



Dry Season

Dan Smith

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'Haunting stuff from a new writer to watch.' The Mail on Sunday.

On the banks of a sprawling Brazilian river lies Sao Tiago. A place poised between the old ways and the new, fought over by gangsters and big business. It's a town for people with nowhere else to run; a place where Sam, a former priest, has ended up. He left England to help people, but what he's seen has scarred him, and now he cares about nothing except drinking and fishing on the great river. But one night changes all that. When a man lies bleeding on a dirt floor, what starts as a fight to save a life becomes a battle with Sao Tiago's dark heart. Caught between friends and enemies, and entangled in the affections of an ex-prostitute and a predatory landowner's wife, Sam realises that in a place where life is cheap, love can be deadly. As the long dry season stretches out ahead, Sam must face his past if he is to forge the chance of a future and survive in a town without a soul. Drawing on influences as disparate as HEART OF DARKNESS and the tales of the American West, it's a novel of shocking strength, populated with vivid characters, wild settings and raw emotion. A dark and compelling story, steeped in violence and rich in atmosphere, DRY SEASON is one of the most powerful and memorable debuts of the year.

Dry Season Details

Date : Published February 18th 2010 by Orion Publishing (first published January 1st 2010)

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Author : Dan Smith

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From Reader Review Dry Season for online ebook

Nik Morton says

A first person narrative that reads more like a memoir than a book of fiction.

Failed priest Sam is hiding from a dreadful past yet inevitably his humanity thrusts him into situations with other people – situations that have the potential to be fatal. At risk is not only his life, but the lives of his friends – and the entire Brazilian township of Sao Tiago.

The characterisation of Sam, Paulo and Ana is superb. The mysterious and formidable Caterina Da Silva is a chilling creation, too. I felt for his predicament and believed in him.

Assured, atmospheric and with a pall of doom hanging over the entire piece, this is a remarkable debut novel.

I have two quibbles, hence the four stars. I'd have felt that Sam would have thought of certain apt passages from scripture, even if unwillingly, at certain turning points in his narrative. While he was in denial about his priesthood, it should still have a powerful if unbidden influence on his thinking processes.

Why oh why do writers of first person narration fight shy of showing us what their character is reading? Sam produces a book to show the boy – but do we see the book's title? No. Does Sam know the title? Yes. Probably Lord of the Flies – but why the guessing game? Hiding the title is pointless and quite unfathomable, particularly when, elsewhere, we're provided with a wealth of detail about the jungle and the human denizens from Sam's point of view.

Sam says

Ooo this book has a bit of a kick to it. We start off in a quiet little town on the banks of a Brazilian river where life is quietly flowing along with no great drama until a card game turns bad and all the power plays begin to pull at each other. Eventually something snaps, all hell breaks loose and the innocent get caught in the crossfire. The story is a little slow to start but it is worth persevering as you learn more about the characters, their backstories and their motivations you just don't want to put the book down and you spend the entire time with your fingers crossed hoping all goes well. The finale is superbly written and perfectly balanced and leaves the reader on an absolute knife-edge some blurry resolutions and destruction for your imagination to play with. Dan Smith is an author to watch out for as with this as a first novel there is no telling what dark, tense, foreboding depths of humanity he will dig up next...but don't worry I'm sure he will keep balancing this with moments of sheer tenderness and humanity to keep us all on the right side of sane.

Em says

Dry Season is set in Brazil, a wild and violent place unlike anywhere I have ever been and yet I found the descriptive writing to create a real sense of the place and the people populating it. The writing is atmospheric, it's been -8 here but I could almost feel the heat and dust of Sao Tiago!

The book grabs your attention from the outset, it is exciting and frightening in equal part and the tension is palpable throughout - you never quite relax. The book works as a thriller - the threat of bandits the power play of the landowning businesses but I would say it is considerably more than just that because of the excellent characterisation. The population of Sao Tiago consists of outlaws and outcasts, people with a past but whether major players or subsidiary, the characters are well drawn, life like and engaging.

There is a strong, personal story underpinning the action - Sam, the boozing, fishing, sexy?! ex-priest who horrified by his experiences has lost his faith and his way in life. He is brave and good hearted, although flawed and I remained sympathetic to him, I found him thoroughly believable. It is his story which is the heart of the book for me, his gradual redemption makes Dry Season all the more captivating a read.

As to the culmination of this story - I'll say this, it's pretty devastating!

