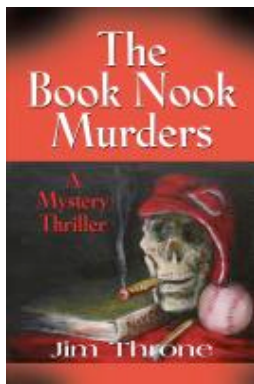


The Book Nook Murders

A
Mystery
Thriller



Jim Throne



Teenager Joshua Blackburn played rookie baseball in a small town where he stayed in the home of a widow and her teen daughters. Years later, the daughters vanish. Decades later, he inherits the widow's bookstore. The building burns, yielding the daughters' skeletons. When the local sheriff accuses him of arson and murder, Josh searches for the real criminals. As he does, he survives many attempts on his life that claim the lives of many others.

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Cover art by Jim Throne, 2011

**To my beloved Jean
You were, and will forever be
My carburetor**



Chapter 1

Elm City, West Virginia, November 1985

Acrid odors of stale smoke and sweat permeated the fetid air of the small windowless room. Mold lived at the bases of the walls and crept up the corners. Above the black mold, the walls glistened wet. One silly thought raced through Joshua Blackburn's head. And around and through again. *Sherwin-Williams must make rail cars of institutional grey paint. All of it formulated 'clammy.'*

A grey table with its standard linoleum top and standard grey metal legs sat in the middle of the grey linoleum tile floor. The only thing on the table was an old earthenware soup bowl filled to overflowing with cigarette and cigar butts. Two tattered armless straight-back chairs sat on opposite sides of the table. Stuffing protruded through cracks in their brittle grey vinyl. A third chair sat in the corner. All in matching grey metal.

Josh occupied the chair on the far side of the table, away from the grey metal door with a tiny window, chicken wire between two plies of impact-resistant plate glass. He touched the table. It was slimy. A ceiling fixture with a crazed yellow plastic cover provided the only light. Its cover had a metal mesh cage over it. A rusty metal ring that had supported a now-absent ceiling fan, surrounded the fixture.

A hand-printed sign under the light switch by the door read:

Bulb caged for your protection

Switch off when leaving

And below that, in a badly smudged, nearly unreadable scrawl, was this message:

Do not turn fan off

The word *fan* had been crossed off. Above it, scrawled in another hand, was the word *fun*. He'd been sitting there for at least twenty minutes. Seemed like an eternity.

Kinda like the wait when you're at bat, oh-and-two, and the other side decides to change pitchers. The longer he waited the more perturbed he became.

He jumped when the door clanged open and quickly bounced back. "Sorry ta keep yew waitin', Mister Blackburn. Somethin' come up," Monroe County Sheriff Walter Eastman roared around his cigar as he banged the

returning door with his foot. He'd been the county sheriff for decades. *Jeez, he was the sheriff when I played ball here nearly a quarter of a century ago.* Since then, Josh mused, he'd lost most of his hair and had become grossly fat. Josh had been told by others that he was nearly deaf. To compensate he bellowed, to the obvious displeasure of everyone around him. His khaki uniform was two-toned. Its shoulders were dark from rain, its underarms dark from sweat, and a sinuous white salt line separated the sweat from the rest of the uniform. His hat brim mimicked the same scenario.

"Fuckin' rain. Hate November. Always hated November. Cold, fuckin' rain." he cursed, tossing his hat at the chair in the corner. It spun twice before slowly settling in the middle of the chair seat. He scratched the top of his bald head, using his fingers to realign his comb-over, then dug his little finger deep into his ear and cranked it around, as if drilling out badness. He blew a huge cloud of smoke around his stogie, took another drag on it, blew that smoke out into the room, and stuffed the cigar into the far corner of his mouth.

