

EXILE FROM BAYOU CITY

BY. J. MARK BERTRAND
AUTHOR OF *BACK ON MURDER*

Setting comes on strong in today's crime fiction. Whether it's the Edinburgh of John Rebus or Kurt Wallander's Ystad, New Iberia through the eyes of Dave Robicheaux or Washington, DC with Derek Strange, the mean streets consist of more than a set of guidebook stops. They have a character all their own, a complex personality, a range of moods. So when I contemplated my own detective, I knew that where I placed him on the map was one of the most important choices I'd make.

Roland March is a Houston homicide detective. I lived in Houston for more than a decade. It's where I went to grad school, earning my MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. My love of crime fiction was nurtured there as I lurked between the shelves at Murder by the Book on Bissonett. And the crazy thing is, although Houston is the fourth largest city in the United States, it's under-represented where fictional detectives are concerned. From the start, I knew March could only be a Houston cop.

The problem is, I don't like Houston. When I lived there, I actually hated it. Not *all* of it, mind you—there are wonderful people and places—but the endless miles of suburban sprawl, the malevolent heat, and the frequent flooding made my years there a bit of a trial. Every time I go back, I'm grateful not to be there anymore.

So how do you write about a city you were only too happy to leave?

The first thing you need to know about Houston is that you don't know Houston. If you've never been there, or you've only visited, you really don't. You can live on the ever-expanding outskirts of the city all your life and not know it. Out there, the place has a generic character, the same clusters of retail chains and

subdivision architecture you'd find anywhere, only with the temperature turned way, way up.

When I was in grad school at the University of Houston, the creative writing program drew people from across the country. I'd see them blinking under the hot sun, staring across acres of cracked blacktop, swatting mosquitoes and asking themselves, "What have I done?" Then a tropical storm would come through and flood the streets. "No, really, what have I done?"

In the fifteen years I was there, I can't count how many conversations I had in which Houston functioned essentially as a prison. What did you do to be sent here? How long until you get out?

But there were always a few die-hards, people who loved the place the way cockroaches must love the thought of nuclear apocalypse. They *wanted* to be there. And they seemed to take a perverse delight in the suffering of everyone else.

Roland March is one of those people. Writers like challenges, and one of mine was to get into the mind of a man who could love a place like Houston without harboring any illusions about it.

To be honest, I think my antipathy really helps. March doesn't hate Houston the way I do, but he has strong feelings about the place. He's impervious to heat in a way that I'm not, and he has opinions about everything from the architecture to the traffic. For him and me both, Houston is not a place you can remain indifferent to.

Also, there's a secret Houston, a part of the city people subsisting on its outer rings never fully appreciate. Find it and suddenly you understand why—to borrow from the ["Houston, It's Worth It" PR campaign](#), with its admirable use of dark humor—for some people, Houston is worth it. Writing about the city through March's eyes, I've become one of them. *

Be sure to read:

Back on Murder

ISBN 978-0-7642-0637-5

For more, visit:

www.backonmurder.com