



## Down by the River Where the Dead Men Go

*George Pelecanos*

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"You already been a punk. Least you can do is go out like a man." Then a dull popping sound and a quiet splash.

In his third appearance in George Pelecanos's acclaimed series, Nick Stefanos has been spending too much time with bad women and bad booze. Which is why he wakes up one blurry morning on the banks of the Anacostia River, hungover and miserable--and now a witness to a murder. With the help of a partner as straight-arrow as Nick is bent, Nick decides to track down the killer, an investigation that leads them through the roughest part of the nation's capital, and into the blackest parts of the human soul.

## Down by the River Where the Dead Men Go Details

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## From Reader Review Down by the River Where the Dead Men Go for online ebook

### Kemper says

Most private detectives in the mystery genre get their cases when someone walks into their offices and hires them, but Nick Stefanos likes to do things a bit differently. For starters he doesn't even have an office, and he gets his latest case by overhearing a murder when he's too drunk to stop it. I don't think that's how Spenser or Elvis Cole would go about it.

Despite having a PI license, Nick spends most of his time pouring drinks at a dive bar called The Spot. After closing up one night, Nick goes on a blackout drunk that ends with him laying in a pile of a garbage in a park by a river. Nick is so plowed that when he hears two men shoot a teenager, he literally can't lift a finger to help. Feeling guilty Nick sets out to track down the kid's killers and gets hooked up with a straight arrow PI named Jack LaDuke who has been hired to find a friend of the dead teen who has gone missing.

The three books that Pelecanos wrote featuring Nick have been a vivid account of an alcoholic steadily falling further into the bottle, and this is definitely a low point. It's telling that while Nick feels responsible for the young man's death, he never once seriously considers quitting the booze. He could tell the police all he heard and head to an AA meeting, but Nick's solution instead is to mount a dangerous investigation while still drinking every chance he gets.

While Nick is a good and decent guy at heart, there are times when you kind of wish someone would just kick his ass for being full of crap. As a chronic sentimentalist, Nick can put a layer of schmaltzy bullshit to his drinking rationalizations. He tells one person that The Spot has become a home for him and delights in the routine of pouring drinks for the regulars, but in reality it's just a dirty bar filled with drunks that provides him easy access to the whiskey shots with beer chasers that he so dearly loves.

Despite his flaws, you can't help but root for Nick and wish he'd pull himself together. That makes it that much worse when he pours the next shot and lights another cigarette. Nick may be willing to risk his life to see justice done, but he'd also rather die than make any changes that would potentially take the bottle out of his hand.

Dan, Anthony and I cracked open a bottle of Grand-Dad and discussed our thoughts about Nick. You can read it at [Shelf Inflicted](#).

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### Maddy says

PROTAGONIST: Nick Stefanos, PI and bartender

SETTING: Washington, DC

SERIES: #3 of 3

RATING: 3.75

WHY: Nick Stefanos, bartender and PI, is a young man but a raging alcoholic. During a binge, he passes out in a park and awakes to the sounds of someone being killed. He takes it upon himself to investigate Calvin Jeter's murder, partnering with Jack LaDuke, a new PI working for the mother of one of Jeter's friends who has gone missing. Together they enter a grim world of drugs, gay porn and violence. As always, Pelecanos

does a great job of portraying the grim side of Washington, DC; and the dialogue is spot on. Noir in tone, there's a sense that Nick will never overcome his demons.

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## **Larry Bassett says**

### **DOWN BY THE RIVER WHERE THE DEAD MEN GO**

It is time to begin the third and final book of the Nick Stefanos trilogy *Down by the River Where the Dead Men Go*. Although I am reading this book from the collection Three Great Novels Down By The River A Firing Offense Nick's Trip, I am including this review under the individual book since that is by far the most common way readers will experience this book.

This is Pelecanos' fourth or fifth published book, published in 1995. He wrote a couple of books between the second of the trilogy Nick's Trip and this book. I thought book one A Firing Offense A Five Star Title was a little slow moving with too much violence and drugs. I thought book two Nick's Trip was a lot better but still plenty of the Pelecanos' early standards of alcohol and sex and violence. I think his recent books are better written and less graphic than his early work. But let's see where Pelecanos goes with the finale of the Nick Stefanos trilogy. I'm looking forward to finding out and that is always a good place to start. I do know that Pelecanos can get the adrenaline flowing and make you think at the same time. (It turns out that violence is at its peak in the third book, one of the negatives as far as I am concerned.)

