

DARK COUNTRY by Darren E. Laws

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When I started reading *Dark Country*, I had no idea what to expect, especially as I had not read the first book in the Georgina O'Neil series, *Turtle Island*. However, it did not take me long to realise my lack of knowledge regarding previous events did not matter. The story stands by itself and everything about it is totally unexpected.

THE PLOT

In 1958, Amy Dark, the matriarch of a famous country and western singing family, is found dead in her hotel room. Twenty years later, her daughter Caroline is abducted but never found. When history repeats itself, and Caroline's grown-up daughter Susan also disappears, the family's manager, Stevie Anderson, enlists the services of Leroy LaPortiere.

Having left the police force, Leroy has now become a private investigator, but has still kept in contact with his friend and former case partner, FBI agent Georgina O'Neil. While attending a misconduct hearing – regarding a death which had occurred during an investigation – Georgina collapses and is rushed to hospital, where she undergoes surgery to remove a brain tumour. No longer able to continue her career with the FBI, Georgina is left struggling to recover her impaired mobility and speech, prompting Leroy to move into her spare room to be there for her.

As Georgina's recovery makes good progress, Leroy asks her to become his assistant, knowing she is the best person to help him solve the mystery of the Dark family disappearances. Glad to have something constructive to do, Georgina agrees. Together they embark on the investigation, accompanied by TV reporter, Barbara Dace, who has been promised an exclusive by Stevie Anderson.

With the help of author Fisher Sutherland – whose research for his book on the Dark family mystery proves invaluable – Georgina and Leroy begin to piece together the family history. However, Georgina is not fully recovered and still suffers from some debilitating symptoms, which begin to affect her performance.

Having insisted on tagging along with Leroy's team, Fisher becomes attracted to Georgina and eventually seduces her. Unfortunately, Georgina's impaired judgement and failure to resist Fisher's charms have disastrous repercussions, setting her and Leroy on a dangerous and bloody trail in the hunt to find Susan.

As they gradually get closer to the truth, the death toll increases, and a complicated story of family betrayal begins to unfold, resulting in devastating and tragic consequences.

MY REVIEW

It took me a little while to get into this novel, mainly because it jumps about quite a bit between the past and the present – sometimes within the same chapter. However, once I got into the rhythm and style of the writing, I became engrossed in the story itself, which is anything but predictable.

Starting off as a simple investigation into one case of murder and two cases of abduction, *Dark Country* soon develops into a story of revenge, cleverly weaving the backstories of the two main protagonists into the fabric of the compelling storyline.

Georgina O'Neil is an emotionally conflicted central character, often given to irrational and ill-considered action. Her father is Assistant Director Wynan O'Neil, her superior at the FBI and a member of the panel overseeing her misconduct hearing. Disapproving of his second marriage to a much younger woman, following the death of her mother, Georgina is even more troubled on discovering her stepmother is pregnant. A rift develops between the previously close father and daughter – a rift Wynan is desperate to heal.

As she spends more time with Leroy, their feelings begin to go beyond close friendship, although neither will admit or act on it. Leroy is also a troubled soul. Having recently broken up with his former lover, Lia, he is trying to reconcile the fact he still loves her with his growing attraction to Georgina. This conflict is continued throughout the story, only to be resolved when it is too late. Personally, I found the simmering tension between them, and their failure to acknowledge it, left me wanting to bang their heads together. Life is too short for that amount of romantic dithering.

The main cast are joined by a variety of supporting characters, from the owners of the fated motel, where the original murder took place, to the people involved in the two abductions – not least the terrifying Fisher Sutherland, whose presence is pivotal to the plot.

At this point, I have to warn readers of a nervous disposition, this book is not only violent but also extremely graphic in its bloodthirsty detail. I have to admit, I had to gloss over a few highly descriptive sentences myself.

The plot is clever and complicated, offering a menacing journey full of twists and revelations. As Georgina and Leroy close in on their target, the pace increases, gathering momentum right until its shocking ending. The story may have started slowly but by the time it ended I was holding my breath.

As well as the time shifting between past and present, I also found the sudden chopping and changing of character viewpoints and scenes within a chapter disconcerting. Although I understood it was probably to give the sense of things happening simultaneously, it was at times confusing.

Overall, I really enjoyed this novel and will definitely be checking out the other books in the series. *'Dark Country'* is certainly worth reading, however I would recommend you read it before eating, especially if you are squeamish.

THE AUTHOR

Born in East London in 1962, Darren's first writing success came in the mid 1990's, winning first place in a short story competition for a BBC Radio 4 arts programme. The thrill of hearing his words read on Radio 4 drove him to write short stories of a

dark and quirky nature before progressing to lengthier works. Darren then crafted his first novel *'Turtle Island'*, a crime thriller, which was picked up by an American publisher.

Darren also has another published novel, *'Tripping'*, a surreal black comedy described as chick-noir. *'Dark Country'* is the second Georgina O'Neil novel. A third novel in the series is being written.

'Dark Country' is published by Caffeine Nights Publishing and is available in eBook and paperback format. It can be purchased from Amazon, Waterstones and W H Smith.