



The Bayou Trilogy: Under the Bright Lights, Muscle for the Wing, and The Ones You Do

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A hard-hitting, critically acclaimed trilogy of crime novels from an author about whom New York magazine has written, "What people say about Cormac McCarthy ... goes double for [Woodrell]. Possibly more."

In the parish of St. Bruno, sex is easy, corruption festers, and double-dealing is a way of life. Rene Shade is an uncompromising detective swimming in a sea of filth.

As Shade takes on hit men, porn kings, a gang of ex-cons, and the ghosts of his own checkered past, Woodrell's three seminal novels pit long-entrenched criminals against the hard line of the law, brother against brother, and two vastly different sons against a long-absent father.

THE BAYOU TRILOGY highlights the origins of a one-of-a-kind author, a writer who for over two decades has created an indelible representation of the shadows of the rural American experience and has steadily built a devoted following among crime fiction aficionados and esteemed literary critics alike.

The Bayou Trilogy: Under the Bright Lights, Muscle for the Wing, and The Ones You Do Details

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From Reader Review The Bayou Trilogy: Under the Bright Lights, Muscle for the Wing, and The Ones You Do for online ebook

Barry Graham says

I remember reading an interview with Daniel Woodrell in *Your Flesh* magazine in the mid-1990s. In it, Woodrell said he had no desire for mainstream acceptance, contrasting himself with those writers who are outsiders only because they haven't been allowed in. Comparing mainstream popularity to a tent, he said he was one of those who belonged outside the tent.

More recently, he has said that he realized that in choosing to write the books he does, he was effectively taking a vow of poverty. Although he has received laudatory reviews - five of his novels have been *New York Times* Notable Books of the year - his gothic/noir tales of modern rural peasants have been little-read, and have been mostly out of print.

With the success of the film *Winter's Bone*, based on his novel of the same title, he is finally getting some attention, and his books are being reissued.

The Bayou Trilogy brings together three of his earliest novels, showing that he has been a master right from the start. James Ellroy has called him a Bayou version of Elmore Leonard. He is and he isn't. His meandering, digressive style is the opposite of the terse, elegant, bullet-train style of Leonard, but he is the rare equal of Leonard when it comes to dialogue, and nonjudgmental character depiction. No matter how admirable or deplorable a person's behavior, the narrative brings us inside their head and heart.

These three short novels - *Under the Bright Lights*, *Muscle for the Wing* and *The Ones You Do* - vary in quality. The first two are very good, and the third is great, at least as great as the best of Flannery O'Connor or John Steinbeck.

The protagonist is a thuggish, self-absorbed, non-too-bright ex-boxer turned cop named Rene Shade, who tries to keep from getting killed while navigating his relationships with the smart and lovely bartender he dates, his bickering brothers - one a tough, good-natured bar-owner, the other a lawyer with political ambitions - his snake-hunting mother, and his pool-shark father who abandoned the family long ago. Add to that the arrival of his 10-year-old half-sister, a hit man, a troop of out-of-town grifters and the local corrupt police department he works for, and it's easy to understand why Shade has a bad attitude.

If you liked the movie *The Fighter*, you'll love this book. If, like mine, the America you live in is so far from the one depicted by the likes of Jonathan Franzen that it might as well be a distant planet, this book will feel like home.

Jamie says

This was like one of those cakes that has all the right ingredients, and sounds so delicious, but you overcook it and botch up the measurements and all those ingredients combine into something so unholy and so... not delicious.

I don't know. Despite appearances, this was not on my wavelength at all. Everyone here knew they were in this gritty noir and were so smug about it and nobody acted just plain human without all these affectations (*ugh*) that got in the way of the story. I wanted to sink St. Bruno in the swamp. Lock, stock, and barrel, and on fire to boot, and believe me, for all the places like St. Bruno I've loved that's a first for me.

Michael Twist says

Woodrell introduces us to a passel of lurid characters that never fail to entertain. He runs the fine satirical line between mocking them and making these characters real and relatable. Demonstrating a thorough understanding of the Bayou's seedy underside, Woodrell crafts fascinating stories that lead you down a path you know rarely ends well, but can't help but treading anyway.

Pati says

Better than Cormac McCarthy, for sure, but not that great. I don't know in which Louisiana town Woodrell did his research, but none of them I know has black, white, and Cajun neighborhoods. Not many houses have basements, either. The plot reminds me of Donna Tartt (very suspenseful). But the details get in the way.

