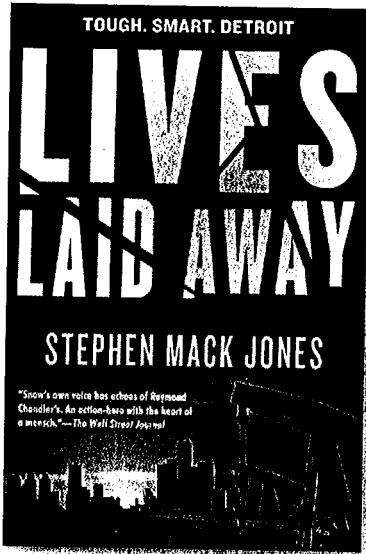


Lives Laid Away



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Reviewed by: C. C. Harrison

"Stephen Mack Jones' snappy, razor sharp writing is a delight to read. *Lives Laid Away* is movie material for sure."

The author, in a display of excellent narrative, tells us just about all we need to know about protagonist August Octavio Snow in the first 500 words of this book. We learn he makes homemade salsa from his mother's recipe, he loves his father's favorite music, his heritage (Black and Mexican,) his dance moves (rhumba bolero, and he's good at it,) his stretch in Afghanistan, the status of his love life, and where he lives (Mexicantown).

In chapter two, we learn a bit more. He's been railroaded off the police force for looking into the former mayor's dirty

dealings.

He came out all right, though:

"After being fired from the Detroit Police Department, the trial that followed and my twelve-million-dollar wrongful dismissal award, I'd wanted nothing more than to isolate my shattered self in a safe place. That had been the whole reason I'd renovated my childhood home on Markham Street . . ."

The story is set in Detroit, let's say in *New Detroit*, because regardless of what you may be reading in the news, that great city is on a huge comeback trail. Snow is instrumental in helping that along by revitalizing his block in Mexicantown. He pours plenty of his newfound money into improving his neighborhood by buying and rehabbing fixer uppers in a sort of one-man neighborhood renaissance.

Besides allowing him to live well, his money also allows him to pursue social justice issues by helping, or helping to hide, his friends and neighbors, both legal and illegal immigrants. People love and respect him, what he does in the community, and they love and respect each other.

When you get a bit farther into this book, look at the author photo on the inside back flap and see if you don't picture August Snow looking just like that. Big guy, kind eyes, nice smile, the face of a guy you'd want looking out for you in a pinch. A guy who keeps five burner phones in a shoebox in his closet.

When the drugged and raped body of a local teenage girl dressed like Marie Antoinette is found in the Detroit River, Snow is given a picture of the victim by one of his law enforcement buddies and asked to show it around. The description of what happens to a body when it lands in the river at 73 miles per hour is brutal.

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Later, the body of another young girl is found, this one dressed like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, and Snow finds himself embroiled in a case of human trafficking, kidnapping, and sex clubs.

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There's plenty of anger, even hatred, in this book mostly directed toward the U.S. government, federal immigration authorities, and the law in general. There's plenty of profanity, too, but then some of the characters are pretty bad and some are pretty badass, and that's how they talk. It's a good read, though, if readers can ignore the political bias that will be off putting to a good number of them.

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One of the real strengths of this book is its sense of place, and the author's excellent portrayal of the color and vibrancy of life in these New Detroit neighborhoods:

". . . You don't live in Mexicantown without making at least a once-a-week sojourn to Honeycomb, a neighborhood institution: pyramids of brightly colored jalapeños, mangos, tomatillos and succulent cactus leaves; shelves crowded with spices, imported packaged Latin American foods; colorful cans and bottles of Mexican and Nicaraguan coffees and soft drinks; fresh handmade tortillas and chorizo, and enough Mi Costenita candy and Pinguinos sweet cakes to make a child's eyes pop." Adults, too, surely.

Descriptions of such new hip, artsy, trendy communities and the people who live in them will please and thrill Detroiters, ex-Detroiters, and transplant Detroiters. Familiar names, places and streets are sprinkled into the story in abundance.

The author includes enough well-described action and shoot 'em up scenes to keep Rambo fans satisfied, some of which are legal and well thought out by the characters involved, some not legal nor well thought out. One of them lands Snow and his buddies in the local slammer.

In addition, Stephen Mack Jones gives us some of the most colorful characters in crime literature today.

Here's Green Eyes:

"After a moment the door cracked open, revealing a third of a pretty woman's face including one emerald-green eye. . . . She was dressed for sex and murder; a short black leather skirt, form-fitting black lace bodice, seamed black stockings and black stiletto heels. Secured around her length of smooth white neck was a black lace choker bearing a silver skull.

"'You have lovely eyes,' she said, easing the hammer down on her Smith and Wesson .38. 'Like—chocolate milk.'"

And readers will love Nana:

"A devilish glint returned to her large brown eyes. . . . I blew her a kiss. She caught it midair and slapped it to her right butt cheek."

Stephen Mack Jones' snappy, razor sharp writing is a delight to read. *Lives Laid Away* is movie material for sure.

C. C. Harrison's most recent novel of suspense is *Death by G-String: A Coyote Canyon Ladies Ukulele Club Mystery*, the 2019 Colorado Humanities Book Award Mystery Winner, the Colorado Independent Publishers Association Book Awards Second Place winner, and a finalist in both the Arizona/New Mexico Book Awards and the American Fiction Awards.