He flipped his notepad on the table, straddled the chair opposite Josh, and stared at the pad for a moment before rummaging through his jacket pockets. "Can't find a goddamned writin' thingie when yew need it," he snarled. "Aha." He produced a yellow tooth-chewed stub, sans eraser, from his shirt pocket. "Now," he smiled a yellow splay-toothed smile, wetting the pencil point in his mouth and poising it over the pad. "Tell me all 'bout yo'sef."

Josh shook his head in resignation. "Jesus, Walt..."

"Ah, stop." The cop held up his hand and snarled, "Les' keep it formal, y'know? Yew kin address me as Sheriff Eastman."

"Whoa, what the hell's goin' on, Walt? This is me, 'member? Josh Blackburn? The same guy you folks welcomed back to your burg a few weeks ago. Y'know, headlines in your local paper? 'Local Hero Returns to Elm City'? The big deal at the gazebo? The Mayor giving me the key to the city? I mean, you were standing right next to him, weren't'cha? The high school band playing what sounded like 'Hail to the Chief'?"

"According to that newspaper article, your Mayor said I was supposed to single-handedly revitalize the entire downtown by simply renovating the Kreps book store. You did read that, didn't you? And now I gotta address you as Sheriff? That's a whole lotta shit, man."

"Simmer down, sir, an' watch yer fuckin' tongue." The cop had turned all business now. "It's 'portant dat I get as much information 'bout da fire.

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And since yer a person of interest, yew gotta cop'erate. So, I jes wanna hear yer side a'da story."

"'Person of interest'? What the hell does that mean? You think I torched my own building out there?" Josh pointed in the general direction of what had been Aunt Mabel's Book Nook and his living quarters only a few hours earlier. Now it was just a smoldering ash pit. "'Member? While we were standing out there, I already told you what the hell'd happened to me?"

"I know'd exactly what yew tol' me, Blackburn. I ain't deaf, y'know," he shouted, glowering at him as he gnawed on his stogie. The end of the cigar bobbed up and down. Ash slowly floated down, uniformly distributing itself over the tabletop and his notepad. "Now," he snarled. "Tell me yer story. Agin. But dis time, I wan'cha to gimme all da details. Okay wid dat?"

"Where do you want me to start, Sheriff? Way back, like when and where I was born?"

Eastman yawned and sat there, waiting, pencil poised over the pad, exactly as before.

Asshole. "Okay, lessee, I got into town about a month ago."

* * *

For what seemed like hours, Joshua Blackburn stepped his way through his time in the town. He explained that in June, he'd received a telegram from B. Bingham Lowrey, Elm City attorney, telling him of the death of Mabel Kreps. According to the attorney, he needed to appear in person to sign papers that would give him clear deed to a book store known locally as Aunt Mabel's Book Nook.

It wasn't until the first week of October, after the Cincinnati Reds had again been eliminated from post-season games, that he was able to get away from his job with the team. He said that he'd met with Lowrey in his less-than-posh offices over Clarke's Hardware and Furniture Store. Lowrey had presented him with the necessary documents, an inch thick stack. At that point Josh stopped his monologue, and waited, wondering whether the cop was awake enough for him to continue.

All during Josh's explanation, Eastman sat there, motionless except for the cigar, which continued to bob and curl smoke toward the ceiling, shedding ashes in the process. Occasionally, he'd take a long drag on his cigar until the end glowed neon red, then blow smoke into the air above Josh's head. Spittle oozed around the cigar and into his beard, adding to the permanent sienna stain there. After a long minute of silence, Eastman focused on Josh. "Ya got a lot more to s'plain, boy. Git on wid it."

“Walt, eh, Sheriff, y’know, it was pretty smoky out there.” He coughed and rubbed his nose. “And in here too. I sure could use a glass of water.”

“Go on, Mister Blackburn.”

“Okay. I guess no water until I confess, right?” When the cop just glared at him over the stub of his cigar, he sighed and continued. “I signed the whole passel of papers. Lowrey called in an ancient, creaky woman in a faded print dress, blue bedroom slippers, and pince nez glasses perched on the tip of her nose, as witness to my signature. I think her name was Hermione. I thought she was his secretary. Somebody told me later that she was his mother.