I couldn't take it anymore. Read the first story, but couldn't stomach the next two. Ugh.

Shelleyrae at Book'd Out says

"This was Frogtown, where the sideburns were longer, the fuses shorter, the skirts higher and expectations lower, and he loved it"

On the steamy and seedy shores of the Louisiana Bayou, Detective Rene Shade walks a fine line between law and loyalty in Saint Bruno where he was born and raised. This trilogy combines three loosely connected stories of crime and justice in the shadows of Frogtown and Pan Fry.

The first story, Under the Bright Lights, has Shade, and his partner How Blanchette, investigating the murder of a city councilman. The Mayor would be happiest if the whole business could be blamed on a trigger happy burglar, but it's not how Shade sees it going. The Councillor's death seems to be linked to a power play in the criminal underbelly that is in danger of triggering a war. Shade chases his suspects right into an armed confrontation in the middle of the Marais du Croche, a swamp beset by lethal cottonmouths and hungry crocodiles.

Muscle of the Wing partners a reluctant Detective Shade with a boyhood friend, Shuggie Zeck, whose business interests are being devalued by a mysterious gang of hold up men. In a town where payback and kickbacks grease the system for politicians and criminals alike, Shade can read between the lines of his Captains orders. This investigation isn't about justice so much as vengeance.

In The Ones You Do (Criminentlies), Detective Shade is brooding over his 90-day suspension when his father, the legendary John X Shade returns to the city with a daughter and annoyed ex associates in tow. This tale features the Shade family, itself a microcosm of the environment they live in. These eccentric characters underscore the themes of loyalty, redemption and belonging that flow through the trilogy.

Daniel Woodrell envelops the reader with his atmospheric depiction of the steaming, soiled bayou and it's

unique characters. His style is vividly descriptive, and it's a surprising pleasure to immerse yourself in the gritty underbelly of his world. The heat, the sweat, the fear become almost tangible with his eloquent turn of phrase. The language he uses has a cultural lilt, wit and earthiness that defines his characterisation. There is a sense of raw authenticity in Woodrell's examination of the realities of life in Saint Bruno and he captures the indistinct boundaries for those that dwell in the less respectable area's of society masterfully.

Far from being a one dimensional character representing the law, Detective Rene Shade is a skillfully drawn character of principle and personal conflict. Throughout the trilogy, Woodrell reveals the flaws and strengths that define Shade. He is a nuanced character who is engaging and likeable.

Shade is surrounded by family, friends and enemies, the ordinary and the eccentric. Eldest brother Tip, runs a drinking dive named The Catfish while youngest brother, Frankie is a lawyer. Their father, John X Shade is a pool hustling legend who is defined by his absence. Shade has grown up in the town he now polices and his childhood friends are as likely to be his enemies as his informants. Woodrell's characters are all boldly drawn with attention to detail and credibility.

Wonderfully written and an engrossing read, Woodrell has a gift for story and prose. The Bayou Trilogy is an atmospheric, brash and exciting adventure through the nadir of the criminal underbelly in the deep south, and I look forward to reading more by this author.

Larissa says

Review published on Reviewing the Evidence website in August: <http://www.reviewingtheevidence.com/r...>

Although Daniel Woodrell has been earning the respect of critics and cultivating a devoted fan base for quite some time, his self-coined “country noir” novels have garnered renewed attention in the last year, thanks to the astounding success of the movie adaptation of his 2006 novel *Winter's Bone*. This spring, three of Woodrell's early novels—starring his shambling Creole detective Rene Shade—have been republished as *The Bayou Trilogy*, and are sure to gain the author even more acclaim for their cinematic, gritty, and occasionally poetic portrayals of the perpetually backsliding town of St. Bruno, Louisiana.

Woodrell fills St. Bruno with a colorful cast of downtrodden men and women for whom double-dealing and neighborhood loyalty are a way of life. Foremost are the Shade family, who play pivotal roles in all three novels in the trilogy. There's Ma Blanqui, owner of the pool hall where her itinerant husband, John X., had once made a name for himself before he abandoned her and her three boys. The oldest of the brothers, Tip Shade, owns the Catfish Bar, whose clientele make a habit of avoiding the police. The youngest, Francois, is an up-and-coming District Attorney. And right in the middle is Rene, a failed boxer turned cop who treads a fine line between the law-abiding and criminal worlds of his family and hometown.

