



# Scorched Earth

*David L. Robbins*

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From David L. Robbins, bestselling author of *The End of War* and *War of the Rats*, comes a novel of searing intensity and uncompromising vision. Part mystery, part legal thriller, it is a story of crime and punishment set in a small southern town during one brutal, hot, and unforgiving summer that lays bare the potential of the human heart to hate—and, ultimately, to heal.

The inhabitants of Good Hope, Virginia, haven't felt the cooling effects of rain in weeks. The crops are withering. The ground is parched. There is no relief in sight. With the town a tinderbox waiting to explode, all it takes is a spark to ignite all the prejudice, the rage, and the secrets that are so carefully kept hidden. And then, in the midst of the terrible heat, a tragedy occurs. A baby is born and dies in her mother's arms. The child, Nora Carol, is buried quickly and quietly the next day in a church graveyard. It should have ended right there—but it didn't, for Nora Carol is of mixed race.

The white deacons of Good Hope's Victory Baptist Church, trying to protect the centuries-old traditions of their cemetery, have the body exhumed. That night the church is set ablaze, and the sole witness is the only suspect—Elijah Waddell, Nora Carol's father.

Nat Deeds, a former prosecutor and an exile of Good Hope, is pressed into service as Elijah's attorney. With a politically savvy prosecutor and a vindictive sheriff aligned against him, Nat knows it will be nearly impossible to get Elijah acquitted. But Elijah refuses to accept a plea.

As the evidence mounts, Nat begins to suspect there is something his client isn't telling him, and the next revelation turns Good Hope into a powder keg: a body is found in the ashes of the church. Now Elijah is accused of murder, and the case is no longer a matter of winning or losing, but of life or death.

The only way Nat can save his client is to scratch and claw for any shred of evidence, even if he has to bend the law to find it. As the summer heat intensifies and passions reach their boiling point, Nat must navigate through the incendiary secrets kept by friends and neighbors, by the guilty and the innocent, to an act of justice that has nothing to do with the law.

## Scorched Earth Details

Date : Published March 4th 2003 by Bantam (first published January 1st 2002)

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Author : David L. Robbins

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# From Reader Review Scorched Earth for online ebook

## MARGO says

Every now and then you run across a book that features intriguing characters, a compelling plot, and a riveting ending. Scorched Earth is such a book. Grieving parents, a frightened town, and a reluctant hero come together in a quest for that most powerful of human drives, the search for dignity. Scorched Earth is a deftly crafted mystery, set in a place both new and familiar, with characters so true they make the heart ache. Oh one little tip, when you think the book has come to its conclusion - it has not - keep reading until the very last page. This story has many twists and turns and is a wonderful enjoyable read.

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## Simon Garnett says

Page-turner marred by increasingly melodramatic plot twists. A lumpen ending.

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## Geraldine says

Reading this book is like a roller coaster ride. It never stops giving you surprises down to the very last page.

David L. Robbins is a writer who knows how to pull in the reader. His characters are believable and so are their actions. I have never had the pleasure of reading his novels before, but I definitely plan to read more of his work.

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## Rick Urban says

Scorched Earth is a compendium of man's inhumanity to man, a fable about the stoniness of the human heart and the racism and bigotry of an insular small town that reads like Scott Turow crossed with Harper Lee, or maybe John Grisham with William Faulker. In this mournful story, an interracial married couple in the town of Good Hope, Virginia, give birth to a baby without a brain, who dies within minutes of being born. A church elder and matriarch for the community, who also happens to be the grandmother of the baby, arranges for the child to be buried in the cemetery of the all-white Victory Baptist Church, but within a day the church deacons vote to have the body exhumed and move to an all-black church 3 miles away. The child's father, Elijah Waddell, is found that same night, drunk and cheering as he watches the Victory Baptist Church burn to the ground. He is the only suspect, and although he proclaims his innocence, he is arrested and thrown in jail. The not-so-prodigal son, Nat Deeds, is coerced into coming back to Good Hope to defend Waddell, which he has fled after discovering his wife's infidelity a year earlier. What begins as a difficult case becomes almost impossible when the troubled daughter of the town's sheriff is found dead in the church's smoking ruins.

