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Tidewater Review by Anne Stinson



Nitro Express by Robert Blake Whitehill. Telemachus Press. 308 pp. \$14.99 (paperback).

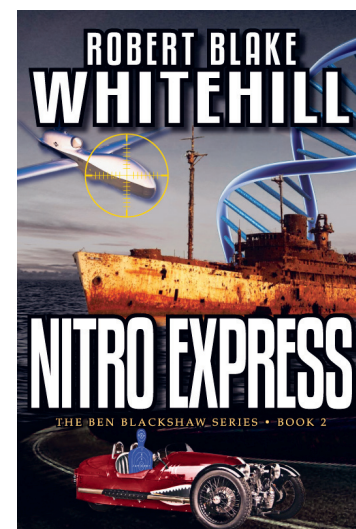
Ben Blackshaw, the mild and modest hero of Robert Whitehill's *Nitro Express*, turns tough as road-tar chewing gum when his furtive private life is interrupted by old buddies from his Navy SEAL days. It seems that they need his help with a problem.

The story opened with a big movie premier in Los Angeles. A violent explosion spoiled the glamour of the extravaganza. The leading lady of the film was the target of an assassin. She's was a Latina singer in her first movie, a star with a huge following whose fans span the globe.

Lucilla Calderone, known to her fans as "La Luz," or "The Light," was playing the role of a revolutionary leader on a South American island. All 3,332 seats of the huge theater were sold out, with 500 seats reserved for her greatest fans, *The People*. The whole area was surrounded by L.A. police who had blocked off the streets and had tight rooftop security to protect the

star. Thousands of her fans packed the streets outside the theater, even though they wouldn't get to see the movie until it opened a few days later in theaters. Just a chance to catch a glimpse of their beloved La Luz was enough for them.

As her open car arrived with the star perched atop the trunk, a horrendous noise ripped through the air, and the beautiful woman was



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reduced to a smattered pink haze. Her entire torso was pulverized with only her legs remaining on the back of the car. This blast was from no ordinary weapon.

At the same moment, Ben Blackshaw was in New York, returning from a surreptitious daily before-dawn walk for coffee, to his hidey-hole of a basement hideout in an abandoned hotel.

After his exploits during a daring stint in covert operations, he was declared dead. He liked it that way, and carried on a career of turning illegal gold into bars to be stashed in secret with help from long-time friends on Smith Island. He grew



Robert Blake Whitehill

up on the Island, and he knew he could trust the folks there to keep his financial pile secret.

To his dismay, an encoded message was on his padlocked entry. The writer must have been aware of Ben's residence for a long time. He could only guess why he was being contacted, but he felt sure it was to enroll him in a return to military duty for secret skulduggery.

His previous service had been in Intelligence, with more than a few super-secret missions. It turns



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out that they want Ben to help investigate La Luz's death. His old commander is still the boss of one of the many distortions of ethics carried on by one of the Homeland Security branches unknown to the American public ~ outfits that waive the law in the name of national security.

As the investigation begins, Ben feels as though his old friend, who is dying of throat cancer, may not be giving him the straight skinny on what is going on. Ben thinks it's only a sample of corruption somewhere higher up in government agencies, but he is disgusted.

He finds clues overlooked by L.A.

detectives' sloppy work. After he shows his boss the discovery, the old man is shot by an unknown assailant. Clearly it is time for Ben to dig a lot deeper. He makes himself scarce with all the tricks of an accomplished fugitive.

For the clueless reader, the story unveils ways to disappear that a novice would never dream of, but never mind. Whitehill's research is awesome. While he says he has invented the plot, not lived it, it's a scary piece of dangerous possibilities and a brilliant piece of writing.

Ben is only one step ahead of all the attempts to make his death real, as it was falsely reported on his military records. The bad guys are as smart as Ben is, and I found

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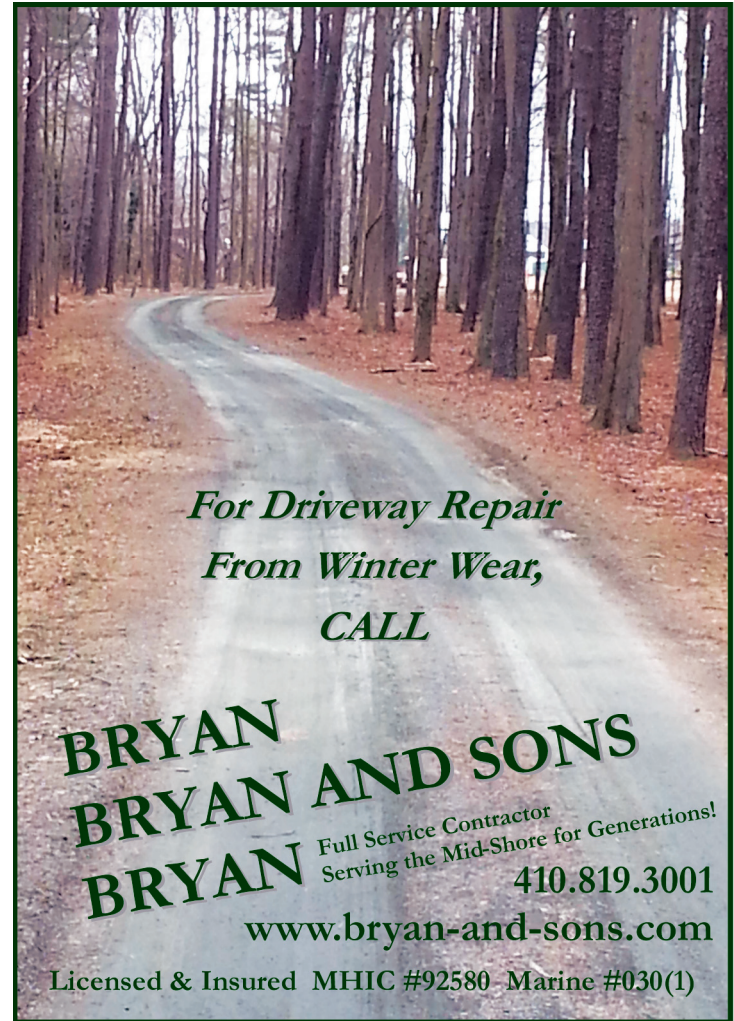
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myself personally anxious about his recovery from the jam he's in.

To reveal more about the plot would be a disservice to both the author and the reader. Trust me ! it's a breathless journey with a shocking glimpse at what could be our future. Remember how surprised we were to read that the United States had created drones, the robot killing-tools that took some soldiers off the casualty lists, while at the same time not being bright enough to spare innocent casualties like women and children?

There's no hint anywhere in the book that Whitehill wrote to alert the reader to suspect lawlessness

in our government. What he accomplished in grand style is a gripping, wonderfully intelligent kind of fiction that will chill the blood of the reader. Bravo, Whitehill, says this reviewer! Keep on writing. For book lovers who covet a book that's way over the top, this is one that shouldn't be missed.



Anne Stinson began her career in the 1950s as a free lance for the now defunct Baltimore News-American, then later for Chesapeake Publishing, the Baltimore Sun and Maryland Public Television's panel show, Maryland Newsrup. Now in her ninth decade, she still writes a monthly book review for Tidewater Times.



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