Under the Bright Lights opens, as do all of the novels in the trilogy, on an over-confident, back country hood who is already in over his head, although he doesn't know it yet. Woodrell's first line introduction of this young would-be hit man provides the reader with a succinct initiation into the dark, subtly mocking humor, drawling dialog, and simmering violence that characterize all of the author's work. “Jewel Cobb,” we're told, “had long been a legendary killer in his midnight reveries and now he'd come to the big town to prove that his upright version knew the same techniques and was just as cold.”

Muscle for the Wing, the second novel in the trilogy, finds Rene rekindling the soured friendships of his past in order to track down the killer of a local policeman who worked as a guard for underground poker games frequented by some of St. Bruno's most powerful men. *The Ones You Do* introduces Shade's infamous ne'er-do-well father, John X. Shade, who is on the run with his adolescent daughter (Rene's half sister) after her

momma ran off with a local gangster's fortune.

The novels are all very similar—especially in tone and pacing—which can lend to monotony if read in quick succession. Woodrell's plotting is also a bit shaky: in particular, the racially-charged murder and political scandal in *Under the Bright Lights* quickly becomes muddled and its resolution is a bit over-determined. But plot is really a secondary concern here. Woodrell has a spot-on ear for the patois of his bayou residents and a gift for characterization that extends into the psyches and pasts of both his anti-heroes and their adversaries.

Each of the novels in the trilogy opens at a running start, and Woodrell keeps up the constant, frenetic pace throughout the books. The stories all unfold over the course of a few days, and are staged in a series of iconic locales: the Marais de Croche swamp, underground poker games, a strip club on the edge of town, an elegant and crumbling cathedral. It's no wonder that two of Woodrell's novels have been made into movies (prior to *Winter's Bone* his book *Woe to Live On* was adapted by Ang Lee). Reading his novels, one can easily imagine watching them unfold on screen.

Steve says

Overall, 3 stars. This was an interesting study in the life of the Bayou, focused on Officer Rene Shade and his friends and family. The first two books were pretty good, with Officer Shade solving a couple of crimes. With the third book, the author completely lost any semblance of a plot and it turned into almost a soap opera. The only saving grace was the narration expertly performed by Bronson Pinchot. If I didn't know otherwise, I would have guessed he's from Rural Louisiana.

Under the Bright Lights - 4 stars. Rural Louisiana hick-noir. Hard-nosed, violent, swampy, cotton-mouth infested, and most definitely regional in its colloquialisms. Once I got used to the outstanding narration by Bronson Pinchot, complete with the various hard-to-understand accents, this story was quite good.

Muscle for the Wing - 3.5 stars. Very bleak, hopelessness abounds in this one, even for police officer Rene Shade.

The Ones You Do - 2 stars. Where's the plot? There is literally no story here, just a lot of characters talking, screwing around, and not doing much else. Not what I expected.

Josh says

"...there was Frogtown, the white-trash Paris, where the wide brown flow of rank water scented all the days, and everfy set of toes touched bottom."

Flecks of dried blood and dirt stick equal in Woodrell's look at small town where multiple criminal entities thrive on their unlawful activities. The down trodden and hopeless sense of conformance with poverty is delivered in poetic-like fashion. Equal billing to the just and unjust alike is given throughout the trilogy to paint a picture perfect glimpse at 'criminalities'.

"I've been poor so long it doesn't bother me anymore, and that's as much peace of mind as a Rockefeller's got."

Woodrell writes in a language so few can emulate. His voice is distinct yet similar enough to evoke a sense of modernised noir. Aside from Megan Abbott, I can't think of another author who comes close. His works within country noir are better delivered yet the tone and prose of 'The Bayou Trilogy' remain true, to a certain extent, of the formula.

Opening with a police procedural in 'Under The Bright Lights' Woodrell introduces Shade – a cop (and former boxer), a DA, and a criminally affiliated barman – brothers who provide an interesting mix which could've been exploited further over the course of the proceeding books. Called in to investigate the shooting of a black politician made out to be a case of robbery gone badly, Shade soon learns of cover-ups and hidden agendas. Given the opportunity to tote the company line or play it honest, Shade is forced to make a decision damning him either way. 'Under The Bright Lights' was a decent enough read which hinted at the hallmarks of a Woodrell noir yet focusing on the more procedural aspects of the story.

'Muscle for the Wing' offers up more of the same in a sense that the story is part police procedural and part criminal POV. The second of the Shade books did little to highlight the unique family ties of the three professionally distinct brothers and could be read well as a stand alone. This both pleased and annoyed me. I think I would've liked to have read this aside from the trilogy – as I read it in this collection I was hoping for more continuity than what Woodrell presented.