“Lowrey told me that Mabel had willed me the store but she’d given the family home to her oldest daughter, Alice. I never met Alice during the summers I stayed at the Kreps or in my visits afterwards, to see Elmer and his wife.”

“Ah, Mister Blackburn? Why jew stay dere?”

“’Cause I was playing baseball. In the late ‘50s. For the Rookie Reds.”

Josh waited for the man to ask more in-depth questions about his statement. Instead, he asked, “Jes’ why did Mabel give you da store?”

“Dunno. Maybe ‘cause she liked me,” he said snidely.

The Sheriff made a note on his pad. “Go on.”

“I opened the store the next day. I think it was a Wednesday. You need the exact date?” Eastman said nothing. The cigar glow faded to gray. “Okay, I guess you don’t. When I opened the door, the place stunk of mold and mildew. Kinda like what this cell smells like. Y’know, like something rotten in Denmark?”

He waited for cop’s response to his quip. When he got none, he continued. “An elderly woman stopped by. Her name was Lucy something. I think maybe Lucy Taylor. She told me the place’d been closed for several months, maybe more than a year while Mabel slowly declined in health. Cancer, she said. She said she heard that Mabel had willed it to a former baseball player. I told her that I was that ballplayer.

“She said she was hoping that I’d reopen the store and keep it as a bookstore. She said she loved to browse the knitting books. I was noncommittal. I told her that first I would focus on cleaning the place and trashing the books that were too damaged or too old. She said that I should either donate those books or put them on sale.

“From the extent of the black mold and dust and the stink in the upstairs apartment, I guessed that place musta been closed up for even longer, maybe years. I hired a couple of local cleaning women. Sorry,

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Sheriff, I don't 'member their names. I wanted them to air out and clean out the upstairs apartment. A week later, I started cleaning up the Book Nook and began making plans to renovate it."

"Where'd'ja stay, Mister Blackburn?"

"At Bailey's. That's a rooming house a couple of blocks down Old Mill Road."

"Thank yew fer dat important location. Shee-it. I guess I gotta 'member dat next time I gotta git me a room." He snorted and made a note on his pad. "Go on."

"In the meantime, I met up with Harold Blakely. He's the editor of the Elm City Weekly."

"Yeah, I knows who he is, Mister Blackburn. Jes' git on wid da story." The cigar, or the little bit that hadn't been totally liquified by Eastman's mouth juices, had died. He tried to light it, once, twice, turning his head to this side and that to avoid lighting his brush mustache. Finally, disgusted, he snapped his Zippo shut and ground the butt into the ashtray, pushing some of the cigarette butts off its edge. He searched his pockets for another cigar. Perturbed by not finding one, he turned to Josh and snapped, "Get on wid it, ballplayer."

"Okay. Blakely had interviewed me for the paper. He's the one who said that the Mayor was expecting my efforts to turn around the economics of the town." Josh hesitated because it appeared that Eastman was nodding off. "Ah, Sheriff, you did read that article in the Weekly a month ago, right?" He resisted adding 'You can read, can't you?'

"Yeah. Sure did, smart-ass. Learnt that while some of us was bustin' ar asses ta make a livin', yew was a fuckin' big shot makin' lotsa money playing a little boys' game."

"Then you don't need me to go into all that stuff in the article, do you?"

"So long as Harold kin testify in court dat what he wrote is what yew tell'd him."

"In court? Whaddaya mean, 'in court'?"

The Sheriff guffawed, his jowls flapping. "Hey sonny, I learnt a long time ago dat ever'thin' a witness say might need ta be said again in court but wid some changes, iff'n ya git ma drift. Anyhow, go on wid yer story, Mister Blackburn."

