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Latest 'Wiley' novel gritty

By Wanda A. Adams, Advertiser Books Editor

"WILEY'S REFRAIN" BY LONO WAIWAIOLE; ST. MARTIN'S MINOTAUR, HARDBACK, \$24.95

Early in this book, his third Wiley novel (after "Wiley's Lament," which was a finalist in the best-first-novel category of the Anthony Award for mystery fiction, and "Wiley's Shuffle"), Lono Waiwaiole tucks a wry little evaluation of the appeal of his own books into the mouths of two key characters. "All of his repeating characters are wounded somehow, but they all keep coming back. I like that," says a mysterious woman Wiley meets in the Hilo Borders store, speaking of a writer whose work they both have read. When she asks him what he likes about the writer, Wiley parrots her words back to her.

Waiwaiole has been praised for his mastery of the detective noir genre, but he does more here than channel Raymond Chandler. He respects the conventions of the genre but makes it more believable by making his main character more nuanced and, yes, wounded.

It's the difference between an old cowboy movie and HBO's "Deadwood." In the former, the dust lies quiet in the streets and the cowboys always look spiffy. In "Deadwood," all is mud, blood and other fluids — not to mention the colorful language. Whether the drama is a bit over the top, you know "Deadwood" is much closer to realities of frontier life.

So it is that Wiley, a professional poker player and lover of blues and intelligent women, does what he has to do to help friends. But he doesn't relish it and he doesn't just bounce back from every blow. Who could respect, or want to be around, someone like that? He'd be as much of a sociopath as the bad guys.

Instead, Wiley carries with him in the loss of his appetite and many sleepless nights the memories of everyone who has died in the course of his previous adventures, including his daughter. His personal life is complicated. And far from being a perfect hero, he can make mistakes.

Lono Waiwaiole based one aspect of Wiley's character on his own life: Both are Native Hawaiians raised on the Mainland. Waiwaiole says in a release that he became convinced Wiley would continue to be "lost in the sea of life" until he managed to reconnect with Hawai'i. So in 2003, Waiwaiole and his wife left his native Oregon for Kea'au on the Big Island. They've since returned to Oregon to be closer to family, but the time in the Islands allowed Waiwaiole to feel he could set part of a book here — with a strong hint that Wiley will return.

I found all three Wiley books intelligent, satisfying, engrossing reads of the kind that are welcome on a rainy Sunday when all you want to do is curl up and go somewhere else in your mind.

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