'The Ones You Do' encapsulated that heavy character driven story Woodrell is most known for in 'Tomato Red' and 'Winter's Bone' where the emphasis isn't on a crime itself, rather the repercussions and the victim/instigator's reaction directly following. John X. father to the Shade brothers is a gifter always on the look out for a quick score. In returning to Frogtown, he's not only brought with him his young daughter but that of raging madman hell bent on revenge. What follows is an interesting family dynamic as John X gets reacquainted with his sons while keeping his more nefarious activities completely aside. 'The Ones You Do' was the best in the trilogy – definite re-read appeal.

Overall, I was a little disappointed with 'The Bayou Trilogy'. I was hoping for more country noir than police procedural (re: the first two books) and while 'The Ones You Do' redeemed the collection I was left wanting more. The Shade brothers were well written and had the capacity to form a unique story in their own right, I only wish Woodrell had put his talents towards those three accompanied by a plot which infused their respective professions and pitted them against one another. That said, I still enjoyed 'The Bayou Trilogy' but I'd be recommending new readers towards Woodrell's other books prior to picking this one up. 3 stars.

Catie says

I haven't read very much that could be considered "noir" but I really enjoyed these. It was rewarding to read them in sequence, because I grew more and more attached to the characters and setting with each one.

Under the Bright Lights is an introduction to Rene Shade, a lifetime resident of St. Bruno, Louisiana, and a resigned, morally ambiguous detective.

He was not guided by a total love of law, but he was more for it than against it and this, he felt, made him reasonable. And that was the summit of his aspirations.

Between the neighboring communities of Pan Fry and Frogtown, there is a strict racial divide, and the gangs fight for dominance. Rene and his corpulent partner Blanchete are called in to investigate the murder of a rising star politician from Pan Fry. Both men have strong ties to Frogtown's underbelly which complicates their involvement. This story also follows Jewel Cobb, an arrogant young patsy with murderous fantasies.

In Muscle For the Wing, Shade is teamed up with a childhood friend, now thug, to catch a cop-killer. Wanda Bone Bouvier, a young, resourceful, and weary woman, finds herself in the unlikely position of gang-leader when her older husband Ronnie is incarcerated.

Without a doubt, The Ones You Do is my favorite of the three. This story follows Shade's father John X as he returns to Frogtown with Shade's ten year old half-sister in tow, after his much younger wife runs out on him and leaves him in hot water.

Noir has always seemed like a boy's club to me. The girls are easy and none too bright, the violence is over the top, and the men are hard and embittered. Yes, I know that this is a stereotype that I need to get over. Actually this whole train of thought led me to google "female noir authors" and I will be heading your way soon, Patricia Highsmith! My point is, while some of the women in these stories fit the description from above, Daniel Woodrell never fails to make them into fully realized *characters*. Yes, they are indeed overly sexed and a bit on the slow side, but they are also shrewd and self-preserving, and long-suffering. Wanda Bone Bouvier is one of my favorite characters from this book. She does what she has to do, while dealing with the egos and occasional incompetence around her. She finds happiness with men as she can, but recognizes that with most she is no more than a "*highly prized household convenience*."

Also, sometimes when I am reading an "intimate" scene featuring one of these ladies it's like I can practically feel the author leering over my shoulder. *Jeez buddy, I get it! You have a rape fantasy. That's very nice. Now, go sit in the corner, because the pages are getting so oily that the sheen is starting to blind me.* Well, that never happens here. I actually felt more like Daniel Woodrell was sitting at a respectful distance, arms crossed, eyes mid roll, and saying, "Criminently but men are poor posturing bastards, aren't they?" There are also about seven strong female characters (not to mention a whole handful of great male characters) in The Ones You Do.

It seems really evident to me that Daniel Woodrell gets a lot of joy out of playing with words. The descriptions and dialogue in these stories are just plain fun to read. I listened to this one, and I was flat out amazed when I realized that the narrator is none other than Bronson "Balki" Pinchot! I have to warn my fellow listeners that he is an extremely slow narrator (which makes absolute sense, given the three extra syllables that every word seems to have). I think that he did a fantastic job narrating: he does great accents (ignorant northerners, French gangsters, and Bayou natives) and he does well with both male and female characters. I highly recommend the audiobook!

Perfect Musical Pairing

Why choose just one when I can have three?