Strey says

Unexpectedly, this was one of the most thought provoking & strangely emotional books I have read in some while.

I was drawn in from page one & could FEEL the dust & heat. Moreover there was a palpable atmosphere of oddly 'loose' tension, which built throughout the book. There was a extra 'edginess' to this, which meant the reader never knew quite what to expect; especially due to the accepted lawlessness of the situation & the level of ever-present brutality, also building with the story, which was sometimes uncomfortable to read, but compelling due to imagery used.

I also liked the narrative approach – we saw what Sam saw & felt what he felt. In his descriptions there was a high level of detail (such as the fishing tackle used for dealing with Piranha) which gave the writing credibility & added to the feeling of 'being' Sam. However, due to the skill of this writing, it never felt tedious.

This level of detail described by Sam further evinced that things move slowly in Sao Tiago. He had the time to notice the minutiae of life & events around him - yet in a place where not much seems to happen, the world changes. Like quicksand, looking still on the surface, but deadly & shifting underneath, as Sam found once he chose not to remain living outside events & stepped in!

As the central protagonist, Sam showed weakness of the flesh (and perhaps faith) but great strength of character. He displayed a real & initially frustrating shallowness, yet we came to see unknown depths & also intelligence when dealing with 'the boy'. All of the characters felt 'real' - each with an unwritten, or lightly described 'history' which gave them depth & evoked an emotion in the reader - from affinity, respect or sympathy, to simple disgust.

Not to spoil the ending, but after such a build up during the book, I was moved to tears. It was strangely satisfying, yet crushing & I shared the emptiness felt by the characters.

In essence this was a sort of Lee Child meets John Steinbeck on a Sergio Leone film-set! Yet it was so much more. Even these are a poor attempt at comparing the incomparable - all the more remarkable because it is a debut title, based around what is essentially a simple plot thread.

Looking forward to "Dark Horizons"!

Ian says

I was surprised by this novel. From the cover notes, I was expecting a dark thriller, but it is so much more than that. Set in the untamed and lawless heart of Brazil, this is a tale full of good and evil - standard thriller fare - but it is also a very uplifting story of friendship, love, loss, hope and redemption.

The central character is a Catholic priest, Sam, who has lost his faith and has moved to a backwater "wild west" Brazilian town to forget his pain, by drinking to excess, by not caring about anyone including himself and also by fishing , becoming obsessed by his hunt for a particularly large catfish - perhaps an allegory for a search for his lost soul?

For me, the thriller element was almost incidental, with the stars of the novel being Sam's emotional turmoil and the scenery - particularly the descriptions of the river. It was more akin to a novel like "A Town called Alice" by Neville Shute - another story of man's humanity and inhumanity set against a glorious, wild backdrop.

I look forward to Dan Smith's future offerings

Elke says

When I started this book, I was very doubtful I could like it. Dry Season is absolutely not my usual reading material, and had I not received this book as a gift, I would have never ever found or read it.

So, to my own great surprise I really enjoyed reading the book, though I did not enjoy the story at all times. It started out a bit b-o-r-i-n-g for an action-lover like me, but once I got into the book's rythm, I was carried away. But, as it is, I was rewarded for staying with the book till the last page. And though I was frustrated and even angry at the end, I know I could not have liked the book as much had its ending been any different or just more gentle.

To me, personally, this book is another good example that it's worth reading something different once in a while.

Lynne - The Book Squirrel says

Amazing story - loved it and I don't normally read this kind of book! Great read!

Brazil

Nicola says

Amazing book. I also thoroughly recommend Dark Horizons by this author. Reading these books has opened my eyes to a whole new genre that I previously thought I wouldn't enjoy!

Stephen says

really enjoyed this dark and brutal thriller based in the jungle areas of brazil and where human life is so cheap but the author makes the story feel and seem real with the characters, looking froward to reading the next one by this author

Emma says

Rather ridiculously, I read this for book club but didn't get enough of it read in time to justify going along to the meeting and yet have read it anyway... if that makes any sense to anyone! Whether you understand that introduction or not, the essential point is that I am very glad that I read this book and I would wholeheartedly recommend it.