Even with my history of Al Anon, it is still hard for me to label anyone an alcoholic. So I have given Nick Stefanos every benefit of the doubt through the first and second books, way beyond what he deserved. I keep forgetting that the alcoholic can be very functional and pleasant even while drinking. But now I have to say it: Nick is an alcoholic and just barely managed to avoid being a drug addict. If I needed conclusive proof, Pelecanos inserts blackouts (indicated by the single word paragraph "Black") several times during extreme drinking episodes. No reason to be surprised that it took me a while to register the many hints of alcoholism; I did that (denial) in real life too. Nick is a part of an alcoholic subculture from the first page to the last of this trilogy.

And he hangs out with several others with alcohol problems including one love interest.

Lyla lifted her wineglass. 'Takes the edge off,' she said, and had a sip. 'Yeah, that'll do it.' 'I thought you looked a little thick today,' I said. And I had noticed her hand shaking as she picked up her glass.

She shrugged apologetically. 'Happy hour stretched to last call. Sorry I didn't make it over last night.'

One of the things I like about George Pelecanos in his more recent writing is that his stories, while intense and on the edge, are also generally believable to me with less unbelievable action for the sake of action. His earlier work, less so. In Nick's Trip Nick is about one second away from being killed in an isolated location when someone appears and shoots Nick's attacker in the back, killing him. Like in the movies, too close to be believable but tense and exciting anyway, real or not. So I guess you have to be willing to suspend disbelief in most murder mysteries. In spite of the presence of plenty of cars, I am pleased to say there are no

improbable car chases. But there is a lot of DUI or DWI. Now murder mystery is not a usual genre for me. I read most of the Agatha Christie books but that is about it. Oh, yes, and the Hardy boys by Franklin W. Dixon when I was in elementary school.

Nick operates on a cash economy. No credit or debit cards. No checks. No stops at the ATM machine but he always has cash in his pocket somehow. Running a tab at the bar is, of course, the norm. He is a big tipper.

I left fourteen on nine and walked to the entranceway, where I dropped a quarter into a pay phone and dialed.

...

I ordered six to go, and Steve arranged them in a cardboard carrier. I left thirty on eighteen, and LaDuke and I headed out the door.

The known donor artificial insemination baby that Nick fathered in “Nick’s Trip” makes a brief appearance by reference but doesn’t seem to have any meaningful role other than to be a small piece of what develops Nick’s character. And, of course, Pelecanos managed a sex scene when the baby was conceived in the second book.

Near the register hung a framed photograph of Jackie Kahn, former Athena’s bartender and mother of my child, a boy named Kent, now nine months old.

There is never any suggestion that Nick takes any role in raising Kent who is on the west coast by now. Maybe he will reappear as a teenager or adult in a future Pelecanos novel.

In early Pelecanos there are no cell phones, a fact that is a date stamp in many books. The drug world is full of beepers and Nick always has a quarter and a pay phone nearby when necessary. I can remember hearing that some people wore imitation beepers so they could appear to be part of a certain crowd. Answering machines often put in an appearance. There is an occasional car phone in the BMW of the drug king. I wonder how they handle the No Smoking laws in restaurants and bars in the more recent books. Probably poor enforcement plays a role.

Violence is as graphic as Pelecanos gets in “Down by the River.” One violent series of events goes page after page, fifteen pages of chapters 23 and 24. I often wonder why Pelecanos novels haven’t been made into movies yet. Maybe even our blood soaked movies can’t portray the level of violence onscreen as you will find in these two chapters. The amount of violence that Nick experiences does not match up with injuries to his body. He can be in mayhem with bodies falling all around him and still walk away with minor damage.

As usual, Pelecanos is notable for his descriptive detail. Sometimes it seems that he can take it to (comic?) extremes: “He hit my dash lighter, slid the cigarette off the top of his ear, and *put the filtered end in his mouth.*”

He looked to be reasonably fit, a thin silver-haired man at the very end of his middle years, with prosperity – or the illusion of it – apparent in every thread of his clothes. He wore a

nonvented Italian-cut suit over a powder blue shirt with a white spread collar, and a maroon tie featuring subtle geometrics, gray parallelograms shaded in blue to pick up the blue off the suit. His face was long, sharply featured, and angular, except for his lips, which were thick and damp and oddly red, reminded me somehow of a thinly sliced strawberry.