What follows is a narrative of unerringly well-crafted prose, thoughtfully considered, and wisely knowing. While the various characters stumble through the story as if the victims of a great conflagration, dazed and incredulous, author David L. Robbins knows exactly what he wants to achieve, and in the economical space

of some 350-odd pages, he fully dissects and provide a post-mortem on the kind of quiet hatred that nevertheless poisons the ground of any community that defines itself by what it excludes. While it was written fifteen years ago, it resonates even now as the country uncovers more and more pockets of racist indoctrination and partisan hatred and mistrust. One can sadly imagine the tabloid-lurid secrets that lie buried at the heart of this story being uncovered practically anywhere, for they are the result of the worst elements of the human condition, elements that will always be with us.

But there is also found within these pages: inclusion, determination, fairness, dignity, love and sacrifice. Though the odds against them are great, Elijah refuses to confess to a crime he insists he did not commit, and Nat puts his integrity, and even his personal safety, on the line to represent his client in an honorable and just way.

What ends up being so satisfying and compelling about *Scorched Earth* is that, while it has all of the drive and suspense of a first-rate legal thriller, and the deft plotting of a murder mystery, it is at heart a meditation on what it means to be human in a place where others blithely deny you that humanity, and how to endure in the face of such adversity. The mystery at the heart of this excellent novel is the same one that confounds us every day: how can people hurt each other the way they do?

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### **Dale says**

a novel Morgan bought at a book exchange while in Malawi & what an absolute page turner it is—right down to the last page. A small community Baptist Church deacons remove a biracial child from the “church cemetery”, the church burns, the father is accused. The defense attorney is asked to come home to represent the father and a whole bunch of chaos ensues. This book was not only engrossing but also insightfully written on SO many levels. I could go on and on. 2002 paperback, 338 pgs., read Mar. '13, #15. Others by this author: *SOULS TO KEEP*, *WAR OF THE RATS*, *THE END OF THE WAR* (there might be more by now).

(what I wrote in 2002): *SCORCHED EARTH*, David L. Robbins: black man married to white woman accused of burning church after death of their deformed child and needing child to be removed from white cemetery. This is much more complicated than I am writing and is v. v. good. Would read more of his stuff for sure: combination mystery + novel. Author is a former attorney. (2002, 383 pgs.) Read June, 2002

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### **Irene Ziegler says**

I greatly admire this book. Robbins transcends the mystery genre with language as sweet and rich as a mint julep on a starry night.

A child is born to a black man and a white women in a small Virginia town. The child dies, and is buried in the Baptist church cemetery. But the elders insist on unearthing the child, because only whites are allowed in their cemetery. The night after the child is exhumed and moved to the black cemetery, the church burns down. The father of the child, a black man, is arrested for the crime, and claims he is innocent.

Nate, a heart-bruised lawyer returns to his home town to defend this man accused of burning down a church.

When a charred body is found in the rubble, Nate finds himself with a murder case on his hands. As Nate peels back layers of history, grudges and racism, he encounters his ex-wife (with whom he is still in love), a corrupt prosecutor, a psychologically tortured priest, and a sheriff with a huge reason to see this black man put to death.

It's not your grandmother's crime novel. Sit beneath a magnolia tree, and enjoy.

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### **Carol says**

didn't like the subject matter as the story had to do with race relations but it was well written, as always with David Robbins.

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### **Libra says**

There is small town drama between church and race, husband and wife, father and daughter. All the while arson and murder is infused into it all. The loss of a parent's child adds a layer of grief to the mix. I was sitting on the edge of my seat. I almost couldn't bear it at times. I couldn't see a way out..But the author knows. He did a great job keeping the suspense up.

However, I finally finished this book (after three years)..It was a decent courtroom mystery. I wish I didn't wait so long to find out how it all ends. When I finished the book I remember why I stopped reading after 80 or so pages. I knew who dunnit already (why did I want to read all 339 pages if I already knew?). Reading to the end only proved my suspicion correct. David Robbins did a good job throwing the scent off, but if my original suspect is the culprit in the end, I figured it out too quickly.

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### **Penny Mccullough says**

#### **Sleep or read?**

I couldn't just go to sleep, I was compelled to continue reading. Mr.Robbins has a different way of looking at life with the words he uses. I felt shamed, encouraged, and I wanted to tell everyone to Read This Book!

Thanks Mr. Robbins for the inspiration!

