



Pago Pago Tango

John Enright

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Detective Sergeant Apelu Soifua spent seven years in the San Francisco Police Department, where the job was just a job and solving crimes required cool detachment. But back home on American Samoa, life is personal—especially for a cop. Because on a small island where no one is a stranger and secrets are widely known but never discussed, solving crimes requires a certain...finesse.

Here, Apelu must walk the line between two cultures: Samoan versus American, native versus new. And that gulf never yawns wider than when a white family's home in Pago Pago is burglarized. And what appears to be a simple, open-and-shut case turns out to anything but. As the evidence piles up, Apelu follows a tangled trail between cultures, dead bodies, hidden codes, and a string of lies on his hunt for the ugly truth buried at the heart of paradise.

Set against the steamy backdrop of the Samoan jungle, this thoughtful whodunit introduces a memorable new gumshoe to the ranks of detective fiction.

Pago Pago Tango Details

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From Reader Review Pago Pago Tango for online ebook

Steve says

Detective Sergeant Apelu Soifua is something of a Samoan Columbo, with his deceptive mannerisms disguising his keen mind. I truly enjoyed this crime novel.

Beth deAcosta says

An ok read....

I loved the surrounding storyline of Samoan lifestyle and heritage customs but a couple paragraphs would have been sufficient not so many many pages.....almost forgetting the real plot that was happening before the long overdone descriptions. But I still enjoyed Pelu.....interesting place and its people....

Nancy says

This book nails the atmosphere of Pago Pago and American Samoa.
Brings back the feel of the place to me, as I lived there for a short time many years ago.

Calzean says

The crime part was a OK, nothing special. Detective Sergeant Apelu was a good character, eminently likeable and his views of the palangis were quite humorous. Some very interesting insights into the culture of the Samoans and the problems facing them due to their reliance on US funds and the scourge of Ice.

Stephanie says

This was a pretty standard mystery set in American Samoa. I've never read anything set in this locale so the descriptions of island life and Samoan culture were really fascinating to me.

Detective Sargent Apelu Soifua has been working the island beat for the last ten years since he and his family returned to Samoa from San Francisco to care for his ailing father. Dear old dad has since passed away and Pelu is now taking care of the family land and working at the local police station. Things begin to go bad when he is asked to look into a burglary at a local "palangi" neighborhood. The wife of corporate boss at the SeaKing tuna processing plant reports that her home has been broken into and some videotapes and a VCR have been stolen. But something about the break-in and the tapes that have gone missing doesn't quite add up. Pelu begins his investigation and other odd incidents start happening around the island. Gang violence, crimes against other palangi, mystery tapes showing up at the local video store all add up to an interconnected crime but Pelu isn't sure who to trust.

A decent mystery, and a very interesting setting. I would like to know more about this area and will definitely be picking up the next in this series.

Jack says

Samoa detective Apelu unravels a mystery with a tense climax. Promising first in a series.

Douglas E. Gillis says

Nice police story

It started a little slow, but the tempo picked up in the end. The ending was left open for some reason, as a second novel.

Marie (UK) says

I am so glad i didn't pay for this as I had lost interest long before the plot attempted to come together.

Stacie Haden says

My most favorite genre is a mystery set in another time or place. Pago Pago Tango is set in American Samoa. I give it a five for sense of place, both the warts and the beauty. I give it a three for Detective Sergeant Apelu Soifua, who annoyingly hid evidence that could help his superiors solve the case and apparently has no issues with entrapment. I hope I respect him more in the next installment, because in this one he was just plum lucky.

John Carpenter says

Pago Pago Tango, by John Enright

The title of John Enright's novel is light-hearted, a joke. True, in one place he refers to the "dance" of different cultures in Samoa where the novel takes place. On the cover the book is described as "a Detective Apelu Soifue Jungle Beat Mystery," but this too is tongue-in-cheek humor. The book is, actually, a parody of the old-fashioned detective novel. A native of Samoa, Apelu is the opposite of the hard-boiled Philip Marlowe-style cop: he has seen much of the world, appreciates humor and jokes, is relaxed, he might be the most attractive "detective" in the entire genre. Surrounded by crime and violence he perceives the human side of the people he encounters. His job as he sees it is only (!) to keep the peace. This is an extremely warm-hearted book.

The novel has a broad cast of characters from all walks of life. It is a sensitive, well-informed cultural study masked as a detective story. In this sense "Pago Pago Tango" is a dance and a study of two very different cultures in concrete detail. The characters range from the plantation boy or "tama" from a bush village-- a

serf living in near-slavery conditions-- to the Samoan administrators, and the different kinds of chief. There are the many “palangi,” the Samoan word for whites: the managers of packing and shipping plants, “SeaKing Tuna,” after the local government the largest employer on the island. Most palangi live in gated “State Department Housing.” There are also “half-castes” or afakasi, sometimes with Anglo-Saxon last names, who have inherited wealth from their parents. Into the mix are also American tourists. The author, John Enright, knows the Samoan language, and convincingly shows how Samoans think, act, and react. He has seriously studied folklore, and lived in the Pacific islands for many years.

