

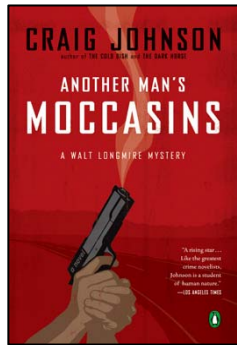
RUSSELL ROWLAND

## Johnson Recycles Old Cardboard

*Another Man's Moccasins*  
Craig Johnson  
Viking Press, 2008

The West has a long history of people exploiting resources for their own profit. This practice is usually confined to natural resources...minerals, livestock, and petroleum products. But it also applies to history, and culture.

With *Another Man's Moccasins*, Craig Johnson proves that he has a gift for turning a phrase, and putting together a plot. This is the fourth of his Walt Longmire mysteries, and Johnson has obviously



settled into a rhythm with his storytelling. This novel alternates between two storylines...one covering the present day murder of a young Vietnamese girl in Powder Junction, Wyoming, Walt Longmire's territory, and the second an earlier murder investigation that Longmire conducted during the war in Vietnam. It's clear from the beginning that these stories are linked by more than Longmire's association to them, and some of the most compelling moments of the story come from this connection.

But from the very beginning of this novel, there are problems. First, the Vietnam section is completely muddled. It's impossible to follow. Second, the present day story is completely predictable. And third, Johnson has created a cast of characters that are right out of the hall of fame of stereotypes. First there is Virgil White Buffalo, a seven foot Indian who doesn't speak and is considered a little bit crazy. Hmm, where have we seen this before? We also have the standard cast of inept and monosyllabic deputies and locals, with names like Double Tough. Johnson seems to think that throwing a few colorful phrases together with an occasional 'yep' passes for character development. One of the most interesting characters in the book is a black man who Longmire knew while he was in Nam, but this poor guy only gets one significant scene in the book before he disappears. He could almost be named Token. And then there are the Vietnamese girls. Neither of these characters gets a single line in the whole book. It's almost as if Johnson decided to throw in all of these nationalities for diversity, but didn't want to put the effort into developing them as real, complex people. Johnson props up these cardboard cutouts to move the story forward, but that's about it. Johnson also makes a half-hearted effort to create a romantic interest, but because the woman involved talks just like the men, and is even named Vic, when we get to the point where they nearly kiss, the natural reaction is to wonder whether we're observing a *Brokeback Mountain* moment. Part of the problem is that Johnson doesn't write dialog. He writes banter. Every scene is peppered with the kind of talk you'd hear in the locker room of every high school in America. So it's hard to make much of a connection to anyone in this story.

Basically, Johnson seems to look at his characters from a perch rather than trying to inhabit their world. This kind of writing is not only predictable, it's lazy. And worst of all, it's one more example of what people have come to expect from 'the West.' It reinforces what most people still want to believe, that this is what people in the West are like. Fortunately, we have a rich history of writers who either grew up

here or have moved to the West from other places and have taken the time to become part of their community rather than looking down on it. Thankfully, these writers have managed to tell their stories from the inside rather than from up high. Their experience of other places has allowed them to bring new perspectives into what the West is all about. Johnson has instead chosen to perpetuate the stereotypes by barely skimming the surface of his characters, and it's not hard to imagine why. Because it sells books. The pity of this is that Johnson addresses some issues that could make for an interesting story...homelessness, sex slaves from the Orient, and Post-Traumatic Stress. But rather than bring these issues to the table in the end, both stories build up to the same old John Wayne, heroic act by Longmire that we've seen over and over again. Instead of another interesting addition to our rich history of Western literature, this book takes us three steps back to the old formulas. It's a shame because Johnson is talented enough to do better.