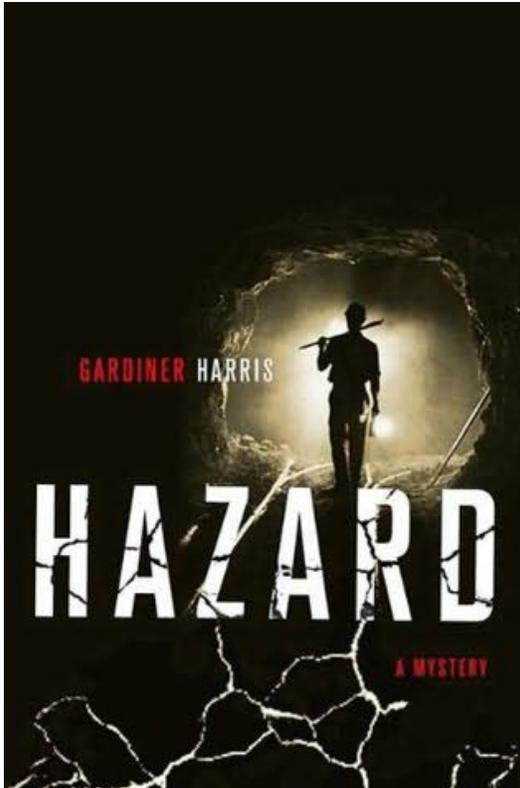
Gardiner Harris, *Hazard*
(Minotaur Books, 2010)

Deep in the bowels of the Kentucky mountains nine miners are labouring to exploit a coal seam when suddenly a block of coal the size of a stove shoots out of a wall, propelled by a torrent of water from an abandoned shaft nearby. In the ensuing chaos most of the men in the shaft are killed, but one makes it to the surface and sounds the alarm. State

mine inspector Will Murphy is sent to investigate the disaster, under pressure from the mine owner to reopen the site as soon as possible. But his efforts to get to the cause of the shaft's collapse sets in motion more violence, as people strive to protect their actions and their jobs. And before the dust finally settles there will be more deaths.

nalism. *Hazards* is a consummately written novel, capturing both the day-to-day struggles of men who know no other way, and the unique sub-culture of the isolated rural communities they inhabit. Readers will not come away unmoved.

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Hazard is an original and gripping tale of the hard-working, no-nonsense people who make their homes above the very mine workings that daily threaten their lives. The insularity of the mining community is tangible. If you are not already claustrophobic, the graphic scenes in the mineshafts, and the hazards they contain, will make you so.

As the public health reporter for *The New York Times*, author Gardiner Harris's coverage of coal-mining disasters led to reforms in laws governing coal-mining safety, and he has won several awards for investigative jour-