Apelu, the detective, is surrounded by two cultures in collision, the native Samoan and the white money-dominated “palangi.” He knows the two cultures well from first-hand experience. As a young man he was taken to California and went to Mission High School in San Francisco; later he found a job with the SFPD. His “beat” was the Tenderloin, but after a couple of years it became filled with the victims of methamphetamine. This was one of his personal reasons for accepting the family’s “mandate” to return to Samoa: to escape the world of meth and “get off that ice train headed nowhere.” His wife accepted the move; it worked, and saved their marriage.

Just as the cast of characters is broad, the nature of the crimes committed is also broad. The events Apelu is called on to investigate almost always have an “unknowability factor;” they are rarely about morality. There are different rules in different situations depending on who is involved. “Apelu’s new cases are very Samoan—done deeds, acts of one kind of passion or another, with suspects already confessed and in custody. He had only to take statements and commiserate with the victim’s families.” The number of homicides in Samoa is enormous, given the island’s population. But the use of a firearm in a murder is exceptional; the usual weapons are rocks, bottles, two-by-fours, bush knives, weapons of personal anger. A dead man is much more likely to have his skull caved in than a bullet hole in him.

The “clues” almost always turn out to be cultural clues. Apelu tries to soften the blows if he can. Among Samoan youth, “Ice” or methamphetamine has widely displaced weed, “it was here like a trailing plague.” The problems in the two cultures are ironically similar, but the Samoan drug problems are drowned by palangi money. Apelu arrests at the airport a young fugitive “ice-head” involved in a violent crime; he is hopelessly addicted, about to return to his home on an out-lying island. Apelu always wants to avoid incarceration, it is his own personal rule. He returns the young addict’s passport, gives him a stern warning to stay away from “the Territory” (Samoa) in the future.

Apelu is called on to investigate a petty crime in the palangi “State Department Housing,” and the plot becomes increasingly more violent. He must interview a high American executive in the packing company. He meets members of the family that turns out to be deeply dysfunctional. The wife drinks, has a vacant stare, loathes Samoa and longs to return to America. At one point she confides to Apelu “I hate to tell you, but your island sucks.” The mother and attractive daughter are unable to speak to one another. The daughter contemplates running away but doesn’t know where. In desperation she has taken up with a local adolescent ice-head who is involved in violent fights. He becomes a fugitive. Apelu has a warrant to arrest him. The conflicts accelerate and gather the force of inevitability. With executive complicity the palangi packing company and its international trade turns out to be a major supplier of “ice” in volume. Using a very clever code of accounting for the shipping containers, huge sums of money mix with the highly addictive drugs. Pago Pago Tango is a warm and generous book. It is extremely well-informed, a book of nuances and cultural awareness. It is a great pleasure to read.

Andrew says

John Enright's “Pago Pago Tango” introduces readers to Samoan detective Apelu Soifua, returned to the Island after serving on the San Francisco Police Department. Soifua's department has his hands full with a

spate of murders – except, Soifua has been assigned dealing with a robbery in a paalangi (outsider, in this and most cases, American) community. Mystery readers will, of course, realize that a detective of Soifua's ability (and the protagonist of the story) won't be kept on the sidelines for long.

Mr. Enright has written 4 tales in this series. I've enjoyed the first two, and hope that other readers discover him and his prized character Detective Soifua. With a few more readers, I'm sure we can be treated to a 5th (and beyond) book in the series.

RATING: 4 1/2 stars., upgraded to 5 stars where 1/2 stars are not acknowledged.

Tony says

American Samoa is a place I am highly unlikely to ever get a chance to visit, so I'll probably have to settle for armchair tourism, and this debut mystery is my first visit. The book is the first of what looks to be a projected series featuring Detective Sergeant Apelu, a Samoan who spent his childhood on the island and much of his adulthood in the US. This included seven years with the San Francisco Police Department, which he was able to parlay into a job back in Samoa when he needed to come care for his dying father. The story kicks off with a bit of a bang, in which Apelu is nearly killed while searching for a dead palangi (Caucasian) in a national park. Thanks to that off-the-books investigation, he is reassigned to trivial duties, including a routine burglary call which entangles him in something much more sinister.

