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Country Dark
By Chris Offutt
Grove Press
340 pp.

Chris Offutt, a current Mississippi resident, revisits his native Kentucky during the era following the Korean War in his new novel, *Country Dark*. He explores the largely isolated world of its hill country, one that shapes its residents into outsiders who use whatever means necessary to survive and take care of the ones they love. For Offutt, it is an uncertain world where violence is used almost casually to resolve many issues, but nonetheless has long-ranging and unplanned consequences.

Offutt's tale follows a young man that goes by the name of Tucker who has just arrived back home in Kentucky from fighting in the Korean War. In his novel *Shutter Island*, author Dennis Lehane explores the difference between 'men of violence' and 'violent men.' Tucker seems to be a mixture of both, as he both witnesses and participates in horrific situations that shape his future decisions. He spends his time in Korea mostly behind enemy lines, constantly in harm's way and doing things no young person should have to do to simply survive. Within his first days of getting back home, he has a gun put in his face as part of a cruel joke and stops the rape of his future wife, Rhonda, by her own uncle.

It is not shocking, then, that he chooses violence to solve the problems that arise in the first half of *Country Dark*. He justifiably beats Rhonda's uncle, even though he has never seen either before in his life. However, he later makes the questionable choice to track down and murder the doctor who threatens to take several of his and Rhonda's children into state custody due to their unexplainable birth defects. Tucker is not an inherently bad person, but his decision to consistently use violence when faced with difficult situations has clear consequences later in the novel.

Another constant theme we see in Tucker's life is that he exists in a world of outsiders. The very place in which lives, the Kentucky hills, is inhabited by people who choose to live isolated from the rest of the world and the structure in which most of us reside. He takes a job running moonshine for a local bootlegger known as Beanpole, which places him in an unpredictable criminal world in order to provide for his growing family. In order to secure Rhonda's and the children's long-term future, Tucker agrees to serve a short prison term to protect Beanpole's business in exchange for enough money to allow him to lead a more stable life going forward. However, like in so many of the situations Tucker encounters, this leads to even more violence and unintended issues that completely upend his family's existence. Shaped by the violent world in which he lives, Tucker must then decide the path forward that best protects the ones he loves, no matter the cost.

Offutt truly shines in his novel when creating a sense of place in the Kentucky hills where his characters live. The natural environment in which they struggle is both rugged and beautiful. The woods are remote and unforgiving, yet serve as a home that gives purpose to people like Tucker, Rhonda, and

the myriad other characters that inhabit these pages. They are all shaped by this environment, and it clearly influences the decisions they make throughout the novel.

There are flaws to *Country Dark* that are mostly forgivable, but are flaws nonetheless. Some parts feel rushed and not fully realized, particularly the ending when you want a little more explanation as to why the characters are making certain choices. Also, the style is a bit jerky, as you get fast changes in perspective; in some places, there are pages of one character's point of view, and then suddenly you jump to an inner thought of another character in a random paragraph. Finally, there are some themes that could have used a little more exploration, such as the affects war has on the young people, such as Tucker, that fight it and how it shapes their lives going forward. However, these flaws are likely due to the shortness of the novel and the its fast paced action. Offutt succeeds in showing that hard decisions must be made when times are constantly tough and when outside forces threaten to change everything. Despite the violence of the novel, ultimately love is the driving force that makes the story of Tucker's family such a universal one.

[*Country Dark* by Chris Offutt is currently available for check out at Starkville Public Library]