



Arkansas

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Arkansas is a biting first novel full of wet T-shirt contests, illicit drugs, and cross-country road trips. There are the days: the dappled grounds, the aimless yardwork, the hours in the booth giving directions to families in SUVs. And then there are the nights: crisscrossing the South with illicit goods, the shifty deals in dingy trailers, the vague orders from a boss they've never met. Before Kyle and Swin can recognize how close to paradise they are in this neglected state park in southern Arkansas, the lazy peace is shattered with a shot. Night blends into day. Dead bodies. Crooked superiors. Suspicious associates. It's on-the-job training, with no time for slow learning, bad judgment, or foul luck.

Arkansas Details

Date : Published March 1st 2008 by McSweeney's

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Author : John Brandon

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Genre : Fiction, Contemporary, Mystery, Crime, American, Southern

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From Reader Review Arkansas for online ebook

Pearse Anderson says

Arkansas is going up there as one of the best crime novels I have ever read. Everything makes so much sense. The characters are brilliantly fleshed out, realistic, charming. The plot is aimless and emotional. The prose is so fucking stellar I want to steal it for my works or hang it on my walls. For a first novel, Brandon has knocked it out of the park. Holy shit. No shit Davy Rothbart loves this. No shit the Coen Brothers probably would. 10/10.

Nick says

gonna give it another go...

With lines as humorous as 'May you dream of offered tits' as playful as 'They'd kiss her like they were in hell and she was iced tea' or as sweet and lyrical as 'Let's stay together till we die. I'll never tire of looking at you when the sun hits you through the window,' John Brandon packs this book with the kind of writing that would seemingly have a pretty wide appeal.

Even though the ending faltered, Arkansas was a thrilling, engaging read. I'm sure Brandon has read his fair share of Elmore Leonard but Arkansas is wholly his own, a great unique debut.

Kilean says

Tore through this one smiling the entire time. I love it when things happen in a book. Especially when the sentences make me turn just the slightest bit green with envy (or jealousy). Great voice, great read.

Jaron says

Barely 3 stars. The writing was good, and there was enough action to keep my interest, the problem was an almost total lack of likeable -- or even just sympathetic -- characters. They were quirky, with strange hobbies and personal histories, but in the end I only really liked one character. It was an interesting concept to use second-person perspective, with who "you" were being a mystery for a good portion of the novel. The late-breaking change of that storyline from "you" to "I" was jarring though. I felt like the author was trying to win a bet -- like someone dared him to use first, second and third person narrative styles all in the same book. I would only recommend this to people who like both Coen brothers films and Bret Easton Ellis novels.

Bookbeaver says

I don't get it. A plotless ramble through the Arkansas drug scene. So many things didn't make sense. The

timeline didn't add up. The characters were shallow and bland, not very well developed. I finished this only because 1) I'm stubborn, 2) I was hoping for it to get better, 3) It was an interlibrary loan and I didn't want to set myself a poor precedent (see reason 1). I had 'Citrus County' on my TRL, but crossed it out after finishing this disappointing read.

Jessica says

I read a snippet of this book in the mcsweeney's rectangle and was really taken by the way the characters interacted and formed.

its very entertaining.

Paul Crittenden says

The Coen Brothers have made a nice career out of crafting stories about guys who are not nearly as smart as they think they are. Folks whose plans are not nearly as airtight as they should be. Folks who don't have nearly the power they think they do. In his debut novel *Arkansas*, John Brandon creates some characters who would fit perfectly in a Coen Brothers movie. Brandon's tight story also reminds me of the whole Southern Gothic thing (Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy) and the fine crime novel style of Elmore Leonard. He also manages to throw in a few experimental flourishes that don't seem to bog the narrative down but rather elucidate it.

Here we have Swin and Kyle, two men who back into jobs in the drug trade in the rural South. Their improbable rise to the lower echelons of narcotics distribution finds them working for a fake Ranger in an Arkansas State Park. They drive for a man named Bright who in turn gets packages from a mysterious woman who goes by the name of "Her." The ultimate power in the small backwoods drug ring is held by Frog, yet another foolhardy type. We learn of Frog's rise to the top of his game (which really isn't all that far up, to tell the truth) in some interstitial chapters written in second person.

