

*Cry Uncle*

By Alan Michael Parker

Review by: Mindy Friddle

In the opening scene of *Cry Uncle*, protagonist Ray Stanton has just been tossed from a pickup truck, naked, tortured, and disoriented. It is a spring night in rural Ohio when we find Ray sitting in the dirt, sliding on a pair of stolen overalls, realizing “more had happened than he could remember: somehow his body or his internal clock or whatever kept track hadn’t registered a chunk of time, as though a few frames of film had been surreptitiously snipped from his life.” Already considered an outsider as an industry hatchet man firing workers at the local textile mill, Ray has plenty of enemies in the small town of Brighton, and manages to make even more as the tale unfolds. Yet it is Ray’s subsequent recovery from his nasty head injury that leads to a journey of self-discovery in this suspenseful novel of mill-town politics, racism, and modern-day corporate malfeasance.

As Ray’s memory sharpens, it becomes evident that Jimmy Palmer, Jr., a local malcontent and racist is the leader of the group of “punks” responsible for Ray’s attack, although Ray isn’t clear for some time why he was singled out. What *is* certain is that the attack has left Ray vulnerable and afraid, a role the 41-year old white, successful businessman, with a workaholic commitment to the job of “business process re-engineering” is not accustomed to. In the past, Ray took pride in his corporate and industrial makeovers, even if that meant he fired people and replaced them with machines and computers. But since his attack, “he had no ambitions,” Parker writes, “he had only the present, small as it felt. He had no future: the pain stuck him in the moment, a fly on a glue strip.”

Estranged from his wife and apart from his children, who live in another state, Ray relies on the kindness of his neighbor Mae Reeves, a black disabled postal worker, who cares for him after he is discharged from the Emergency Room. With the help of Mae and her biracial daughter, Kayla, a restaurant manager, Ray begins to heal, even if his vague sense of paranoia and fear increase. “His emotions felt closer to the surface than usual,” Ray thinks. “The past few days had taught him a new suspicion: events, too, weren’t what they seemed.”

Wariness binds Ray with Mae and Kayla, since the women are well acquainted with the racism and violence that linger just below the surface of the town. “ “Being a victim is new to you,” Mae tells Ray. “It has touched you for the first time in your life.” Meanwhile, the close quarters intensify Ray’s attraction to Kayla, and the two begin a passionate affair. Previously, a man “living in response to everyone else’s life,” Ray finds himself thinking deeper, “capable of anything, not to be trusted, glad to be angry.” Ray and Kayla soon hatch a plan to wreak vengeance on Jimmy Palmer, Jr: “How to nail a punk who acts like he’s a member of the Klan?” Ray thinks, “And the answer: make his friends hate him. How to do that? Make him seem...enlightened.”

Ray’s brief return to his office at the Windy Oaks shirt factory, where he is charged with modernizing the plant, goes badly. Here’s where the real strength of the novel comes into play, as the author is adept at capturing the increasingly menacing feel of Brighton. Ray soon realizes he can trust no one. His job at Windy Oaks is on the line, due in part to the “unpleasantness” of his being attacked. Jimmy Palmer, Jr. continues to stalk Ray in his neighborhood and workplace, and Ray and Kayla have managed to captured the unwelcome attention of a local cop. Kayla’s actions remain inscrutable, leaving Ray to wonder if she is toying with his affections as her “white lover.” Even the seemingly benevolent Mae betrays his confidence in a surprisingly personal way. Ray’s behavior becomes unpredictable even to himself, after he covertly kisses a stranger after a few drinks in a local dive. “Life in Brighton,” Ray reflects, “had become exaggerated, or at least bigger than his life usually was.”

When it comes to setting, Parker has done his homework: the “business process engineering world” of the modern textile mill is expertly drawn, the corporate slang, the worries and power of management, the descriptions of a shirt factory are pitch perfect and a real pleasure to read. As a narrator, Ray’s narrow point of view, his flawed memory, may seem myopic at times and leave some frustrated readers wanting to know more about other intriguing characters. Kayla, especially, remains a bit of a cipher. Nevertheless, the narrative pull remains strong throughout this page-turner, and when Ray must choose between revenge or redemption in the end, we wonder if the decision will be made with Ray’s new self and his “ability to go somewhere, in himself...a place new to him.” Part mystery, part love story, *Cry Uncle* is steadily entertaining and a memorable debut.