"Hey, look, Walt, er, Sheriff, if you're gonna charge me with something - arson or something - why not get to it? I mean, what's with all this threatening shit?"

"Now, now, Blackburn," he snapped, stiffening and bristling with authority. "Let's not git yer panties in a bunch. Jes' keep goin', okay? Ain't no charges bein' filed 'gainst you or anybody. Jus' wanna get the facts, thas' all." After an eyeball-to-eyeball stare, he said tersely, "Continue, an' ferchrissakes, cut out the fuckin' cursin'"

Josh told him that until the place smelled better, he'd been sleeping at Bailey's. And that he'd moved into the apartment two days before the fire.

"How yew spend yer days, boy?"

Now it was Josh's turn to bristle. "Hey, Sheriff. what's with that 'boy' thing?"

"M'be yew din't hear me, sonny. I axed yew whaddaya do durin' da days. Jes' git on wid da answer."

After silently cursing the fat man, he continued. In addition to spending time on the computer and his phone with his people in Cincinnati, he said, he'd been working his way through the books in the store, winnowing out those that were too moldy or mildewy and cleaning the shelves as he went. He'd cleared out most of the trash in the apartment. He tossed a lot of it and gave a substantial portion to Goodwill.

In the second floor living quarters, he'd been able to salvage a decent bed frame and a dresser. Even though some of the silver was missing from its mirror, the dresser was still serviceable. He said that he'd ordered a mattress and box springs that had been delivered just the day before the fire, just in time for him to bed down in the apartment for the first, and as it turned out, the last time.

"While I was going through the books, I found a list of potentially valuable books. The list was in Mabel's hand writing. As I was working my way through the store, I kept searching for them."

"Yew gonna tell me dat ol' Mabel had somethin' worth value in all that shit?" he roared.

He continued, ignoring the fat man's sarcasm. "According to her list, there were several first editions. An original *Leaves of Grass*, a first edition Jack Kerouac, a signed copy of *Naked Lunch*, a..."

"Did'ja say Nekkid Lunch?" Eastman roared, slapping the table for emphasis. "Das a goddamn good'un. What da hell'd that old bitch want wid somethin' like dat, ferchrissakes?"

"Her list said that book had an auction value of a thousand."

"No shit, Sherlock," he roared again. "A grand? Hey. What da hell difference does dat make now, y'know? All dem books was consumed in da fire, right?" He jotted something on his pad.

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Josh was about to tell him that he hadn't found any of the books on the list when Eastman bellowed, "Shit. Fuckin' lead broke." He pitched the pencil across the room and searched through his pockets without success. "You got somethin' ta write wid?"

Josh handed him his Cincinnati Reds Championship pen, with the rose-cut diamond in the clip. The Sheriff took it without looking at the engraving.

"Tell me 'bout what yew did da night before da fire." He absentmindedly put the pen nib to his tongue, leaving a spreading blue spot behind. It commingled with the brown cigar juice.

"Had dinner at Mom's, 'til nine or so. I stopped at O'Malley's for a couple, watched the end of a hockey game, and headed back to the apartment around midnight."

"Who'd'ja see dere?"

"Where? At Mom's? Well, Sally waited on me, if that's what you mean. At O'Malley's? Brandi was tending bar. But I shot the shit with Edgar and Willis. At least 'til after the game. Edgar claimed he'd won the bet but he and Willis argued about what the bet was all about. The two tumbled into the street a few minutes later, arm in arm. Tippy? Yeah. Drunk? No. Then I chatted with O'Malley. He was telling me about..."

"Who'd'ja say was tendin' bar?"

"Brandi." It was apparent to Josh that the cop was having trouble keeping up with his story.

"Don' know her. She new?"

"Can't say. She's been there since I got here. Why?"

"She good lookin'? She young? Single? Did'ja check out her ass? Got nice titties?"

"I guess so," he said cautiously, answering all of the questions at once.

