

Los Angeles Times

4 best mystery books to read right now

By Paula L. Woods

March 17, 2025 3 AM PT



(Minotaur)

[Cold Burn](#)

By A.J. Landau

Minotaur Books: 336 pages, \$28

April 29

In “Cold Burn,” collaborators Jon Land and Jeff Ayers (writing as A.J. Landau) reunite Michael Walker — a park ranger turned special agent for the National Park Service — and FBI special investigator Gina Delgado (after “Leave No Trace”) for a complex, high-stakes investigation. What starts as seemingly unrelated deaths in Alaska’s Glacier Bay National Park and Elfin Cove and Florida’s Everglades National

Park grows into a conspiracy that threatens life on the planet. Early on readers learn that central to the action is Axel Cole, a naturalized American citizen whose goal is to become “the world’s first trillionaire, his collective list of companies growing more influential and powerful than all but the world’s greatest powers, his worth greater than the GDP of France’s and Italy’s combined.” Cole’s ruthless methods are a challenge to the ingenuity and tenacity of Walker and Delgado, but the breakneck pace that builds in the novel’s later pages results in a showdown that’s believable but also feels like the sweetest revenge on a villain we know all too well.

Landau has a winning recipe with this series, marrying action with extensive research into everything from avalanches to submarines, plus a generous sprinkling of details on our national parks that will hopefully spur readers to visit America’s living national treasures. And while one can admire the sensitive exploration of the Tlingit, an Alaskan Native community that figures prominently in the plot, sometimes the research in “Cold Burn” slows the action, as does the constant toggling between the two characters’ investigations in the novel’s initial chapters. But once they come together, Walker and Delgado are a sure-fire dynamic duo readers will want to revisit.

How do you balance that vast knowledge base in the novel with the demands of a fast-paced thriller?

Jon Land: Jeff had this amazing concept for a thriller series centered around his incredible knowledge of the national parks, using the parks as a backdrop that would define the series. However, his initial draft of what became “Leave No Trace” wasn’t working, and he needed help to make the idea come to life. I suggested we blow up the Statue of Liberty on page one. He reminded me that the Statue of Liberty wasn’t in the book. “It is now,” I told him.

I’m curious how you settled on ISB special agent Michael Walker and what were the advantages in pairing him with special agent Gina Delgado of the FBI.

Jeff Ayers: I told Jon about the Investigative Services Branch of the National Park Service, which would allow our hero to work out of any of the over 430 sites they oversee. Jon especially embraced the fact that the ISB had never been utilized in a thriller before, making this a fresh take in the genre. Gina grew out of wanting to pair Michael with an FBI agent who was also an expert in explosives. Their skill sets match perfectly.

Share a bit about your research into Alaska Native cultures and why the Tlingit people became a compelling element in the novel.

Ayers: Alaska’s beauty is unprecedented, and spending time in Glacier Bay National Park and the surrounding communities gives you a taste of the Tlingit and their culture. When visiting a museum in Sitka, the guide called all of the Alaskan Native artifacts “materials from curiosity collectors.” I knew that Jon would agree that Michael would need to investigate stolen artifacts and get past the locals’ animosity toward National Park staff. Talking to rangers and locals also helped with the flavor of the area.

Any takeaway messages for readers in your character Axel Cole?

Land: We looked at Axel Cole as emblematic of the excess driving contemporary tech, which is the modern-day version of the military-industrial complex. Cole is a projection of a selfish, conceited worldview that barrels ahead without any concern over the wreckage left in its wake. So, at heart, he’s a prototypical Sean Connery-era James Bond villain. The difference is that he isn’t out to dominate the world so much as to own it.