Brandon makes all of these characters seem real and you find yourself rooting for Swin and Kyle even though you get the feeling from pretty early on that their story will not end nicely. Then the bodies start piling up and what little center there is obviously cannot hold. The sympathy is ratcheted up when Swin gets his girlfriend pregnant and the three try to make a semblance of a normal life. Brandon makes Swin an intelligent (if not too clever) wannabe family man who is more than a little self-centered. He fears that the sisters he left in Kentucky will miss him so much that they will become strippers for lack of a decent male role model. The truth is they are doing just fine without Swin. His partner Kyle is the real criminal of the two. Kyle doesn't pretend to be smart but he thinks he knows how to live outside the law. The two bring out the best and the worst in the each other. Mostly the worst.

Brandon does a fine job detailing the land of Razorback football and shady trailer parks. With a debut as strong as this, I expect great things from John Brandon. I highly recommend *Arkansas*. Read it now so you can impress your friends when the Coen Brothers version wins Best Picture.

Nooilforpacists says

Could be a Coen Brothers movie. Dark and rich as a cup of French Roast coffee, transported to Little Rock Arkansas. Shifting narrative perspectives keep the reader on his toes. Not a five star, however, because the characters feel either thin or forced.

Howard says

Maybe I'm old-fashioned, too traditional, out-of-touch, or all three, but I like to have at least one character in a novel that I can pull for -- or at least feel some sympathy for. There were none in this one. I would have liked to have given it two-and-a-half stars.

To me the characters are reminiscent of those in the spaghetti Westerns that I disliked for the same reasons. I remember watching "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," unable to identify "the Good". A more descriptive title for that film would have been "The Bad, the Bad, and the Ugly."

John Brandon is no Daniel Woodrell or Larry Brown, though it is obvious he would like to be. Maybe later, but not yet.

Michael Whitaker says

Dark, funny, gripping and grimy.

John Brandon's prose is peppered with details, like shotgun pellets of facts, spread throughout each page. Almost every sentence is a description, it seems like. At first, to be honest, this annoyed me, but it read like a book of cold, hard facts. Facts - depressing, disturbing, disjointed, diminutive - are all there are. And the characters in the book live them out until the very end.

With main characters that I basically despised in the beginning, I truly felt for them by the end.

One of the themes that struck me in this story is our lack of control over our lives. There are too many variables. We can't change it all around, for ourselves or for others. But in no sense is this a nihilistic novel. Things still matter. Things matter deeply. There are still things worth fighting for.

For me, 'Arkansas' and 'Citrus County' by John Brandon are new summer classics.

Jamie says

Count me as a newly minted fan of John Brandon. There are the books you read, and then the books you

read, and then the books that take up residence, that shoulder in with their noise and their luggage and eat and breathe and sleep under your roof. I read *Arkansas* in the grass, in the sand by the water, by the flat, empty hotel pool, all in the glass-eyed heat of the southern summer. It bristles with the same dark energy of boredom, cosmic and comic and criminal. The languid, lazy south; the placid domesticity of a wild life of crime.

Entirely coincidentally, the New York Times Book Review just came out to give Brandon's newest novel some seriously high praise. Meaning I now get to shamelessly crib Daniel Handler, as he finds in *Citrus County* what I found in *Arkansas*:

"John Brandon joins the ranks of [writers] whose wild flights feel more likely than a heap of what we've come to expect from literature, by calmly reminding us that the world is far more startling than most fiction is. He subverts the expectations of an adolescent novel by staying true to the wild incongruities of adolescence, and subverts the expectations of a crime novel by giving us people who are more than criminals and victims. The result is a great story in great prose, a story that keeps you turning pages even as you want to slow to savor them, full of characters who are real because they are so unlikely."

All that's left is to change my review this much: withhold that last fifth star for John Brandon's next.

