

San Francisco Chronicle Jan. 1997

DEAL ON ICE

By Les Standiford

HarperCollins; 256 pp.

A swelling number of readers insist that in the steamy literary sleazeworld of South Florida that's home to Elmore Leonard, Paul Levine, James Hall, Edna Buchanan and Carl Hiaasen there's no smoother nor more substantial crime novelist than Miami's Les Standiford.

In the fourth and most sophisticated of his Deal thrillers, Standiford once again packs maximum mayhem per page into what should be the happy life of John Deal, successful building contractor and accidental sleuth.

When we first see Deal this time, he's waking in the wee hours to find a Pat Boone lookalike interviewing a stylish gray-haired man on t.v. "We're moving toward the One World government," says right-wing televangelist James Ray Willis, "the rise of the Global Plantation." Preaching to the marginalized multitudes, Willis cajoles them to his flock by insisting the enemy "international media" makes them feel like failures.

To clear his soul, Deal heads to the quality independent bookstore of his old friend Arch Dolan, where years earlier he'd heard Isaac Bashevis Singer and James Baldwin, because "no matter what was wrong with the momentary world, he could walk into Arch's, start wandering the rooms, in a couple of minutes he'd start to relax.

But this is Miami, where there's more crime than sunshine and corruption is as common as white shoes. So, quickly, Dolan turns up murdered. The police assume Dolan had resisted a crackhead robbery.

Janice, Deal's estranged wife who worked for Dolan, suspects something more sinister. She's sure the killers were contracted by Mega-Media, a media superstore chain that controls books, newspapers, magazines, broadcast outlets and cable operators, and has been squashing independent booksellers like bugs. "All he ever wanted to do was sell books," says Janice, "to people who loved to read. And they killed him, for that?"

It's possible, but it would leave some strange details unexplained: the fatal plunge of Mega-Media's CEO through a hotel window, the disappearance of Dolan's sister Sara who worked in Willis's Omaha headquarters, the suspicious documents Sara'd sent Dolan that were found clutched in his hand.

And then there's the folksy 60-ish Kittles, Dexter and Iris, who "looked like a pair out of Grant Wood," yet when people cross their path their life expectancy drops to seconds.

When the pieces all snap into place in Deal's mind, the picture is clear: Willis plans to take control of the world's communications media. Only Deal can stop him, so he grabs Janice and heads to Nebraska for some icy chases and a chilling showdown.

Tautly plotted and crisply written, all this makes for deft genre fiction. But Standiford never stops there, and by now he's expert at elevating thrillers into art.

He capitalizes on his readers' built-in sympathy for those who love books--like Dolan, Deal and themselves--and his readers' built-in antipathy for power-mad scoundrels like Willis who prey on the unreflectively spiritual. This, in turn, affords Standiford room to limn and develop the richly textured relationship of John and Janice Deal.

And a bittersweet muddle their marriage has become. In *Raw Deal* arson raged through the Deal's fourplex apartment, burning and threatening to disfigure Janice's face. By *Deal to Die For* the scars were imperceptible, but not in Janice's mind. Convinced she was no longer lovable, she left Deal and their five-year-old daughter to reassemble her psyche.

Deal can't look at her without feeling "the same goddamned tidal-strength pull in his gut that he'd felt since the day they'd met," but Janice's post-traumatic crushed ego keeps her at arm's length. However, teaming up against killers and madmen just might prove the bellows to rekindle the cinders of their romance beneath the ashes of their fear.

And there's another urgency here. As the communications corporate little fish get gulped by the bigger fish who get swallowed by the biggest fish, some fear we're entering the cyber-electronic dark days that auger the death of books and central control of information. In James Ray Willis, Standiford weaves a seamless caution throughout his tale.

Vibrant characters, suspenseful plot, a bruised love treated honestly and without sentimentality, and one of the most ominous dangers facing our world--Standiford blends them into something just right for curling up with by a cozy fire, even in Miami.