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### **Stuart says**

I loved this book! The story begins with the untimely death of the child of an inter-racial couple, a couple who had seemed to be perfectly accepted in their Virginia town, even being held up as examples in the workplace diversity council. Suddenly all the racism that had been hidden surfaces, in the refusal of the deacons of the white church to accept the child for burying (in fact, digging up the dead body and rejecting it). There follow reprisals (the church is burnt down) and a gripping investigation and trial. The story builds the way a story should, with an inevitability to each action and discovery that makes the whole thing

supremely believable. The story is the classic un-putdownable one. The plot is well crafted, with enough information being doled out along the way to keep you interested – as opposed to stories that deliver all the answers on the last page. The author also builds a superb picture of the town, built as it around its main industry, an evil smelling paper plant. And to top it all, the weather (the scorched earth of the title) is hot throughout the novel, only breaking at the end with the breaking of the case. What a superb read!

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### **Rachel Doboga says**

I was enthralled by this book. The language is pitch perfect; the narration is vivid, each character has a unique voice, and the dialogue feels authentic - truly charged with all that is left unsaid. The story itself is such a maze of moral questioning and compromise. I found myself constantly wondering what I would do in the place of various characters. An interesting question that seemed to come up a lot was how far one can go to remain loyal before entering the territory of corruption, denial, or delusion. This is not just a book about a crime, but about the role people play, passive or otherwise, in the smaller but equally painful injustices that fill daily life. Entertaining, thought-provoking, and certainly not easily forgotten!

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### **Aurora says**

In diesem Buch geht es vor allem um Elijah und Clare Waddel – er ein Schwarzer, sie eine Weiße -, die geheiratet haben und nun ein Kind erwarten. Das geborene Mädchen kommt allerdings ohne vollständig ausgebildetem Gehirn auf die Welt, da ihre Eltern in einer Papierfabrik arbeiten, wo viele Chemikalien eingesetzt werden. Nora Carol, so nennen sie ihre Tochter, lebt gerade mal zehn Minuten lang. Clares Großmutter ist eine der Kirchenältesten der Victory Baptist Church veranlasst eine schnelle Beisetzung der Kleinen ohne großes Tamtam. Als die anderen Kirchenältesten davon erfahren, sind sie empört, da das Mädchen schließlich halb weiß und halb schwarz ist und somit nicht auf den Friedhof ihrer Kirche gehört. Sie fordern die Exhumierung und Verlegung auf einen anderen Friedhof. Dies geschieht gleich am nächsten Tag. Elijah und Clare nimmt das sehr mit. Elijah geht nach der zweiten Beisetzung nicht nach Hause und irrt durch die Kleinstadt Good Hopes. Clare macht sich Sorgen um ihren Mann und bittet Hilfssheriff Monroe, von allen nur Money genannt, um Hilfe, ihren Mann wiederzufinden. Dieser macht sich sofort auf die Suche und findet Elijah neben der brennenden Victory Baptist Church. Er freut sich über das Feuer, beteuert bei seiner Festsetzung aber immer wieder, dass er das Feuer nicht gelegt hat. Keiner glaubt ihm.

Vom Gericht wird ihm der Anwalt Nat Deeds zugewiesen, ein ehemaliger Bewohner von Good Hopes. Dieser ist anfangs auch davon überzeugt, dass Elijah den Brand gelegt hat, ändert seine Meinung allerdings recht schnell. Nun macht er sich auf die Suche nach dem wahren Täter.

Der Schreibstil von David L. Robbins ist sehr gut und somit lässt sich das Buch leicht und flüssig lesen. Alles ist schön bildlich beschrieben, ohne dabei zu sehr in nervige Details zu verfallen.

Im Kopf hatte ich immer zwei mögliche Täter und je mehr das Buch sich dem Ende entgegenneigte, desto mehr kristallisierte sich einer der beiden auch tatsächlich heraus. Doch ganz zum Schluss erst kommt der wahre Täter ans Tageslicht, mit dem man niemals gerechnet hätte. Demnach eine sehr gelungene Wendung und auch der komplette Schluss gefällt mir außerordentlich gut.

Wer die Justizthriller von John Grisham mag, wird auch dieses Buch mögen!

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## Bill says

A Well-Crafted Mystery With Too Many Words (2013)

Robbins, David L. (2002). *Scorched Earth*. New York: Bantam.

This mystery and courtroom drama takes place in a small town in contemporary Virginia. It opens with scenes of Clare and Elijah living an idyllic life, filled with love, in their country house. They tend their garden, fish in the stream, repair the house, and make love outside in the grass. Elijah is a big, strong, quiet black man who works at the paper mill during the week. Clare is a tall, thin white woman of 22 years. We never learn much about where they came from, their families, or how they met.