First read July 2010

June 2011:

At this rate I'm making room for this book every summer. It's maybe not even summer until *Arkansas* comes shouldering in. I guess what I'm saying is, this is just my thing and I loved it even more this time than last.

Drew says

Legalization of cannabis has become something of a pet issue for me, and not just because I live in Colorado and enjoy the occasional smoke. The reason I get more and more interested in legalization is because its implications are so unexpectedly broad. Pharmaceutical companies, the alcohol and tobacco industries, and the federal government all have something to fear from it, but also something to gain if they play their cards right. It's causing a renewed states'-rights debate. And if you consider the potential revenue that could be gained from a heavy tax on it, it affects other areas, too, like education and public transportation and any number of other perennially underfunded things. That's just from the psychoactive, though; legalization would allow industrial production of hemp, which has all sorts of mostly-good implications. And let's not start on how such a thing would impact traffic stops and DUI (CO/WY and CO/UT border patrols, e.g.).

What stops it from being legalized? Mostly the aforementioned parties who have something to fear from it, plus voter blocs like, uh, probably older Christians, plus the fact that 50% in favor may be a majority but it's not a majority that could induce government higher-ups to stick their necks out. But any discussion of marijuana and the drug war tends to eventually lead one to the conclusion that the main reason it's illegal is for the creation of a permanent underclass of nonviolent criminals who can only get the very worst jobs, and who are thus denied the social mobility that supposedly exists here. And if you're actually smoking while having the discussion, it'll take you further and probably convince you that all of law and law enforcement

revolves around creating a few key criminal acts that are extremely appealing and largely harmless and victimless, for which enforcement officers can use their discretion as far as arresting or not arresting. Example: possession of marijuana. Appealing, since many people smoke and can usually do so without getting caught. And since you can't overdose on weed, or even really become a junkie, even if you sell it to tons of people, it's probably not going to harm your community much, so you can have a clean(ish) conscience even if you deal. But let's say you get caught driving with weed in the car. If you're a rich white kid from the suburbs, maybe you go to jail, but it's just as likely that the cop will just take your stash and your piece and let you go with a ticket. And the ounce you have next to the spare tire is probably fine. But if you're a black kid and you're in the ghetto, you're getting searched and most definitely going to jail. It allows police officers to apply a double standard according to whether they like the look of you or not. Speeding is another good example. Since we're conditioned by being able to get away with going five or ten over the limit anywhere, police have carte blanche to pull over any car they want to, for any reason, provided it isn't one of the odd ones that goes at or under the limit. The goal is, it seems, to create a world in which you are either a law-abiding citizen or you are a criminal. And a law-abiding citizen can become a criminal, but not vice versa.

If there's any one major merit that *Arkansas* has, any one Big Idea that it's trying to get across, it's demonstrating just how false that dichotomy is. All its characters are criminals under the definition laid out above, but they represent a whole spectrum of criminality. You have Swin, a good-natured autodidact whose main attraction to smuggling is its ease and thrill; Kyle, who's similar but more serious and with a cruel streak; Bright,

a kind, innocuous-seeming park ranger who nonetheless keeps bones in his attic; and Frog, the consummate businessman, who's willing to use violence but not without exhausting all other possibilities first. All these guys are, to my mind, in that grey area between criminal and citizen, and in fact the one (not one of the four above) who starts as a criminal but goes furthest towards law-abiding-ness is the one who dies in the most gruesome way. Brandon's characters also live in the world to which criminals are relegated: a world of trailers, pawnshops, beat-up trucks, and general crushing poverty. A world that smells like "tarnished silver and bad fruit." The characters in this book are there to demonstrate what ends up being a simple point: "criminals" are just normal people, trying to work and live normal lives, under a bizarre set of extra constraints: less money, less food, more drugs, more violence, high stakes, inscrutable law enforcement. A representative quote: "You wish you could have [X]'s body cremated and go to the top of the Barnett Building and let his ashes blow all over Little Rock. You wish you didn't have to drag him through your house and down your steps and across your yard and bury him in the woods."