What that ends up being is not particularly complicated, as far as mysteries go, nor is it entirely convincing. Or rather, it's just convincing enough not to spoil the book. The real fun of the book is exploring the culture of modern American Samoa as it struggles to reconcile traditional systems and structures with the influences of America, Asia, and most of all, capitalism. Unlike many stories set by outsiders (Enright lived in Samoa, but is not from there), these are woven into the fabric of the story and characters, and there are not passages that feel like info dumps from a guidebook. Apelu is a compelling protagonist, balancing his beliefs with his time in America, family life with work and the desire to have fun. His investigative style might be described as a kind of tropical Columbo, as he tends to just drop in on people for chats and then, just as he's leaving, pull out the old. "Oh, one more thing..." card before delivering his real "gotcha" question. Good fun, and I'll look forward to the next in the series. Definitely recommended for those who read fiction for setting, less recommended for those primarily concerned with plot.

Ivonne Rovira says

Detective Sergeant Apelu Soifua in Tafuna, American Samoa, makes distinctions between crimes involving Samoan natives and those involving *palangi* ("white people," pronounced "puh-LANG-ee"). In the former cases, everyone knew what happened and why and usually "the perpetrator would either be waiting for [Apelu], already collared and ready to confess, or easily identified and apprehended" (Chapter 3). But with the *palangi*, the police rarely knew what had really happened. When someone breaks into the upscale home of SeaKing Tuna executive Gordon Trurich and his vodka-swilling trophy wife Karen, Apelu quickly realizes there are more unknowns than usual.

First of all, the mode of entry differed from that of the recent string of robberies. Secondly, why would

burglars take a VCR and 50 videotapes, most just home-made ones, and then dump the VCR on the edge of the property but take the tapes? The same tapes that Mr. Trurich forgot to mention on the police report. (This narrative is set in the early 1990s.) And why did neither Gordon nor Karen Trurich report the .357 that was stolen, as well — a gun later used in a shooting at a nightclub? Later on, even more discrepancies — and some mayhem — emerge. Apelu quickly realizes the case constitutes more than a run-of-the-mill burglary by teenaged gang members.

Himself a *palangi* who spent 26 years in the South Pacific, John Enright has created a great protagonist in Apelu, an imperfect man at odds with his people's missionary culture, his religious and strict wife, and his superiors at police headquarters. Pago Pago is pronounced "Pango Pango" so that the title is said "Pango Pango Tango"; that's perfect because Apelu finds himself dancing a very intricate dance between *palangi* and native cultures, between traditional views of honor and its modern consumerist bent, between his own sense of justice and his strained relationship with his superiors, between the overwhelming demands of his job and the needs of his family. Enright has a great mystery with a suspenseful ending, of course, but what I really welcome was the chance to learn about American Samoa, about which I knew virtually nothing. Enright has created a valentine to with this debut novel while not shying away from the sordid aspects of life in a supposed paradise: the subverting of native culture, the destructiveness of inter-village rivalries and resentments, the corruption and nepotism involving the traditional chiefs. As with the novels of Robert van Gulik, *Pago Pago Tango* provided this armchair traveler a chance I'd not otherwise get: to see another faraway culture from the inside.

The next book in the so-called Jungle Beat series, *Fire Knife Dancing*, appears later this month. I can't wait for a return visit to Tafuna.

Laurel says

What a find this mystery turned out to be! I found it by accident, as I was searching for books for my Read Around the World challenge. It is set in contemporary American Samoa, and proved to be a welcome lesson in the culture and history of the island, as well as a strongly plotted mystery. I really liked the main character, Det. Sgt. Apelu Soifua, or Pelu, for short. A family man, with a scarred past as a former San Francisco cop and drug user, Pelu has returned to his native island, and reclaimed his life in order to become a dedicated father, husband and police officer. He loves his culture, at least most of it; and worries about the impact of many decades of white culture and inhabitants, on the island. This book is as much about Samoan culture as it is a well constructed mystery. And John Enright knows whereof he speaks! A former journalist for *Fortune*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, Enright spent twenty-six years living on American Samoa, teaching college courses. He is interested in cultural folklore, having studied it at UC-Berkeley, and weaves Samoan stories and cultural tidbits throughout his book. Pelu believes in many of the old ways, and actively practises them as part of his daily life.

This book saddened me at times, as Enright describes many of the negative effects white culture and economic endeavours have had on the island. The tuna canning industry, represented by the famous Charlie the Tuna, of Starkist fame, does not come off favourably, in Enright's text. The "palangi", or whites have been having considerable impact on American Samoa since it was used by the Navy in 1907 as a base. A huge population of wild dogs, a garbage plagued harbor with badly contaminated fish, severe damage to the island's reefs from cannery waste, declines in native birds and plants replaced by invasive species brought to the islands by white outsiders.....the list of problems tied to white interference goes on and on.

There are two other books in this series. I will be reading them, to continue to follow Pelu's career, and to learn more about his people's culture, and to see if there are any solutions to be found for American Samoa's problems, perhaps suggested by Enright, based on his observations, having made the island his home for almost three decades.

Tina says

Not what I was expecting. Didn't get to the point where I cared about the characters or the crime. The island setting was a nice change but not enough to salvage my attention.
