

Review of *This Wicked World* by Richard Lange

'Wicked' debut exposes vile L.A.

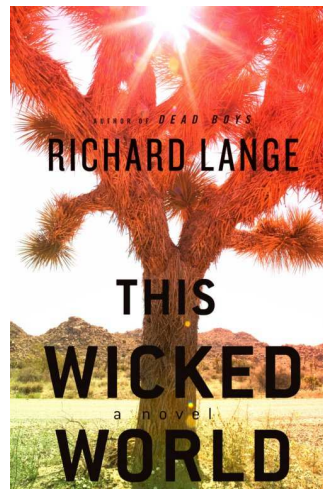
BY JOSEPH PESCHEL, Correspondent

In his first and so far only collection of short stories, "Dead Boys," Richard Lange wrote grittily about bank robbers, drug addicts, alcoholics, whores, and gamblers, depicting their desperate lives with a tough poetic voice that sometimes snuck up on you, sometimes smacked you across the face.

His first novel, "This Wicked World," is a California crime story in the manner of Denis Johnson's recent "Nobody Move." Lange's novel, though, is twice as long and magnitudes better.

The action goes down in and around Los Angeles. Jimmy Boone, a former bodyguard and now an ex-con and bartender, begins an obsessive mission to discover how a poor Guatemalan immigrant died of infection from dog bites, "A weird one, even for L.A." Along the way, Boone scraps with a

young, small-time drug dealer and the kid's ex-stripper/hooker sister.



The trail leads to a pair of murderers and a crime boss who stages dogfights. (The description of the dogfights is almost enough to put you off the book.) Boone has a love interest, of course, a female ex-cop who now teaches middle school. Eventually, Boone finds himself in the middle of a deal gone wrong between the crime boss and a Mexican gang of counterfeiters.

The plot is stock pulp and the result could have been something as insignificant as Johnson's novel, but Lange manages to elevate "This Wicked World" above its page-turner storyline with much of the writing as poetically forceful as his best writing in "Dead Boys," and he adds some solid characterization that is absent from "Nobody Move."

Boone, an ex-Marine and the novel's most sympathetic character, is not the genre's typical tough guy. Sometimes he wakes up thinking that he should take "Fail better" as his motto, since it's the most he can hope for. Lange writes, "The previous night's dreams, more real than life a moment ago, slip away from him, and he lies in bed and listens to the birds' simple morning songs while waiting for dawn to chase the shadows into the corners."



Most of the minor characters are well developed, too. Robo, a 350-pound bouncer, is a self-styled private detective and strong-arm

man who works several jobs to feed his four babies and to pay their huge medical bills. The villainous Spiller, a hit man, is getting his neck tattoo removed so he'll fare better in court at winning custody of his 3-year-old daughter.

For Lange, even the city is a character. He writes, "Los Angeles was not its haughty self in the rain. It was like a wet cat: humiliated, confused. People stepped gingerly on suddenly slippery sidewalks, looking like

they'd been lied to." Even buses snort and hiss, "throwing up silver sheets of spray."

"Wicked," cramped by the limitations of its genre, doesn't quite live up to the promise of the best stories in "Dead Boys." But call it a crime novel or Los Angeles crime noir, it is one exciting well-written novel.

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This Wicked World
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