I won't try to sell *Arkansas* on just that point, because Brandon's actually a pretty good writer, and not really an "ideas" writer like I may have just portrayed him. What the book primarily is is a standard someone-gets-murdered-and-one-thing-leads-to-another thriller, which works to whatever extent you care about the characters. There are a lot of ins, a lot of outs, a lot of what-have-yous. If I'd read more of this type of thing, maybe I wouldn't like it as much, but I haven't.

Luckily, Brandon's a good writer. To those who say his writing has a pervasive "McSweeney's" tone, I respectfully submit that you are reading too much McSweeney's and are hypersensitive to it. He's not florid or overly descriptive, but also not overly hardboiled. Maybe some examples will show it better:

"I read a book. Did I tell you?

'You might have.'

'It was about farmers. Four hundred thirty-six pages long. You start on page thirteen, though. They count the table of contents and the part where other writers say, "This man, by damn, is a writer. If he was here, I'd give him a nut scrub.'""*'

"The seat would not recline at all; it forced Kyle into the posture of a responsible citizen who trimmed his azaleas and bought cleats for needy punks."

"Your neighbor in the next condo is your best customer. His day job is carving cedar elves. A big company bought him out of his copyright, but they still sell a select line of elves hand-carved by the inventor. This man hates sleep. He hates to let time pass while he's not watching, and does not want to say, one day, that his life was short. He measures time in elves."

Sure, it may get a little self-consciously stylish especially in the second-person parts, but it's solid. Certainly nothing to drive anyone away.

Recommended. But here's where the book fails for me, and the spoilers are major so don't read on unless you've already read it or aren't ever going to: (view spoiler)

*This is probably the widest block of quote marks I've had to use since writing my thesis.

Sam Quixote says

Kyle, a young man and a drifter, gets involved in crime early on, stealing, petty crime, and then moves on to become a drug mule for someone called Frog. Swin, another young man aimlessly moving through life, becomes Kyle's partner and the two drive drugs around the state of Arkansas. When a deal goes wrong resulting in the death of their boss, a park ranger called Bright, they hide the body and try not to let Frog know. Swin then gets involved with a young woman called Johnna and people start wondering where Bright is. Kyle and Swin realise their time is coming to an end but can they make it out of Arkansas alive?

I came across Brandon's writing in McSweeney's 26 and was thoroughly impressed. It's an exciting and interesting tale of modern day adventure taking in rural Arkansas, disturbing and fascinating characters, all told with a strong sense of storytelling. The writing is of a very high standard with the dialogue sounding genuine. The story moves along at a cracking pace and is never boring. He even writes action well, while the mysterious Frog character's true identity is a great reveal in the end.

I highly recommend this book to all fiction loving readers out there and only lament how little known such a talented and interesting writer John Brandon is when so many poor writers are so well known (you know the ones). Here's hoping he finishes a second book soon and achieves recognition.

Darren says

This book is perfection. If Cormac McCarthy were as funny as Elmore Leonard and they wrote about aimless twentysomethings vaguely attempting to commit a crime but mostly just talking about nothing in particular, it would read something like this. God damn, John Brandon, you are a discovery for the centuries.

Nate D says

I somewhat preemptively joked that this book spoke in the Universal McSweeney's Voice, as used by a lot of young authors seemingly seeking to avoid overly rich or impassioned style. But *Arkansas* actually seems like the proper use such for pared-down, precise, affectless prose. The protagonists are smart but dissolute, too directionless to be disillusioned, people with nothing to lose and nothing to lose it on. The crisp prose both seems accurate to their experiences as small-time criminals, and flattens out a few horrifying events into the matter-of-fact simplicity of day to day life. Which also suits the prevailing absence of moral compass throughout. All the major characters have life histories that reveal them to be ordinary people, lead astray only by random chance and poor alternatives, not really lead astray at all but drifting into arbitrary callings like most anyone else. But no one is for ending up where they do, no one is forgiven. The novel neither solicits nor elicits any sympathy, falling away into a sort nihilism that lacks even the force of pessimism.