John Lee Hooker – Mad Man Blues

These stories are all set near one of the Jazz capitals of the U.S., which is unfortunate because I am sadly lacking in that area. I admit that I don't really "get" Jazz. I mean, I do like it...but my brain doesn't explode with awesomeness when I listen to or anything. But, I can definitely appreciate Blues. I feel that the first story is the darkest of the three, and this song definitely fits the mood of it.

She & Him – I Was Made For You

Wanda, I think that you would enjoy this song, which is my little nod to your method of survival. Perhaps this song will also prove useful the next time you take the stage for a “narrative” strip?

Arthur Alexander – Every Day I Have to Cry Some

Arthur Alexander was an extremely talented song writer and performer but he never got the fame that he so deserved. This song, for me, captures the resigned and mournful tone of John X. Shade in the last story.

El says

The books that make up The Bayou Trilogy are a slight departure from Woodrell's other novels in that instead of featuring the Ozarks, these novels take place in Louisiana along the bayou. There's still the noir-aspect that one sees in Tomato Red, which I guess he coined the term "country noir" to describe his writing. I'm intrigued by that, because in the back of the edition of the trilogy is an author Q&A in which Woodrell states that he dislikes the labels given to his writing.

Your style has been described as "southern", "gothic", "country noir", or all three. If you had to classify yourself, where would you say you fit?

All labels are a form of prejudice - so said Chekhov, and, as usual, he knew what he was talking about. "Regional," "gothic," "noir," "mystery" are all terms meant to segregate us from a true evaluation - no need for the literary world to even look at the work, since you are sub-literary by category, and the categories are very dumbly applied in many cases.

On the surface I understand and appreciate what he said, but am baffled because he's attributed to calling his own writing "country noir", which makes me wonder if he feels like it was okay for *him* to label his own writing, but not okay for publishers and the public to pick up on it.

Or maybe he was just having a bad day during that interview.

In any case, I didn't hate these novels. Having them all together in one book makes it easy to see his growth as a writer over the however many years it took him to write the stories, though I felt that his characters only developed superficially. What the reader sees in Rene Shade, the good guy/bad guy cop, from the first book to the third where he barely even makes an appearance makes me feel that the only real growth he made was the growth made by the author himself.

The first book was rough around the edges, which isn't to say it's a bad thing, but it's evident Woodrell wasn't entirely sure the direction the story was going to take. The second book started to come together and I found some of the characters (Wanda specifically) fantastically written. The third book, while it maintained some of the vivid descriptions as the second book, was sort of too busy trying to bring it all to a conclusion and tie up loose ends.

I continue to like the noir aspect of Woodrell's writing, and it's what keeps me coming back for more. Will

continue working my way up to *Winter's Bone*. Since it's the one that most people have raved about the most and have told me I'll like most of all, I want it to be the last one I read.

RandomAnthony says

Daniel Woodrell, in my imagination, stares at his keyboard before choosing words, like he's afraid if he uses too many he'll mess up. That literary fastidiousness pays off, with interest, in the three crime novels that comprise *The Bayou Trilogy*.

The novels included here, republished in one volume most likely to cash in on the post-*Winter's Bone* publicity, revolve around the fictional neighborhood of Frogtown, a far-south run-down criminal playground with its own noir-ish rules and legends. The local cops and criminals grew up together, and Rene Shade, of the former, bangs around town while orbiting his barkeep older brother, lawyer younger brother, pool hall owner mother, and long disappeared father. He tries to do the right thing without getting screwed by the overlapping interests of the connected lawmen and outlaws. The bayou looms in the background, a viperous, hungry beast that will swallow those unlucky enough to error within its reach.

Yes. You probably know, from that last paragraph, if this trilogy is in your wheelhouse or not, and if it is, it's probably way within your wheelhouse. Woodrell and Ellroy (who gives a gushing backcover blurb) walk hand in hand through this territory but differentiate in language. Ellroy jams as many words onto the page as possible while Woodrell supplies phrases at a spare, careful pace. If the two authors were in a bar together Ellroy would talk 200 miles an hour while Woodrell tossed out responses here and there but seemed generally uncomfortable and ready to go home until, after about the sixth beer, he loosened up.

The first two volumes, *Under The Bright Lights* and *Muscle For the Wing*, dive headfirst into Frogtown's criminal dust and decay. In both novels outsiders disturb the culture's delicate balance. Rene Shade endeavors to restore the equilibrium. The last volume, *The Ones You Do*, positions Rene in the background and positions other members of the Shade family onto center stage. The trilogy totals a quick 470 pages, combined, and reads like one novel with three extended chapters. Woodrell writes his malefactors dark and desperate, and even if the banter is probably a little too bullet quick for reality, it's a hell of a lot of fun.

