

DOWN RIVER

Synopsis

“Down River” follows five characters and three interwoven plotlines chronicling the descent of a quiet, upscale suburban neighborhood into the violent and sordid worlds of rape, murder, racial hate crime and child pornography. While originally victims of chance and circumstance, it is the flawed personalities of the characters themselves that send them hurtling toward humiliation and destruction. Jealousy and hatred, ambition and greed, love and lust and their dreams and disappointments all drive them to make bad decisions, compromise their principles and betray their neighbors. The indomitable forces of sensationalist media, racial politics and the criminal justice system soon take over, sweeping their personal plights into the national spotlight, threatening to destroy their lives and tear apart the entire town of Down River.

In the first plotline, three primary characters become involved in a murder investigation after a popular local real estate agent is found half naked and dead in a model home at the new housing development in town, killed in self-defense by the woman he date-raped there the night before. The reader is aware early on that the woman who killed him is SAMANTHA BECK, a widowed, tough criminal defense attorney who decides not to report her involvement for fear a false murder conviction and imprisonment would leave her autistic child parentless and alone. When her pathologically ambitious real estate agent neighbor, MARY ROBERTS, becomes the prime suspect

in the murder, Samantha takes her case and walks a nerve-shattering tightrope trying to get the woman off without implicating herself in the crime. The dramatic tension in this thriller of a murder plot is not who done it, but who will take the fall for it.

Investigating the crime is DETECTIVE CLYDE BARRETT, a hardened, black homicide detective on loan from the neighboring ghetto city who lets his contempt for white, upper-class Down River and his hatred of both women lead him toward professional destruction. He already has history with Samantha Beck and soon develops an intense dislike for Mary Roberts who, despite her suburban upbringing, is utterly unintimidated by Barrett and not afraid to go toe-to-toe with the veteran, inner-city cop. As Barrett digs deeper into the past of the murder victim, ST. JOHN BARLOW, he stumbles onto the man's journal in a hidden computer file and discovers he has been leading a twisted and sadistic secret life. Barlow has been seducing the bored and lonely housewives of Down River into secret rendezvous, sexually humiliating and abusing them and then threatening to blow up their quiet, comfortable lives if they ever tell. In the process of untangling the mystery, Barrett clashes psychologically and sometimes physically with the wealthy and privileged of Down River. Finally brought to his breaking point, Barrett rocks Down River society by releasing the diary of St. John Barlow to the local sleazy television reporter.

Mary's husband, AUSTIN ROBERTS, is a soft-spoken family man who wants only to settle down and lead something resembling a meaningful life. But now he finds himself wondering whether his wife has killed a rival realtor or slept with the piggish developer in order to get real estate listings worth a nearly half million dollars. The second plotline develops when the innocent and naïve Austin is arrested for possession of child pornography after a 16 year old neighbor girl, SKYY ALLEN, accidentally sexts him a naked picture of herself. The more Austin tries to clear his name the worse his circumstances become, eventually ending up in an additional arrest, this time for

a hate crime involving an African American teenager. For Skyy Allen, the mistake of sending Austin the illicit photo leads the sweet and responsible young girl spiraling into the dark underworld of hardcore pornography.

Woven throughout the novel is the first-person narrative of AIDEN BABBLE, born into hyper-celebrity when his famous writer mother intentionally allowed herself to be raped in one of the most notorious events in modern pop culture history. Now 19 and known to the tabloid-obsessed culture as “The Rape Baby”, the boy passively observes the self-destruction of his neighbors with an almost mystical ability to learn their secrets and understand their lives better than they do. While The Rape Baby is the omniscient narrator throughout the novel, he also becomes the main character in the last of the three major plotlines when his mother drops one final bombshell: Diagnosed with cancer and given no more than a year to live, PAGE BABBLE announces to the world her intention to get pregnant, have the baby, and then die. The sensationalist media machine Page Babble played a big role in creating twenty years earlier immediately latches onto the story, force-feeding it to a culture ripe for outrage and absurdist drama. But when her real intentions are finally revealed after her death, the reader discovers it had been a ruse all along, a trick to show society the foolishness of its obsession with celebrity.

Ultimately, the resolution of each plotline and the story as a whole lies within the overall theme of the novel; that people negotiate the terror of living by assuming off-the-rack personas that often lead them into disasters from which they can only escape by betraying their fundamental beliefs.

Detective Clyde Barrett’s reclaims his humanity when, having at last trapped Samantha Beck with the evidence he needs to charge her with murder, he destroys it instead and sets the woman free. The single-minded Austin finds true love when he finally stops trying to save what is

left of his marriage and follows his heart to Samantha Beck instead. Skyy Allen's salvation comes only when she breaks free of the father she once revered, determined to be just a "normal" teenage girl and not the feminist hippie-chick he has engineered her to be. Even The Rape Baby has a transformative moment when he decides to abandon his "Nothingist" credo and reaches out to pull Skyy Allen out of the sleazy underworld of sex and degradation into which she has descended.