What the River Knew Reader Report

What the River Knew is a novel by Cindy Brown that could be classified in the genres of mystery, suspense, and thriller, and has several noir subgenre elements.

The story begins when a homeless woman meets her son's father and winds up killed. Her son, who had been hiding under a bush, then mysteriously shows up on retired cop Ster McAffrey's porch. Ster takes the boy in, believing that his mother could be Ster's adopted daughter Lydia's child and his grandson, and undertakes an investigation into figuring out how and why "Fuzzy" was left on his porch, and what happened to his mother. Along the way, Ster joins forces with a motley crew of colorful characters, including Spidey, who has schizophrenia and is trying to kick his meth habit, and Luis, who always rides the Portland MAX, Bonnie, who killed her former husband while sleepwalking, Will, a young cop who doesn't fit in on the force, and Harper, a local library staffer. Ster learns that Fuzzy isn't his grandson after all, but finds that one of his former cop colleagues, someone he thought of as a trusted friend, is Fuzzy's father and the person who murdered Fuzzy's mother Aleesha. Ster doesn't reconnect with Lydia, his adopted daughter, but the book ends on a note that perhaps someday she will be ready to reconnect.

As the main character, Ster, goes through the most character development. The reason he's retired is because he suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) during an altercation on the MAX. The effects of his TBI read as consistent and realistic throughout in how they impact his energy levels, pain, and thought patterns. He also lost his wife to cancer a few years before the story starts, and Lydia ran away soon after. So with the loss of family members and the job he used to have, and with the TBI impacts, the story opens on Ster living a lonely life in which he can't get motivated to do much to take care of himself and his surroundings. This changes once he fosters Fuzzy and connects with the ragtag crew he assembles, and over the course of the book, Ster finds community as he also is forced to break ties with people he thought he could trust. Ster also is forced to confront his views about homelessness and sex work and even convicted murderers as he digs more into finding out what happened to Fuzzy's mother.

The pacing for WTRK strikes me as spot on. As an avid reader of mysteries and suspense novels–in just these first 24 days of 2025, I've listened to eight audiobooks in this genre–this manuscript fulfills many genre conventions. As an example, the sad death of Luis happened at just the right plot time for a death of a well–liked character on the detective's crew. Similarly, while the ending wraps up fairly quickly, without an extended denouement, this is very typical for the genre, and for current times in the genre. There

is perhaps a bit more meandering to get to some of the major action moments along the plot, but they are full of detecting, library work, informal interviews/interrogations, and also informed by Ster's TBI, so I suspect readers will take that in stride. The bittersweet note the book ends on, when Lydia and Ster don't actually reunite but it's hinted that they might someday, strikes the right chord for the genre as it doesn't tip over into too tidy or too hopeful or too sentimental.

There are a couple of moments where the pacing and plot get a bit entangled, such as when a character refers to Jane Doe by her real name before they have learned it. I suspect this is an artifact from the author's revisions and rearranging some plot points, and can be easily addressed in a DE.

The voice and tone of the manuscript is probably what needs the most work. The subject matter and the main character's age (56) situate this book squarely in the adult category, but the tone can read much more like YA. The author draws attention to the YA tone by having characters cut other characters off mid-sentence before they can curse or make a sexual reference. While the story is gritty and the novel contains several noir elements, the tone and narration and voices of characters in both spoken and internal dialogue feels like it has been watered down so much as to be a mismatch for the genre, for the book, and for realism.

I heartily recommend a "YES" on What the River Knew. It fits many of Ooligan's mission elements. There is diverse representation of the houseless population, and the book is situated so clearly in Portland with all its complexities. The book also does a thorough and empathetic job of portraying Ster's TBI without falling into disability tropes, and that is a rare standout in the genre and in book publishing at large. In the case of this manuscript, I can also speak from the perspective of being part of the target audience and how well it fits in with genre conventions and current trends. Though the book is specific to Portland, it has appeal outside the region, similar to Liz Moore's *Long Bright River*, set so specifically in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia. Both novels' settings are so prominent they are their own characters, and both touch on themes of homelessness and sex work and the police, and how those themes overlap when it comes to family and community.