I didn't realize Woodrell published the first volume of *The Bayou Trilogy* twenty-five years ago and the last nineteen years back. He's been writing for a long time. And while *The Bayou Trilogy* moves like the work of an author finding his voice there's a joy in hindsight when you know that eventually this talent will generate *Tomato Red* and *Winter's Bone*. While some writers' early work earns the "for fans only" label, *The Bayou Trilogy* is solid enough to stand on its own.

Two additional points:

- 1) Thanks again to awesome Karen for sending the ARC my way...I owe you big time.
- 2) In a brief post-trilogy interview Woodrell says he's a Drive-by Truckers fan. My love is complete.

John Hood says

Bound: Down on the Bayou

Daniel Woodrell Writes the Lives Behind its Crimes

As the Atchafalaya River Basin begins to flood one can't help thinkin' that maybe the authorities have read Daniel Woodrell and come away believin' the folks who live in that swampy stretch of nowhere don't deserve saving as much as everybody else. That's a mean thing to consider, of course, let alone to say right out loud for everyone to hear. But had you just waded through Woodrell's wrenchingly-drenched tales of the Zeus-forsaken place, well, it's a cinch you'd get that notion your own self. Why? Because the people Woodrell writes into being are about as mean and as nasty a bunch that have ever been put to page. And that's saying something indeed.

My cruel supposition is based on a collection called *The Bayou Trilogy* (Mulholland Books \$16.99), which takes three of Woodrell's first four books and puts 'em into one heaping helping of unmitigated ugly.

Individually the tales are *Under the Bright Lights* (1986), *Muscle for the Wing* ('88) and *The Ones You Do* ('92). When each was initially released, writers as wily as John D. MacDonald, James Ellroy and Barry Gifford stepped up and sang their respective praises. And they, in turn, were joined by a chorus of critics who couldn't find a thing to criticize about Woodrell's work, but found all kinds of reasons to believe in it.

Since then there have been awards (including a '96 PEN USA for *Tomato Red*; an '08 Edgar for "Uncle"), and a slew of *New York Times* Notable Books, among them '06's *Winter's Bone*, which was made into the same-named flick that earned four Oscar nominations and a Grand Jury Prize at Sundance. A few years back director Ang Lee made screen of Woodrell too, turning '87's *Woe to Live On* into '09's *Ride with the Devil*. And if that's not enough to put the man among a rather lofty roster of wordslingers, then there's not enough of anything for anyone.

In the Trilogy, Woodrell wrings the neck of a Cajun outpost called St. Bruno, where blood runs thick with consequence and spills even quicker. The, er, heroes of these tall tales are a family fittingly named Shade, who might walk both sides of the law but remain most at home among the lawless. The patriarch, John X., is a rambling man whose beautiful Babushka pool cue rarely gets him outta the trouble his big mouth has asked for. Even when he's nowhere around (which is mostly), Daddy Shade shadows over most everything, be it with an unhealthy mix of legend or an echo of some absurd (but often telling) barroom philosophy. To John X. it's all "stragedy," which will give you some idea of his life's trajectory.

John X.'s ex also has a thing for the felt, and she lords over Ma Blanqui's Pool House with a bewitching boldness that would scare the be-Jesus outta decent folk. Then again, if there ever were any so-called decent folk in St. Bruno (which is doubtful), they'd've left long ago. So it's unlikely the image of Momma Shade's ankle-length locks really bother anyone.

Those potentially terrifying tresses certainly don't bother any one of her three sons. In fact, second son Rene, who lives atop the Pool House, watches the slate gray mess cascade around his momma's ankles nearly every night with nary a disparaging word. Though his seldom being sober enough to talk might have something to do with it too.

When Rene's not drunk, he's usually working on it at his elder brother Tip's Catfish Bar. The Catfish is where all of French Town's mischief makers mingle. Since Rene happens to be a detective, it's possible he considers his sidling up to the bar simply a matter of good police work. It certainly puts him in the thick of

many nefarious things. By the same token, pretty much any spot in St. Bruno is thick with nefarious things.

Not to mention nefarious people. St. Bruno's the kinda town where one-legged women wear t-shirts that say "I Can't Help It If I'm Lucky," and where to 'have it all' means "having a door jimmy, a friendly fence, and a ten-minute headstart." It's where not having a prison record means a lack of ambition. And not holding a grudge shows a distinct shortage of feelings. Hell, this is the sorta place where even the swamp is Crooked.

