

Washington Post Aug. 1997

## **APACHES**

By Lorenzo Carcaterra  
Ballantine Books. 336 pp.

Controversy surrounded Lorenzo Carcaterra's 1995 allegedly non-fiction memoir *Sleepers*, and took another swirl last year when the film version appeared. Disclaimers at the film's end by New York's Dept. of Corrections and Manhattan District Attorney's office raised suspicion that the only actual crime in the film was its bombastic voice over narration.

Wardens and bishops denied the likelihood of reformatory rapes and priestly perjury. Carcaterra stuck by his story.

Artistically, the argument seems barely worth making. As Frank Lloyd Wright said, "The truth is more important than the facts." Whatever the facts, Carcaterra convinced us some incarcerated boys endure far more anguish than they'd ever intended to inflict, and that their lives can be destroyed rather than corrected.

Now, Carcaterra moves from memoir to pulp noir, working in a hackneyed but ever-appealing format: the all-star team of good guys assembled to battle evil. Nothing about his first novel *Apaches* purports to be factual. Everything about it cries out "Cable TV Movie."

The names the jacket flap orders us to remember are Boomer, Dead-Eye, Pins, Geronimo, Reverend Jim and Mrs. Columbo. Each was a New York cop. Each was among the best. By the early 1980s, each suffered some career-ending wound that stole the meaning from their lives. To them, "A life void of action was a death sentence.... The red gauge on their adrenaline tanks was brushing on empty."

But in 1982, when 12 year-old Jennifer Santori is kidnapped in front of New York's Port of Authority terminal and her father comes for help to Giovanni "Boomer" Frontieri, these walking disability pensions can return to life. Boomer calls ex-partner Davis "Dead-Eye" Winthrop, and the two ex-cops track down Jennifer just in time to save her life, not in time to prevent her repeated rape and savage beating.

Carcaterra, though, is more intent on showing that Boomer and Dead-Eye have saved their own lives.

Boomer assembles all the "cripples" like himself at his neighborhood pub, Nunzio's, run by Nunzio Goldman, the mob-connected friend with a heart of roughly 10-karat gold. We've seen this assemblage before—from *The Seven Samurai* to *The Iliad*—but this time think of it as "NYPD Bruised."

In addition to Boomer, who'd been slashed, shot and flung down three flights of stairs, and Dead-Eye, shot in an elevator in the leg, chest and both arms, there's "Pins" Ryan, the electronics whiz who took four mistaken bullets from a jealous husband; "Geronimo" Lopez, munitions expert who'd dived onto a grenade; Mary Silvestri, aka Mrs. Columbo, the homicide sleuth who'd been stabbed in the lung and stomach; and "Reverend Jim" Scarponi, junkie turned undercover cop, who left the force after he was set afire on a stake-out.

Their mission, should the reader decide to accept it: bring down Lucia Carney.

She's the 38 year-old beauty who rose above an impoverished childhood and pre-teen work in the family prostitution business to become one of the largest cocaine smugglers in the world: "She had a knack for the drug business,... a ruthlessness that was often necessary in the powder game."

We're talking no garden-variety ruthlessness here. Lucia's method of smuggling? She finds teen runaways, has her crew get them pregnant, takes the babies, fattens them for six months, then kills them. The tiny corpses, sliced open and packed with cocaine, are then flown around the country by young "mules" masquerading as mothers of unusually sound-sleeping infants. The children fly back filled with money.

A bit much, but Carcaterra does suit the action to the word, the word to the action. Like his plot, his prose has all the subtlety of a George Foreman right cross. He's made the common mistake of thinking that by his third book he should sound like a "writer." He does. He sounds like Raymond Chandler with a migraine: "Lucia Carney was sitting on the crest of a six-hundred-million-dollar mountaintop and had come too far over too many long nights to let anybody throw her off."

He likes to end most scenes with a Sgt. Joe Friday coda:

"You and your partner did save her life. Don't let that get lost in all of this."

"Maybe so... but we did make one mistake. One very big mistake."

"Which was?" ...

"We brought him in alive."

But what do we expect when two of the book's heroes take their names from t.v. shows and tough cops answer "I just hear a threat?" with "It's no threat. It's a promise"? Someday, when people say, "This story uses every cliché in the book," this may be the book they have in mind.

Yet, despite its triteness, *Apaches*, like *Sleepers*, showcases Carcaterra's ability to create chillingly evil characters and a world horrifying in its depravity.

Miles Davis once said of musicians, "Sometimes you have to play a long time before you can sound like yourself." Writers too. When Carcaterra does that, he has some gifts that may show to powerful advantage.