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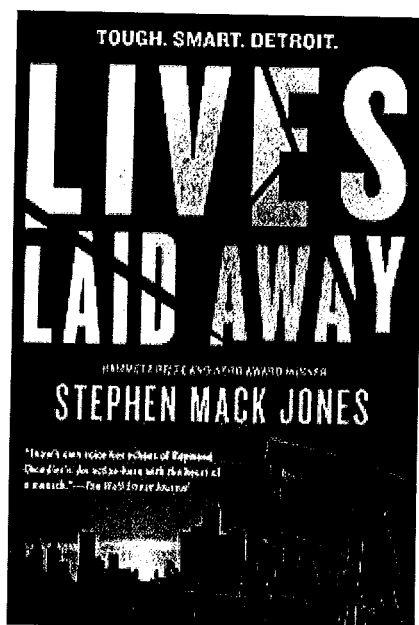
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★ Lives Laid Away

Stephen Mack Jones. *Soho Crime*, \$26.95 (312p) ISBN 978-1-61695-959-3

MORE BY AND ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

Jones effectively dramatizes the Trump administration's approach to illegal immigration in his superior second novel featuring ex-cop August Snow (after 2017's *August Snow*). Snow was forced out of the Detroit PD after he began digging into allegations that the former mayor was corrupt. The wrongful dismissal lawsuit he filed yielded a multimillion-dollar payday, and Snow has chosen to invest that money in his old neighborhood of Mexicantown. The community he is working to help comes under threat from an ICE crackdown, an initiative that coincides with the death of 19-year-old Isadora del Torres, an undocumented alien who leaped into the Detroit River while dressed as Marie Antoinette. Snow learns that the dead teenager was the victim of a vicious human trafficking ring that may involve corrupt immigration agents. Snow, who is of mixed African-American and Mexican heritage, is an uncompromising crusader with a sense of humor reminiscent of Robert Parker's Spenser. He merits a long literary life. *Agent: Stephany Evans, FinePrint Literary Management. (Jan.)*

DETAILS

Fiction Discussion Questions

1. For the person who chose this book: What made you want to read it? What made you suggest it to the group for discussion? Did it live up to your expectations? Why or why not? Are you sorry/glad that you suggested it to the group (ask again after the discussion)?
2. Did you think the characters and their problems/decisions/relationships were believable or realistic? If not, was the author trying to make them realistic, and why did he or she fail? Did the male/female author draw realistic male and female characters? Which character could you relate to best and why? Talk about the secondary characters. Were they important to the story? Did any stand out for you?
3. How was the book structured? Did the author use any structural or narrative devices like flashbacks or multiple voices in telling the story? How did this affect the story and your appreciation of the book? Do you think the author did a good job with it? Whose voice was the story told in (from whose point of view is the story told)? How do you think it might have been different if another character was telling the story?
4. Talk about the author's use of language/writing style. Have each member read their favorite couple of passages out loud. (You might want to warn them ahead of time that they'll be doing this so they'll be prepared.) Was the language appropriate to the story? Was it more poetic or vernacular? Did it stand in the way of your appreciation of the story, or enhance your enjoyment of the book? If poetic, did the characters speak in vernacular language, or in the poetic language of the author? Was the dialogue realistic sounding? Was there a rhythm to the authors style, or anything else that might be considered unique about it?
5. Was the author fairly descriptive? Was he or she better at describing the concrete or the abstract? Was the author clear about what he or she was trying to say, or were you confused by some of what you read? How did this affect your reading of the book?
6. Talk about the plot. What was more important, the characters or the plot? Was the plot moved forward by decisions of the characters, or were the characters at the mercy of the plot? Was the action believable? What events in the story stand out for you as memorable? Was the story chronological? Was there foreshadowing and suspense or did the author give things away at the beginning of the book? Was this effective? How did it affect your enjoyment of the book?
7. What were some of the major themes of the book? Are they relevant in your life? Did the author effectively develop these themes? If so, how? If not, why not? Was there redemption in the book? For any of the characters? Is this important to you when reading a book? Did you think the story was funny, sad, touching, disturbing, moving? Why or why not?
8. Compare this book to others your group has read. Is it similar to any of them? Did you like it more or less than other books you've read? What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book? What will be your most vivid memories of it a year

from now? Or will it just leave a vague impression, and what will that be? Or will you not think of it at all in a year's time?

9 Talk about the location. Was it important to the story? Was the author's description of the landscape/community a good one? Talk about the time period of the story (if appropriate). Was it important to the story? Did the author convey the era well? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the events in the story? Why or why not for all of the above? Was pertinent information lumped altogether, or integrated into the story? How did this affect your appreciation of the book?

10. Finally, what else struck you about the book as good or bad? What did you like or dislike about it that we haven't discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Did this book make you want to read more work by this author?

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General Book Discussion Tips

It is likely that you won't get to all of the questions during your meeting. Choose the questions that you think are most appropriate to your group and the book you've read, and feel free to modify them any way you need to.

If you need further assistance in leading your discussions, keep the following in mind:

Questions that allow your members to express their opinions work better than those that simply have them pull answers from the book (like a high school exam). Ask your group to back up their comments with specific examples from the book. Sometimes it might even help to play devil's advocate with the group. Take a stance that's different from the consensus of the group (if there is one) and force the members of your group to defend their opinions of the book.

Another option is to go through the book, chapter by chapter, pointing out scenes or passages that were especially touching/memorable/interesting to you, and then asking the group what their reaction to these selections are. And don't be afraid to let the discussion go where it will --- if one particular aspect of the book really captures your group member's attention, allow them to stay on this theme, rather than rushing them through all the questions you have prepared.

Finally, if all else fails, you may want to ask each member to bring a couple of questions of their own to the discussion.

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