

American nightmares

Noir leaves its traditional urban haunts in favor of wide-open spaces in two compelling books.

Economic and racial divides prove to be powerful motivators in these two gritty thrillers from masters of the genre.

In Edgar Award-winning author Joe R. Lansdale's **More Better Deals** (Mulholland, \$27, 9780316479912), the irresistible allure of easy money coupled with a conniving woman in distress drive main character Ed Edwards to take some unorthodox steps to secure his financial future.

When we first meet him in 1960s East Texas, Ed is a simple used-car salesman, barely eking out a living on commissions. He's quick to jump at a chance to make a few extra bucks when his boss asks him to repossess a Cadillac from a client, Frank Craig, who has failed to uphold his end of a sales contract.

Enter Frank's wife, Nancy, who is clearly distressed by her husband's physically abusive behavior towards her. Before long, Ed and Nancy are entangled in a steamy affair and embarking on a plot to permanently separate Nancy and Frank—by offing Frank and, in the process, collecting on his life insurance policy.

In typical Lansdale fashion, the best plans go astray in hilarious ways. Before long, the pair is planning the kidnap and ransom of the daughter of Frank's life insurance agent, with equally disastrous results.

Lansdale, who recently enjoyed some mainstream notoriety for his rough-and-tumble "Hap and Leonard" TV series, handles the misadventures of Ed and Nancy with his characteristic flair for dark humor. He often throws his down-on-their-luck characters

into oddball situations with less than favorable outcomes. Rather than learning from their mistakes and uninhibited ambitions, the characters always think they can do better the next time out—and inevitably fall even harder.

While Lansdale offers a dose of humor to temper harsh realities, author John Galligan goes into full-on dark mode in his new novel, **Dead Man Dancing** (Atria, \$27, 9781982110734). Right off the bat, Galligan gives readers a taste of racial injustice as he depicts a man driving around with a Confederate flag on the back of his truck at the Syttende Mai Festival (Norway's Constitution Day) in Farmstead, Wisconsin. The affront is especially egregious as the town is known for having harbored people who escaped slavery, smuggled in via the Underground Railroad during the Civil War.

Sheriff Heidi Kick, who made her debut in Galligan's previous thriller, *Bad Axe County*, struggles to keep the peace, but finds the situation compounded by the murder of local author and retired history teacher Augustus Pfaff and the discovery of a young Hispanic man who has been beaten nearly to death in an underground fight club. Some of Pfaff's last words are ultimately prophetic: "Anyone who wants to kill my story has to kill me too."

Heidi's investigation into both events ultimately uncovers a secret white nationalist movement operating in the town's shadows. Even as she tries to root out the hate, her

husband goes missing, further elevating the stakes.

Given current tensions and deep divisions in the United States, **Dead Man Dancing** takes on an electrifying relevance made all the more effective thanks to Galligan's vivid descriptions and emotional portrayal of his characters.

—G. Robert Frazier