I assume that Pelecanos writes from real life observations. I wonder where he saw that tie or if he has one like it.

“It’s time for some fucking justice.” Characters invented by Pelecanos often take enforcement of the law into their own hands when they think that the criminal justice system has failed or will fail. In Pelecanos, the morality of the hero is always somewhat blurred.

Decisions have consequences for Nick. But he has his own way of putting it. And his own conscience and guiding light in which he tries “to find a kernel of spirituality before returning to the cold reality” of his day. There is no evidence that he ever finds the kernel.

You know, you don’t always have to work so hard at being cynical around me, Nick. I know that, in your own way, you have a fairly clear idea of what’s right and what’s wrong. Not all the good that gets done in this world gets done in a church or a meeting hall, I realize that.

Guiding lights and basic truths are occasionally spelled out or tried out by Nick and others.

I told him, and then we went back and forth on it for the next half hour. In the end, against his better judgment, he agreed to do what I asked, maybe because he knew that we both wanted the same thing. I set a time and thanked him, then hung the receiver in its cradle. Then I tilted my head back and killed the rest of my beer.

I could have called Boyle back and ended it right then, if I had just called him back, things might not have gone the way they did between Lyla and me, and I never would have met Jack LaDuke. But the thirst for knowledge is like a piece of ass you know you shouldn’t chase; in the end, you chase it just the same.

...  
You got this one way of lookin’ at things, like it’s right or it’s not, and nothing in between.

...  
I don’t believe in this victimized-society crap. All those people pointing fingers, never pointing at themselves. So people get abused as kids, then spend the rest of their lives blaming their own deficient personalities on something that happened in their childhoods. It’s bullshit, you know it? I mean, everybody’s carrying some kind of baggage, right? I know I was scarred, and maybe I was scarred real deep. But knowing that doesn’t straighten anything out for me.

...  
Everything is black and white with people like you. People like you can’t even see the possibility of a higher power. No, I am certain that if you were asked, you’d say that there is no God.

But it seems that it always comes down to what you've got.

You got matches? You always got matches, Nick.

Nick's got a cat.

I had another beer, and another after that. By then, it had gotten pretty late. I thought of my cat, out in the weather, hungry and pacing on the stoop. I dimmed the lights and put on a coat, then locked the place and set the alarm. I went out to the street.

So, for me, it was great that these three stories were all bound into one book. It gave me a chance to get to know Nick Stefanos pretty well and to read the stories in the correct sequence. But like several of Pelecanos' heroes, I am not sure if I like him. I know that I am glad the world is not filled with people like him who fight fire with fire. We have to hope for better than Nick. The end does not justify the means, does it? Knowing Nick Stefanos is like being schooled in alcoholism. You might have to go to a few Alcoholics Anonymous meetings to decide if Nick is believable.

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### **James Thane says**

First published in 1995, this is the third and final installment of George Pelecanos's series featuring Nick Stefanos. In the opening book, *A Firing Offense*, Nick left his job at Nutty Nathan's electronics store and got his license as a P.I. But as this book opens, Nick, who has a major drinking problem, is supporting himself by tending bar at The Spot, a somewhat less-than-genteel establishment. Being a P.I. is still something of a sideline for Nick.

At this point, Nick is dating a woman probably better than he deserves and who is also developing a significant problem with booze herself. Needless to say, Stefanos is not the best influence in this regard. One night, Nick goes on a hellacious bender and winds up dead drunk, down by the Anacostia River. During the course of the night, a car pulls up near the spot where Nick has passed out. He awakens sufficiently to hear two men drag a third out of a car and shoot him. Nick can't raise his head high enough to see either the killers or their car, but he is alert enough to deduce from the sound of their voices that one of the killers is white, the other black.

The next morning, Nick finally awakens and stumbles down to the riverbank where he finds the body of the victim, a young black man. He makes an anonymous call to the cops, reporting the killing, and then beats feet.

The cops are convinced that it's a drug deal gone wrong or perhaps a gang killing and they don't appear to be putting a lot of effort into solving the case. But Nick knows that it's highly unlikely that a black man and a white man would be cooperating in either scenario. The killing has sobered him, at least temporarily, and he decides to investigate the crime himself.

