

Hotshots

JUDITH VAN GIESON

HarperCollins, \$22.00 cloth,
ISBN 0-06-017-5125

Does Hallmark design a card to send to someone who saves your life? Neil Hamel might buy one. Hamel is a real estate and divorce attorney, the investigator and heroine of Judith Van Gieson's mystery series, set in Albuquerque, New Mexico. *Hotshots* is the seventh in the series—and the most resonant.

Named for an Albuquerque-based, wildland fire-fighting group equivalent to S.W.A.T. teams or the Green Berets, the book revolves around the death of one of the hotshots. Joni Barker is a strong, young, athletic woman of antelope grace and adrenaline rush. She, three other young women, and five young men die in a searing, destructive blaze backed by 40 mile-an-hour winds and flames 100 feet tall.

As in Van Gieson's other books, characters and issues are nicely marbled. In this particular case, Barker's parents engage Hamel because they want to sue the Forest Service for negligence. An interagency report blames the victims and "criticizes the hotshots for their can-do attitude." In their initial interview with Hamel, the Barkers are as divided in intention as they are in their grief.

REVIEWER: Nancy Coggeshall is a writer who lives in Albuquerque, NM.

Deliberating on whether or not to take the case, Hamel first interviews two surviving hotshots: Joni Barker's bereaved boyfriend, Mike Marshall, and another friend, Ramona Franklin, a Navajo single mother who fights fires in the summer in order to stay in school. She was on lookout when the fire blew up. Mrs. Barker blames Ramona for Joni's death.

The investigation takes Hamel to the scene of the fire at Thunder Mountain in Southern Colorado. She is accompanied by the Barkers, Marshall, and Tom Hogue, a Forest Service employee in Public Relations. They are coopted to the site where the deaths and burn occurred.

Ironically and terrifyingly, another fire breaks out. Hogue is killed. And but for Ramona Franklin, there to pay her respects to Joni, Hamel would be ash.

This brush with death forces Hamel to take note. Prior to this, she has cushioned her approach to turning 40 with four comforting Cs: cigarettes, cholesterol, copulation, and Cuervo. After suffering acute dehydration and hallucination, our girl doesn't light a Marlboro for the rest of the book.

Besides the poetry of wildland fire, Van Gieson introduces us to other fire-fighting correlatives such as the "pucker factor," a strong governor when facing an inferno, and the ever-present myopia of bureaucratic, governmental snafu. Here, there is an incendiary cause of concern: the report of a crew boss on the reburn potential of Gambel oak, based on a fire in which three lives were lost, and which was ignored by administrators for three years.

Van Gieson's strength is her ability to swirl inventiveness and research into timely plots with timeless themes. And what better place to quarry than New Mexico, where indigenous culture and glorious geography provide lode for symbol, moment, and hue.

Hamel asks her secretary for her opinion about a photo of 22-year-old Joni Barker, a snake in either hand, wading in a nest of them. Anna, whose dress size is 6 to her size 20 hair, reminds her boss that snakes symbolize lightning in sand paintings. Firefighters' symbology differs: Lightning equates with fire. And that means cash.

Another Van Gieson characteristic is political rectitude that's inverse. Hamel's acceptance of multiculturalism in New Mexico begins at home: in the embrace of her lover, the Kid, who was raised in Mexico by a Chilean father and an Italian mother. But the Kid was born in Argentina. Now he runs his own garage in the North Valley and still plays the accordion at a bar in the barrio at night. Ten years younger than Hamel, he is spending more and more nights with her. We still don't know his name.

The mystery of the second fire is solved, thanks to Neil, and the OSHA report cites management for "willful and serious violations." It exonerates the victims of the Thunder Mountain Fire. And Ramona. The Barkers decide not to sue. But the ~~entanglement~~ ~~ment~~ of grief and guilt takes longer to unwind.

At the annual Gathering of National Powwows at UNM's basketball arena, the Pit, the reconciliation between the Barkers and Ramona and her daughter Hanna begins against a backdrop of drums and men, dressed like parrots, whooping and leaping, "dancing for losses, dancing for living, dancing for the dead." □

* embranchement