

Mississippi Noir

Edited by Tom Franklin

As editor Franklin (*Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter*) observes in his introduction, Mississippi is the perfect setting for the latest volume in Akashic's long-running noir series. The pronounced social conditions that make the Magnolia State ripe for noirish exploration—political corruption, infant mortality, the highest poverty rate in the nation—recall a saying from Franklin's Alabama upbringing: "Thank God for Mississippi; otherwise we'd be at the bottom of everything." Divided thematically into four sections, these 16 stories share some common denominators: doomed love ("There was a girl in all of this," says the narrator in Andrew Paul's "Moonface"), often fatal decision-making, and revenge. As always, established authors (Megan Abbott, Ace Atkins) share space with promising newcomers (Jimmy Cajoleas, Dominiqua Dickey), but the collection struggles to break out of its tonal rut. The most memorable pieces take the definition of noir beyond the expected: William Boyle's "Most Things Haven't Worked Out" is reminiscent of the gothic fatalism in Flannery O'Connor's stories, while Michael Kardos's "Digits," about a writing teacher whose students come to class with fewer and fewer fingers, veers into Shirley Jackson territory. **VERDICT** Despite some standouts, this is not one of Akashic's stronger efforts. Purchase only where this series is popular or of regional interest