Stefanos finds it significant that the victim's best friend is now missing and he teams up with a straight-arrow newbie P.I. named Jack LaDuke who has been hired by the missing boy's mother to find him. Together, Nick and LaDuke will be drawn into a seamy world of drugs, gay porn, violent crime and lots of other unpleasant activities as they attempt to find the missing boy and solve the killing.

As is usual in a novel by George Pelecanos, the major force in the book is the setting and atmosphere that he creates. The seedy underside of Washington, D.C., where virtually all of his books are set, comes alive and is vividly rendered. You can feel the poverty and despair, smell the cigarette smoke, and practically taste the liquor.

As always in a Pelecanos book, music plays a key role, and hardly a page goes by that does not find Stefanos listening to one musical group or another, a great many of whom no one else has ever heard of, and at times it can seem like Pelecanos is simply showing off in this regard, effectively pointing out to the reader that he is cooler and way more hip than the reader could possibly ever be.

But this is a small complaint about a very good book from a writer early in his career who would only grow more talented and produce even better books in the years to come. It should appeal to any reader of crime fiction who likes his or her action down and dirty and who understands that in real life, sometimes there are no happy endings.

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### **Toby says**

I'm glad I went back on my previous decision not to finish the Nick Stefanos trilogy of early Washington DC noir novels from George Pelecanos as this was a much more enjoyable and well written book than the previous entry. The endless descriptions of bars and what music was playing during Nick's Trip has been toned all the way down in favour of following Nick's downward spirals in to alcoholic oblivion and a tightly plotted hunt for a murderer and a missing teenage boy with a little help from a rookie PI who insinuates himself in to Nick's messy life via a laughably bad attempt at a strongarm manoeuvre lifted straight from the movies. The life choices made by Stefanos are depressingly bleak, especially the way Pelecanos writes him so knowingly treading the path towards self-destruction and the way they undercut the actual detection is straight out of the early Matt Scudder school of detective story, only this time he has a case worthy of Scudder too. By far my favourite of the four Pelecanos novels tried out so far and has reinvigorated my interest in exploring the man's extensive back catalogue further.

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### **Aditya says**

Stefanos just before passing out after one or five drinks too many overhears a kid being killed. A combination of boredom and guilt gets him on the trail of the murderers. The market for full time drunk, part time detective who deals with a cast of colorful characters while living in an atmospheric rendition of a major US city is completely cornered by Lawrence Block's Matt Scudder series. Pelecanos is not a bad writer but he never reaches the highs of Block. His dialogue though realistic remains bland and he doesn't possess Block's wry sense of humor.

The sense that Stefanos is slowly withering away is constant and for the first time in three books Pelecanos does enough for me to care about Stefanos. Another PI - LaDuke, that Stefanos teams up with is also highly enigmatic and interesting. The best long running crime series (Robicheaux, Scudder) always focus more on great characters and the plots are of a secondary importance. However that doesn't give the plot a license to be stupid. Pelecanos makes that major mistake, he focuses completely on characters and the narrative suffers. I had two main issues - Stefanos repeatedly refuses the help of a friendly cop and bites more than he can chew with disastrous results. And there is one major deus ex machina moment where he suddenly recognizes a crucial witness whom he has never seen before while just roaming in his car in a completely different part of town. Amateruish indeed.

The first two books in the series were hampered by Pelecanos' self indulgence. The narrative would often be sidetracked by pages after pages of description of 60s musclebound car, 90s underground rap and a lot of bloated description of drinking. This one does away with the first two but the third remains. I like a drink more than most but the repetition tested my patience. I don't need to know exactly where the bar was situated, what the bartender wore, how long Stefanos sipped and how long he chugged. It seemed like a fifteen year old had discovered drinking for the first time. I had no idea it is that easy to forget whether one is writing a crime novel or the liquor section of the local yellow pages.