Clare gets pregnant, the baby is delivered, but dies within minutes. The couple is devastated. The child is buried in their church's ancient graveyard. But the deacons of Victory Baptist Church are not pleased when they learn that a mixed-race baby has been buried in the church's cemetery. There is a coloreds graveyard two miles up the road. The new pastor of the church, a recovering alcoholic, was not aware of the policy. The church elders decide the infant must be exhumed and moved to the other place. The pastor opposes the decision eloquently, to no avail. Clare and Elijah are appalled as they watch their baby dug up and re-buried.

Shortly thereafter, the church is burned to the ground. Arson. The sheriff arrests Elijah, drunk, watching the fire and cheering. But he says he didn't torch it.

His court-appointed defense attorney is a home boy who used to work for the county prosecutor before he left some years ago. The case for the defense seems hopeless. Elijah refuses any plea-bargain because, he insists, he is innocent. Gradually, and for reasons not entirely convincing, the attorney comes to believe him. Very slowly, new information is introduced into the story and tiny clues appear, which could possibly mean Elijah is innocent, although the whole town has, at this point, the mentality of a lynch mob. The surprise ending is to learn whodunit. I certainly didn't see it coming.

The story is well-crafted, with good clues, good red herrings, and believable character motivation. The problem-solving investigation is a little slow to get going, and is a little off-center, focusing on possible prosecutorial misdeeds, because the defense actually has nothing to go on. The evidence against Elijah is overwhelming. The southern town racism trope is well-worn and not very original as a story theme or character motivation, but the author refrains from moralizing. Elijah and Clare remain throughout as representations, not well-rounded characters. Nevertheless, once you believe Elijah is innocent (and you must), the mystery keeps the pages turning.

It's hard to write a good, satisfying mystery within the strict boundaries of realism and plausibility, but Robbins pulls it off. The writing is completely adequate, although for my taste, overwritten. There are long backstories dumped out in flashbacks and reminiscences. Characters soliloquize about religion, justice, racism, and small town life. The scenery and the weather are described in detail. The defense attorney's troubled marriage, separation, and reconciliation is mundane, although I think it is supposed to be some sort of symbolic representation of how anger can lead to self-destructive revenge when your church/wife betrays you, but I didn't need a symbolic representation. The story was plain enough without it.

All the extra writing slowed everything way down for me. This 350 page novel would be more readable in



250 pages that stuck closer to the plot line. The superfluous narration is fairly well-written actually, sometimes insightful, often well-observed, but it's by no means scintillating or lyrical enough to justify itself.

The main storyline is narrated in third-person, present tense, which seemed stilted to my ear. "Elijah's hand comes to the baby's cheek. Clare hears him whisper...The baby gurgles.. Clare laughs..." and so on. The reader is welded to the here and now because of that ever-present present. So when backstory and other narration appear in the past tense, the effect is like being booted off the field.

Overall, if you skim over the parts that most readers don't read anyway, you find a well-crafted mystery with a satisfying, surprise ending.

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## **Lake Oz Fic Chick says**

Scorched Earth by David L. Robbins

A mixed-race infant dies at birth and is buried in the cemetery of an all-white church in a small Virginia town. Soon, however, the church deacons reconsider, ordering the body exhumed and buried in the black cemetery. The white church goes up in flames and, since he's found at the scene, the baby's father is the obvious suspect. Improbably, he maintains his innocence. The long hot summer is turning into a drought and tensions are mounting. When the body of a white teenager is found in the ashes of the church, beaten and raped, the mood of the town edges closer to violence. This is a compelling novel that deserves a wider readership.

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## **Patty says**

Good Hope, Virginia is a small town with a number of big problems. The problems are nothing new to small towns - interracial marriage, babies dying, church controversy, murder and maybe rape. What small town hasn't had at least some of these troubles. However, the community of Good Hope manages to combine all these issues so that the rest of Virginia knows their problems and that is not good.

Robbins held my interest through his entire story. He is a good storyteller. I have to say, however, that I think these issues have been addressed before, and probably will be again. I am not sure why some people are so blown away by the troubles of Good Hope.

I will always wonder - how much of the town of West Point, VA is actually in this book about Good Hope?

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