

The River We Remember

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

William Kent Krueger sets *The River We Remember*, his latest novel, in mid-twentieth century rural Minnesota. The storyline centers on the townspeople of Jewel, the seat of Black Earth County, which is bisected by the Alabaster River. Residents thought of the river "as an old friend. On quiet nights when the moon is full or nearly so, the surface of the Alabaster is mirror-like and glows pure white...to stand on a hillside and look down at this river is to fall in love."

The River We Remember begins on Memorial Day 1958. The residents of Jewel were mostly hardworking farmers, and many of the men were veterans. "Decoration Day," as it was called then, "was the first real celebration after the relentless work of spring." The highlight of the day's festivities was the Decoration Day Parade, which featured marching bands and veterans dressed in their uniforms.

Sheriff Brody Dern, a highly decorated World War II veteran, purposely avoided the parade. Brody was on duty at the jailhouse when word came that a body was found at the Inkpaduta Bend of the Alabaster River. The victim was Jimmy Quinn, the county's largest landowner, who was despised by many citizens.

As Brody investigates the incident, suspicion immediately falls upon Noah Bluestone, a Native American. Inkpaduta Bend had been the site of a Sioux uprising a century before. Noah's ancestral lands were then taken by the powerful Quinn family. After a 20-year stint in the Marines overseas, Noah returned to Jewel with his Japanese wife, Kyoto. He took a job at Jimmy Quinn's farm, "working the land that should have been his." Right before Quinn's demise, Noah was abruptly fired.

Several of the novel's characters were impacted by World War II. Sam Wicklow, publisher of the local newspaper, had been wounded at Iwo Jima. Kyoto had lost her entire family in the bombing of Nagasaki. Angie Madison, the manager of Wagon Wheel Café, is a war widow. The coming-of-age story of her teenage son Scott, who never knew his father, is an affecting subplot.

The Alabaster River itself is an omnipresent character and a metaphor for the novel's themes: "Our lives and the lives of those we love merge to create a river whose current carries us from our beginning to our end. The river each of us remembers is different, and there are many versions of the stories we tell about the past. In all of them there is truth."