In Woodrell's hands however, it's also where "honesty can siphon off a few regrets and resentments if you tap into it." And the bleak and burdened picture he paints of this place and its people can only be considered brutally honest. How else to explain features as unforgiving as a blood feud and creatures less becoming than bad luck?

Naturally there's more to these stories than sheer portraiture — much more. But I don't dig spoiling surprise by giving away narrative. I will tell you that these are crime stories, which reviewers have taken to calling "country noir." If you know about crime, and you know about noir, then you'll know that in the end nobody makes out good. And I mean nobody.

If you want some idea of how Woodrell reads, the opening of line of Muscle for the Wing will give it to you straight:

"Wishing to avoid any risk of a snub at The Hushed Hill Country Club, the first thing that Emil Jadick shoved through the door was double-barreled and loaded."

And if that doesn't spell the start of something ugly, well, there's no such thing as an alphabet.

Kenneth says

Rene Shade is a detective in the Parish of St. Bruno, Louisiana. However, as a series, this is not really a detective story. In the beginning we focus on a man (Shade) who straddles the fence of legality in a town where he is both a former local celebrity as a boxer and a longtime acquaintance and relation to most of the seedy underside of St. Bruno. Gritty and callous as he is, Shade has a sense of honor unassailable by friendship or blood, and he finds himself the odd man out in most situations. From the first chapters, Shade grows from a hard-nosed cop running from the ghosts of his childhood, his defunct boxing career, and his dead-beat father, into a man of greater tenderness and understanding. With every new character we are given new insight into Shade's history and persona, and it seems that he benefits from this insight, as well. By the second book, Shade's darker side has reared its head, which coincides with his most direct clash with "the powers-that be", and he has deadly decisions to make. Whose side can you take when the law asks you to ride shotgun (literally) with a mobster looking for retribution? At the same time, Shade has begun a serious relationship with Nicole, and wants little more than to escape with her from the drama of his hometown. As book number three opens, we find ourselves following the heretofore legendary John X. Shade, Rene Shade's absent father, and also the father of his brothers Tip and Francois. John X. brings an awful lot of baggage back to St. Bruno, including his strange daughter, Etta, but this is the first time when we feel the wholeness of the Shade family. The character of Rene takes a bit of a back seat to John X. and Etta, Nicole, his mother Monique and even a man with an ancient grudge against John X., but it is clear that this is because of the fulfillment that Rene is feeling as his family comes together. Never fear though, for nothing is ever truly settled on the bayou of St. Bruno. The series ends, not as we think it will, not as we want it to, but as it

should.

I received this book for free through Goodreads First-Reads. Thanks.

Daniel says

****Under the Bright Lights****

Here is how Daniel Woodrell distinguishes his crime fiction from the multitude:

"The pecking order of the homegrown juice merchants and trigger jerkers, green-felt Caesars, and snow-shoveling cowboys was likened to a vivid Chicago of the memory. And in this urban simile, if Auguste Beaureain, a force so devious, potent, and dangerous that he'd never even been hooked for a parking ticket, was a scaled-down Capone, and Steve Roque an irritating Spike O'Donnell, then surely Sundown Philips of Pan Fry was perfectly Bugs Moran."

Crime fiction abounds with urban simile, and Woodrell is very talented at spinning his own. He sketches the bayou setting with language that makes you feel the heat ("The inside of the car was still baking hot, and everything liquid in him seemed to be dripping down his neck."). He writes dialog that rings true enough to draw you in. He constructs a plot that pivots on credible renditions of vanity, greed, weakness, passion, and folly. He writes like he knows these people and their ways, and that he has a story worth reading.

I look forward to reading more of his stories.

****Muscle for the Wing****

Much as I enjoyed "Under the Bright Lights," I turned the last page feeling like Woodrell could have put a little more flesh and bone on protagonist Rene Shade. In "Muscle" he does so by teaming Shade up with a childhood friend who turned towards crime while Shade went cop. Together, the two are supposed to represent the law and the local mob in the search for an errant gang that's been rolling some of the mob's high-stakes gambling outfits. The partnership is tenuous and trying on Shade, who still feels connected to deeds and friends that are contrary to his chosen profession. Through flashback and brief character sketches, Woodrell opens a door into Shade's head and shines the light on details and experiences that add significant weight to his character, and to the story as a whole.