The series overall would go down as a disappointment for me. So *Down By the River Where the Dead Men Go* being the best in it by some margin is not much of a glowing recommendation. Not bad by any means but everything attempted in the book has been done more effectively by better authors. Rating - 3/5

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### **Josh says**

I love a tainted protagonist and booze soaked sometimes-Private-Eye Nick Stefanos fits the bill perfectly in the James-Ellroy-esque noir *Down by the River Where the Dead Men Go* by George Pelecanos. After a bender, Nick wakes to the sounds of murder on the banks of a river. Despite wallowing in his own vomit and drunk-induced haze, he's alert enough to know the sound of an execution. With no paying cases on the go, and loads of flexibility in his 'day' job as a bartender at the Spot, he sets out to catch a killer.

Stefanos teams with DaLuke, an out of town PI with little experience and the two form a close bond; their respective character complimenting one another as they wade through a criminal underworld seeped in depravity with underage male prostitution and drug trafficking at its core.

My rating: 5/5. I thought this book was great. Murder angle aside, there's a lot of character and subtle sub plots in this book which makes it feel like a meaty read despite the low page count.

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### **Edward says**

This is the best Pelecanos novel I've read yet. It's raw, it's real, and written with the gritty, lean style that I love. It's purely neo noir compared to his later works which are more procedural, yet still very much on the noir side. It also touches on some serious subjects such as alcoholism, and child predators and pornography.

I didn't realize this was the third Stefanos book so I'll be on the look out for the first three soon. Nick is a great character. An alcoholic bartender who has a knack for screwing up his love life. He's just as much a

criminal as the people he's chasing even though he's suppose to be somewhat of a PI. LaDuke was another great character who at first seems like a straight arrow, but later find out he has serious problems all his own. Both come together to investigate the murder of a teenager only to find out he's in deep with some child pornographers.

A terrific, albeit dark, piece of crime fiction written by a terrific crime writer.

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### **Richard says**

***"The thirst for knowledge is like a piece of ass you know you shouldn't chase; in the end, you chase it just the same."***

The best of the Stefanos novels and my second favorite book Pelecanos has written! In somewhat of a parallel to Nick Stefanos's character, the first two books in the series are a little meandering, but this novel is more mature, with a cleaner and clearer plot line, and finally a real sense of true detective work.

Nick is on somewhat of a guilt trip with his latest investigation. He is set on solving the murder of a teenage kid; a murder he witnessed and possibly could have stopped if he wasn't piss drunk and semi-conscious under a bridge in Anacostia after a major bender. But the mystery is secondary to the wonderful character study of Nick himself, now close to rock bottom. The novel is not only a detective story, but also a look at a young man trying to finally confront his alcoholism.

Nick has grown into a great character and almost all of the smaller characters are extremely memorable, including LaDuke and the "man in the brilliant blue coat". And as usual, there is a great sense of place in the way Pelecanos portrays mid-90's Washington D.C. and it's culture. I used to live there for four years in college and I really miss it. Reading these books takes me right back!

This is an awesome story that kept me hooked. Also, for a real conclusion to Nick Stefanos's story, read Shame the Devil, my #1 favorite Pelecanos novel, which unites both the Stefanos series and the DC Quartet series and brings them both to a rich resolution.

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### **John Culuris says**

★★★★ 1/2

When we first met Nick Stefanos in 1992's *A Firing Offense*, we find him beginning his workday by staring into a bathroom mirror while noting that he had recently reached thirty years old and the previous night had drunk several beers backed with bourbon. A recreational stoner who socialized in bars, his lifestyle had not yet reached the point where it was affecting his work as the advertising director of a Washington, D.C. electronics chain. As we follow his involvement in subsequent events, it becomes clear that he had only been kept in check by lack of time and minimal opportunity. By the time Nick cleans up the case he gets drawn into, there are several losses, the least of which is his job. He applies for a private investigator's license as we fade out.

A year later (two years in our world) Nick has found that a license does not a living make. He earns the majority of his income from bartending at a dive bar called **The Spot**, and almost as if to prove the point the two cases he takes on in this novel stem strictly from friendship, one recent and one stretching all the way back to adolescence. The book is called *Nick's Trip* in part because of the latter. Nick goes on a road trip fueled by alcohol and drugs with this childhood friend, a trip that echoes a similar cross-country jaunt they had taken post-high school. By the end of this outing, the world has again made it clear to Nick that good and evil are not always so easily separable. When your illusions are shredded, unlimited access to alcohol is far from ideal.