"Hey, gotta go check her out, 'fish'ly, of course," he laughed, then, seriously said, "Go on wid yer tale."

"Hey, Sheriff, sir, before we go on, I really gotta take a piss. And I really need a drink of water."

Eastman looked up from his pad and glared at him. "Relax. Jes' a few more questions. Tell me wha'chu did after ya left da bar?"

"I went back to the store. Checked the door to make certain it was locked. Climbed the outside stairs to the apartment. Locked the door. Flipped on the television. Watched the end of Carson. Went to bed."

"And den what happened?"

"I guess it was around three when somebody started pounding on the door and yelling that the place was on fire."

“Wait jes’ a goddamned second, boy/ Who’d ju say yew went ta bed wid?”

“I didn’t.”

“Aha,” the cop snorted. “Okay, tell me. Who’dja go ta bed wid?”

“Nobody.”

“An’ what time yew say dat tee-vee guy Carson was over?”

“Probably about twelve thirty.”

“Aha,” he said gleefully. “So, yew ain’t got no alibi fer ‘tween da end o’ Carson an’ what time jew say someone was bangin’ on yer door?”

“Sometime around three. Three-thirty, maybe.”

“And who’d ja say was pounding?”

Josh was really getting perturbed. “Look, Sheriff, I’ve told you before, when we were standing out there on the goddamned street.” He deliberately dropped his voice to a near-whisper. “Well, maybe you just didn’t hear me.”

“Wha’ju say?”

“I didn’t see anybody,” he yelled. Before the Sheriff could react, he continued, “But I sure as hell smelled smoke. By the time I’d grabbed some clothes and shoes and yanked open the door, all I could see was smoke. I couldn’t even see the bottom of the stairs. In fact, the heat was intense. I burned my feet on the last couple of metal steps.”

“Yeah, I think yew tol’ me all dat shit before. Go on.”

You sonofabitch. “That’s it, Sheriff,” he snapped. “I stood there and watched the flames consume Mabel’s last hope and dream. I stood there and waited for Henry to get his scrawny ass outa bed and call out the volunteers to fight the goddamned thing. Twenty goddamned minutes for him to get the pumper out and with the fire station not two blocks away. Jesus!”

“Hey, I already tol’ ya not ta curse, Blackburn. I mean, dis here ain’t yer goddamn big city, now, is it? The folks ‘round dese parts do da best dey can. Don’ really need no big ass-shots like yersef ta come in here ta liven things up, iff’n yew get my drift.” Eastman had puffed himself up until the brass buttons on his uniform were straining at their loops.

“Tha’s ‘nough fer t’day, sir.” He flipped his pad closed. “Sign on yer way out. I assume yer gonna be at Bailey’s ‘til ya decide what yer gonna do next. Like git yer ass back ta yer big city. But, don’ leave town wid-out tellin’ me or my man. Good-day, sir.” He hauled his ass off the chair, stuck the pad under his arm, and tucked Josh’s pen in his breast pocket.

“Wait, I wanna know what you know about the fire,” Josh said, half rising from the chair.

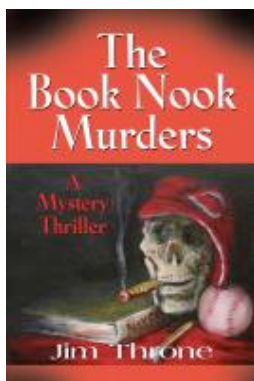
“Whaddaya wanna know?”

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“For one, how the hell did it start?”

“Hey, sonny. I ain’t no fire guy, ‘member? I jes a fuckin’ Sheriff. So, ta answer yer question, it ain’t fer me ta know. Gotta ax White, He’s da County Fire Marshal. Looks ‘spicious, though, iff’n ya ax me.” He pulled open the door. “Purdy sure he’s gonna have a whole passel a questions fer ya.”

The door clanged shut behind him before Josh could yell that he wanted his pen back.



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