To call these crime tales is to anticipate a certain neatness of execution that Woodrell does not in fact employ in his storytelling. There is a caper in this story, and there are perps, and there are cops who do pick up the scent and start to follow its trail, but the events that follow this setup do not fit together with the same rigor that many authors bring to the genre. The crime that Woodrell writes about is too pervasive to escape or contain, too tough a stain to wash out with high minded principles or noble intentions. There may be straight people in the Louisiana town that Woodrell has created, but Shade and his blood and everyone else he is connected to are not these. And when that last page falls and the tale comes to a close, the greys and blues are just that much darker, and that much more mixed with every other shade of color.

The Ones You Do

The third book to feature the denizens of St. Bruno hardly features Detective Rene Shade at all. Instead, most of the limelight falls on his father, John X., who makes his way back to St. Bruno by way of a string of misfortunes; and upon John's history, itself a collection of more misfortunes and misadventures that the subject himself looks back upon sans negative prefixes, despite greeting each day with smoker's lungs and the DTs.

Woodrell writes an incredible passage describing such an episode:

John X. set the empty glass on the floor next to the couch. He patted his T-shirt where a cigarette pocket would hang on a button shirt, then grunted. On many mornings of late he could recall a ten-line conversation or a stolen kiss from back in 1949 in every detail, but could not find his cigarettes. He always seemed to be waking up in new spots for one thing, plus, those old acts and conversations came into his head so clearly that he sometimes wrung new meanings from them. Quite a few of the nuances and long silences that had baffled at the time now offered themselves up for interpretation in retrospect. They surely did. But that did not solve the real issue, which was, where'd I leave those smokes?

History and family are the threads that stitch everything together in this tale, and Woodrell guides his gifted prose through past deeds and present woes with a sure hand while keeping the final destination well-hidden. "The Ones You Do" is a collection of conversations between people who have lived and lost and now wonder; of moments that bring back the past while pulling the present forward into painful relief; of the young learning from the old, and the old seeing something they once knew in the young; of sons and fathers sharing whiskey and small talk while passing up unasked questions and unfound answers. It is a remarkable book, and I shall long remember it.

Matthew Peck says

I don't often read 'crime novels' - not out of disdain, but because of personal taste. I've read and been engrossed by a few Denis Lehane books, but I probably wouldn't have opened them at all if they weren't set in Boston, with landmarks I know so well. I decided to try Daniel Woodrell after watching the film of 'Winter's Bone' and reading some not-so-faint critical praise. And now this fanboy wants to read everything he's published.

UNDER THE BRIGHT LIGHTS (1982) - Woodrell's body of work is set mostly within the Ozarks (his home), but his first novel and its 2 follow-ups are set in the fictional Louisiana town of St. Bruno, which is more akin to True Blood's Bon Temps than New Orleans (I imagine). It's a sultry riverside burg teeming with gambling, alcoholism, and the general seediness that spawns noir stories. The marvelously-named protagonist is Detective Rene Shade, a local boy from the French neighborhood (Frogtown) who yearns to transcend the corruption in his department. These elements are familiar, of course, but Woodrell's prose is like a nimble electric piano solo and the sense of place is so vivid you can smell it. The character names and physical descriptions are the most memorable I've read outside of Annie Proulx "[he] had the complete barnyard of personal characteristics: ox-sized, goose-necked, cow-eyed, a hog gut, probably mule-headed, and clearly goaty of appetite." This story details the events stemming from the murder of an African-American councilman and ends with a mythic showdown in a dark swamp.

MUSCLE FOR THE WING (1988) - The sequel is quick and vicious, telling the story of a prison gang's run of poker-game robberies in the region, some of said poker games involving the movers and shakers of St.

Bruno. Woodrell's words continue to compel, even though this installment gets a bit TOO bleak and depraved at times.

THE ONES YOU DO (1992) - The conclusion to the trilogy is the best, a near-masterpiece centering on the sudden return of Rene Shade's long-absent father John X.- a former poolroom hustler and ladies man - along with a 10-year-old daughter. This is less of a crime potboiler and more of a serio-comic rural drama with some surprising and grotesque elements (again, like acknowledged Woodrell fan Annie Proulx). The characters are lively and unforgettable, and the set pieces grand. One chapter involving a psychopath, a couple from Iowa, and a day out together in Natchez, Mississippi could stand on its own as a great short story.

I never thought I'd complete a gritty crime trilogy and immediately miss the characters and their lives. How about a cable TV series? (The Shades?)