With word one of *Down by the River Where the Dead Men Go* Pelecanos makes it clear that Nick Stefanos' downward spiral has continued in the reader's absence:

**Like most of the trouble that's happened in my life or that I've caused to happen, the trouble that happened that night started with a drink. Nobody forced my hand; I poured it myself. . . .**

It was the first drink of many. Bored and lonely after closing the bar, Nick drinks until he can no longer fill the glass without splashing the countertop. At that point he stumbles over to another bar still open and active, and after some brief socializing returns to The Spot, drinking all the way. Walking blackouts ensue, followed by driving blackouts. Nick ends up at a vacant area by the Anacostia River, parked in woods because of the need to urinate, but not making it to the nearby clearing before collapsing, unable to move. Consciousness comes and goes over the course of the night. During one stretch of awareness he hears an execution, and come morning, when mobility returns, he discovers a bound young man floating in the water.

Guilt weighs on Nick. That it is an irrational guilt does not help. Nick is well aware that had he been able to move, the only thing he would have accomplished was giving the killers a second victim. The author is also well aware that, given Nick's deteriorating condition, guilt alone is not enough to keep his attention on the case for an extended period. Early in the investigation Nick encounters another detective who needs some measure of nursemaiding. More importantly, the victim had a friend who disappeared at the same time, and there is every indication that he is still alive to be rescued. Together they are enough to keep Nick engaged.

Structurally *Down by the River* mirrors *A Firing Offense* in that the novel adopts the PI tradition of following two stories that intertwine and intersect, and may or may not come together in the end. The Pelecanos twist on this? He treats Nick's personal life as the second plotline, and for the most part moves from one story to the other with little interaction. (The middle novel differed from this structure because both cases were personal from the start; there was no need for a major personal storyline. In fact, the lone subplot involving a personal dilemma in *Nick's Trip* was of such insignificance that it was quickly forgotten each time Pelecanos moved on to matters of more consequence.)

In this book--Nick Stefanos' third appearance and the last time he will tell his own story--being forced to take a hard look at himself is of such vital importance that it **needs** uninterrupted attention. If the opening did not make that clear enough, the second chapter does. We learn that Nick has a girlfriend. All it took in the pre-cell phone world of 1995 to set him off was not being able to reach her. It's not just his world impacted by his alcoholism. The people in his orbit are also affected. Nick must examine his life as thoroughly as he examines the case at hand because, as the novel winds down, this time each story will find reflections in the other. Decision must be made, decisions where the reader can never be assured of which way Nick will go. As it should be. It's what keeps us enthralled.

It started with a drink. And when the circle is completed, all questions answered and all secrets revealed, Nick will once again finds himself alone in the dark facing one final decision. As with all the other choices

he made up to this point, there is no guarantee of which road he will take. He could push the bottle away as easily as he could reach for a chaser. It is well worth finding out which.

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### **Dan Schwent says**

When a drunken bender sees Nick Stefanos stumble upon a murder in progress, he begins investigating once he sobers up. Nick soon finds himself teaming up with Jack LaDuke, a straight-laced PI and looking for the murder victim's best friend, unraveling a web of drugs, pornography, and death...

Nick Stefanos' slide into irredeemable drunkenness continues in *Down by the River Where the Dead Men Go*, the third of his "adventures." While Nick is now one of my favorite series mystery characters, he's wearing me down with his drinking.

*Down by the River* deviates from the structure of the first two. There are no drunken road trips in this one. Nick actually acts more like a detective in this one than the previous two books put together, mostly because Jack LaDuke doesn't drink. Still, Nick being Nick, he does manage to hit the sauce quite a bit, getting blackout drunk a few times and trashes his relationship with Lyla.

Pelecanos' writing continues to mature in these early outings, displaying some Jim Thompson in addition to the usual Chandler and Crumley. His depictions of Nick getting drunk make me feel a little hungover. This one felt a lot more urgent than the other two Stefanos books, probably because there was no drunken road trip to break up the investigation.

*Down by the River Where the Dead Men Go* is the best written of Pelecanos' Nick Stefanos series and probably the most powerful since it shows what Nick's life is doing to the people around him. I guess I'll give it a five but I feel guilty doing it since Nick keeps plunging toward rock bottom.

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### **Jake says**

After reading this, I'm glad I have a functioning liver. I can't believe Nick Stefanos doesn't have cirrhosis. A few years ago, slacker-bartender-cum-private-eye would have been a more enjoyable read. Now I just want him to get to a meeting.

