

and cases decided by lawyers, judges, and caseworkers who don't bother to learn anything about the children, or even let them into the courtroom. Yet while this material was eye opening and not "just fiction," the book does not expose a globally deficient system, and its sketch of the system's workings seems at times overgeneralized. The author conveys personal suffering, but he is no Upton Sinclair. I wondered how my reading of the book would have been altered had I not been given the author's history.

The novel's not-so-tacit premise is that the system creates monsters or masochists. "We're like savages," the teenage narrator says of his comrades. Later he and his girlfriend, having been abused, become stuck, depending on people to beat them up in order to experience erotic pleasure. Something about this connection seems implausible—not the behavior itself, but the simplified calculus that relates past abuse with present desire. It lacks psychological depth and complexity.

The big problem with making thoughtful temporal connections is that the novel is told in reverse, starting with the narrator's return to Chicago as an adult and working backwards to when he was in the fifth grade. Some of the past is revealed early, but, of course, none of the book's previous episodes can be remembered later—because that's the future! It is all written in the present tense, but until the last chapter the retrospective adult seems to narrate, which makes for sometimes awkward reading. Maybe therapy works backwards like that, starting recently and returning to childhood, but one hopes that even in regression we acknowledge our present selves. For me, the technique was simply annoying, and I would have turned pages more eagerly if the chronotope had been upright.

There is a lot of masochistic sexual material in this novel, but most of it reads like a shop manual. I can only guess that people who frequent dominatrixes don't routinely use the

words "penis" and "vagina" to describe their activities, as the narrator does. The author's Web site (www.stephenelliott.com, posted in the "About the Author" section at the back of the book) has no problems finding the appropriate vernacular,

including in conversations with a real dominatrix about Republican clients. The site's commentary about the Republican convention seemed more trenchant and entertaining, and probably more socially relevant, than this novel.

White Hot

by Sandra Brown; New York, Simon and Schuster, 2004, 432 pages, \$25.95

Scott Turpin, M.D.

I will preface this review with the caveat that I had never read a novel by Sandra Brown. *White Hot* is a romance mystery set in the small Louisiana town of Destiny. The book begins with the lines, "Some said that if he was going to kill himself, he couldn't have picked a better day for it. Life was hardly worth living that particular Sunday afternoon, and most organisms were doing a half-assed job of it."

From this beginning the story unfolds around the Hoyle family, who run an iron foundry, the main industry in town. The patriarch of the family, Huff Hoyle, is introduced to us after he returns from a hot day during which he planned to play golf but ended up playing cards at the country club. He is described as striding in and telling his son, Chris, to, "Get me one of those longnecks. I'm so damn thirsty, I couldn't work up a spit if my dick was on fire." He is the coarse, domineering, and controlling father of three children. He also runs his iron foundry with a firm and at times brutal hand, with disregard for safety regulations. His oldest son, Chris, is his pride and joy. Huff's daughter and second child, Sayre, left the family. We find later that years ago Huff ruined her plans to marry her high school love, forced an abortion on her, and then had her marry a rich old crony.

Understandably, she decided to leave. Since then she has found her

calling doing interior design for the elite of San Francisco. Huff's youngest son, Danny, is more emotional and apparently kills himself at the start of the novel. Danny's apparent suicide sets the stage for Sayre to return, with a guilty conscience, because she did not return two telephone calls Danny recently made to her. Soon it appears that Danny may in fact have been murdered, and that Chris is a suspect. Sayre decides to stay and is embroiled in a love-hate relationship with the Hoyle family attorney, Beck Merchant.

Unfortunately I found the characters too flat, and I could not get interested in them. I found Sayre to be temperamental and annoying, whereas the author wanted to portray her as having a smoldering passionate side. Having roots in the South myself, I have enjoyed Southern literature. However, I found that the novel did not evoke a real sense of the South and that the plot could have been transplanted to any small town by changing a few props. The main plot twists came late, and I felt they were sprung on the reader.

The promotional literature accompanying the novel had a list of proposed questions for an interviewer to ask Ms. Brown. One question is, "You've described *White Hot* as 'more of a potboiler' than your previous novels—how so?" This seems an apt question. The novel was readable, although I do not feel that I learned anything new or interesting about human nature, behavior, or psychology.

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