'Dry Season' is the sort of book that demonstrates why I joined a book club. The fact of the matter is that I am precisely the type to judge a book by its cover (literally not metaphorically - generally speaking I'm quite broad-minded!) and so would never have picked this book up otherwise. It isn't perfect - there are some cheesy moments (if I tell you that the blurb on the back ends with the words "he must face his past if he is to find redemption in a town without a soul" then you'll get the gist), some glitches in the prose that should have been ironed out at the editing stage and some caricatured characters - but it is gripping, emotive, evocative and fundamentally very interesting.

The book is set in 1980s Brazil, when deforestation is the order of the day and the smooth progress of its business is ensured in a manner akin to the machinery with which it is practiced, sidelining and squashing everything and everyone that may, let alone will, get in the way. It may be my ignorance or my age but I had never really thought about how the politics and socio-economics of this business might have been, having been made so aware instead of the environmental impact. Smith takes this whole strand of the unknown (to me, at least) and exposes it brilliantly through the sad, tangled and destructive stories of the characters. As disgracefully glib as the cover text is, redemption is what this is all about and it is breathtaking how tragically it is ultimately achieved.

Alicia says

sounds interesting. love the cover!

Tracy Terry says

A debut novel from local author Dan Smith, though marketed as a thriller to me Dry Season is much more a story of relationships, of hope and redemption, the characters every bit as important as the plot.

OK so there was a thriller-ish element to the book but, very slow burning, in my opinion it was very much secondary to the rest of the story, the 'star' of which for me was undoubtedly the atmosphere created by Dan Smith, his portrayal of man's inhumanity/humanity towards man.

Set in the mid-nineteen eighties in a village situated on the banks of a Brazilian perhaps one of the things I appreciated most about the book was the way in which the struggles of the characters were played out in a very matter of fact, dare I say restrained way that made the whole story seem all the more poignant ensuring that it had a huge emotional impact on me.

An enjoyable enough read, obviously a master story teller in the making, like the fishing which is frequently mentioned throughout, the author expertly reels the reader in.

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Alumine Andrew says

I really enjoyed this book, I could feel the dry red dust in the back of my throat and the glare of the constant Brazilian sun. In the back-blocks of the rain forest is a small town where not a lot happens, where people go when they want to forget and be forgotten.

In this town we meet a priest in denial, a renegade doctor and a reformed hooker...who all need each other to do away with the ghosts of their pasts and form a future for themselves.

There is a really languid feeling about this book, you are immersed in how it feels to be there for real, the torpor of the tropics, the destruction and desperation of the subsistence lifestyle of the people living on the fringes of society now, not in historical times.

The pace is slow until I felt something had to happen. The tension builds to breaking point, the action speeds up to a cataclysmic event which brings the story to a close. a very satisfying read. Be warned have a glass of water to drink while you read, you will be parched!

This book reminded me of two of my favourite books The Power and the Glory by Graham Greene and most books by Gabriel Garcia Márques Chronicle of a death foretold.

Tori Clare says

I enjoyed this one.

Set in the lawless, dusty town of São Tiago, Brazil, the style of the opening chapters mirrors the setting itself: slow and lazy. Not that the writing is lazy nor the pace slow, but the detailed, descriptive scenes done almost in real time for a while, describing the violence, the drinking, the socialising, the partying the intense heat etc, vividly captures the atmosphere and skillfully draws you in. Dan Smith has a real gift for painting pictures in just a few carefully-selected words.

It is said that everyone in São Tiago is running from something. This is certainly true of the protagonist, Sam, an ex-priest who wants to escape the memories of the past, of which he never speaks. The bloodshed in São Tiago is an integral part of life there. The town is firmly under the thumb of one rich and powerful family who call the shots. Dangerous and beautiful, the boss's wife has an eye on Sam. An ex-priest, half decent looking, she intends to seduce him and doesn't understand refusal. It all contributes to a tense and delicious plot.

The characterisation is well realised; the writing excellent throughout. It was very moving in parts too. The only disappointment for me was the ending. I felt a bit robbed of detail and padding throughout the closing scenes. The end came at me in a rush and was something of an anticlimax really. He'd built to a dramatic finale and I felt it could have had fireworks, but somehow, I found my Kindle telling me I'd reached 100% and then everything fizzled out.

Chris Stanley says

What a good book, great character in Sam, a lapsed priest. In fact all the characters were realistic and well developed, and some were truly nasty. The violence is pretty brutal, but not out of place. The writing style is very descriptive, but unlike many books, it doesn't slow down the pace of the plot and really enhances the book. Definitely an author I would seek out again.