At any rate, considering how raw the first book in this series was, it's impressive at how Pelecanos honed his style. It's got the same energy as the first but is better written. I know his later novels are more prestigious and deal with IMPORTANT subjects but I wish he had done a few more of these. They're fun reads. He's said that he couldn't write these books anymore and I get that but they're still entertaining.

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### **David says**

In my view, this was the book in which George Pelecanos put it all together and emerged as a great mystery writer. His first two books were exhilarating, but often seemed like he was trying to out-do Hunter Thompson in the amount of space dedicated to drug and alcohol binges. His first book, "A Firing Offense" seemed to have the plot as an afterthought. It was fun, but very undisciplined and not a lot of focus.

In "Down By the River Where the Dead Men Go", that is not the case. As if to pay homage to his old style of writing one last time, Pelecanos has his returning hero, Nick Stefanos, go on a bender, only to pass out and then be awakened by the sounds of a murder. The curiosity of the protagonist gets him involved in the case, and the plot unfolds from there.

The characters are a highlight in this book. Stefanos is in a relationship with a woman named Lyla, which is bending under the strain of too much drinking. In addition, another private detective, Jack LaDuke, is introduced, who is colorful and interesting. Best of all, Johnny MacGinnes from the first novel makes an appearance, and is his old, crazy self.

Unlike the first two Stefanos books, here, Pelecanos does not allow himself to be sidetracked by the drugs or the personalities. They play a supporting role to an interesting and well thought out plot. It unfolds with a pace and logic that would make Ross MacDonald proud. Along the way, a more thoughtful, even brooding tone takes over the mind of Nick Stefanos, as he seems to realize that his younger, partying self is giving way both to maturity and to a world that is somewhat threatening.

I don't want to give away the final conversation in the book, but do want to highlight it as a mark of the maturing style of Pelecanos. It is extremely well done, artful and pensive. It provides an excellent ending to a powerful story.

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### **Tyler Collison says**

I held off on reading Pelecanos for a while. I will forever thirst for watching *The Wire* over and over and over again, but after my first Pelecanos experience was the *The Big Blowdown*...that was never the case. I gave that book a shot because my friend told me it was a fun, quick read, and was by a guy who did *The Wire*. He was right, but ultimately the book was sort of amateurish and didn't have a lot going for it. So I put Pelecanos on the back burner.

As an avid fan of Dennis Lehane, though, Pelecanos kept creeping to the forefront. I heard great things about the different series he did, his depictions of the seedy D.C. areas et al. Then I heard a recommendation for *Down by the River Where the Dead Men Go* in the first edition of Grantland's *Hollywood Prospectus'* "Double-Down" book series. It contains Nick Stefanos, of the same name as the lead protagonist in *Blowdown*, so naturally (if you've read any of my other reviews) I couldn't ignore the omens.

As I'd eventually find out in my read, Stefanos is a couple generations removed from the main character in *Blowdown*, which made *Dead Men* an even more entertaining read. Though it's been three or four years, I still grinned when Uncle Costa popped up briefly to say, "Niko!"

Also interesting is how clearly the author's style evolved from my first read to this. This Stefanos is a great character; he's fully aware of his flaws and their effect on his relationships and livelihood, yet he embraces his habits despite this and chooses to accept his regret. (Good for you, Niko.) All of this makes for one of the more honest first-person narratives I've come across. (My opinion on first-person narratives: They either fail and come off as cheesy and forced; or they have you pulling for the protagonist to turn him/herself around.)

Regarding the story itself, I was told time and time again that Pelecanos writes page-turners, which is clear in *Dead Men* and his composition of the penultimate episodes of *The Wire*'s seasons (h/t *Hollywood Prospectus*). The inciting incident happens earlier than I've read in many crime novels, so kudos to Pelecanos

for that. While the occasional chapter comes up where it appears Stefanos will be taking a break from his crime-solving, that never ends up being the case—something always breaks and pulls you and Nick back in.

A great read—I'll be revisiting Pelecanos soon; though I may have to take a break from the Stefanos series. He encourages me to drink a bit too much.

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### **Ted says**

The usual music drenched, gritty page turner by Pelecanos. Read in one day, right after finishing King Suckerman.

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