



The Ax

Donald E. Westlake

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For 25 years, Burke Devore has provided for his family and played by the rules. Until now. Downsized from his job, Devore is slipping away: from his wife, his family, and from all civilized norms of behavior. He wants his life back, and will do anything to get it. In this relentlessly fascinating novel, the masterful Westlake takes readers on a journey of obsession and outrage inside a quiet man's desperate world.

The Ax Details

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Author : Donald E. Westlake

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From Reader Review The Ax for online ebook

Still says

Westlake just kills me!

I started reading this and was a little disappointed that it wasn't as fast-paced as other novels I've read by Donald E. Westlake.

Then around about page 27 it becomes a pretty gripping tale of a guy who is laid off from a nice, comfortable job he's had in management at a paper company for 25 years.

What would you do if you were fired from a position you'd held for 25 years?

Why you'd become a maniac!

Or at least that's exactly what Westlake's protagonist, Burke Devore, does.

And he becomes a remorseless maniac at that.

Recommended.

Monique says

Ha ha ha..this book was hilarious, not in the roll on the floor laughing way but kept a sly smile on my face by the sheer absurdity of the whole book..This book made me actually cheer and root for a serial killer, a crazy man who kills people and then goes home for dinner like nothing..This book is deranged and psychotic but oh so enjoyable I think there may be something wrong with me for liking it so much, this author is absolutely brilliant and the only reason I didnt give it five stars is because its kinda short, but 273 pages of entertainment. The premise of the book could happen just as easy today as it was in the book's time of 1998 as its about economic downsizing and how losing one's job can make you lose your mind. Our protagonist Burke is a regular guy, middle management in a paper factory when he is laid off and then cant find a job for two years. Struggling to support his family and yearning to be back at work he pulls a desperate act..secretly sets up a P.O. box advertising the type of work he used to do then when the applicants come in he kills off the most qualified so that when his perfect job comes available (he plans to also kill the man who currently has that job LOL) he is the only one qualified. If it didnt involve murder it would be a brilliant plan..Now does he really kill them, how and is he caught are all the things you have to read and find out and I definitely recommend it for a night of smiles and giggles with this lovable lunatic...

Steven says

Loved this book. Now one of my all-time favorites. A brilliant noir that also includes in-character commentary on the layoff economy, which gives it a scope beyond the usual crime novel. Burke Devore has

been out of work for two years after being laid off from his management job at a paper mill following a merger. As the novel begins he has decided to start taking out the competition - other men just like himself who are slightly more qualified than him for the jobs he is seeking. Seven men to kill and then the field is clear of competition for the job he wants. The first-person narrative got me right inside Burke Devore and as extreme as his actions were I found myself identifying with and rooting for him. Remove the social veneer and it's a survival of the fittest world. Westlake did a great job tapping into that. The seven killings creates a great plot driver and each of the killings comes with complications and that keeps the story fresh all the way to the surprising ending.

Ron Hefner says

Can there be any doubt that Donald Westlake was a genius?

The premise of this book (which has nothing to do with an actual ax or an ax murder) is so outrageous that only a master like Westlake could make it so real and compelling.

No spoilers here. Just read it, and you will be hanging on to every word until the incredible and unexpected ending.

What an amazing legacy Westlake left us. Over 100 books. He's best known for his comic caper novels, but I think his "serious" stuff is his best work. After reading "The Ax," read the recently re-published Memory from 1963, an existential masterpiece.

Richard says

The Ax starts strong with a great plot that is irresistible and tailor-made for a modern noir tale. Burke Devore has been laid off from his job as a manager at a paper manufacturer and has been jobless for two years. In a desperate attempt to land a job, he gathers together resumes of men that could be seen as his competition, and proceeds to take the steps that would guarantee his resume would be at the top of the pile: killing his competition one by one.

"What it comes down to is, the CEOs, and the stockholders who put them there, are the enemy, but they are not the problem. They are society's problem, but they are not my personal problem.

These six resumés. These are my personal problem."

I was struck by how believable the entire situation was. This type of story could have easily succumbed to convenient plot-points and fantastical feats of ability by the protagonist. But I never felt a false note in the entire novel. Another risk is that the developments could have easily gotten repetitive. But incredibly, the book is still intensely readable and well-paced, with each murder-attempt feeling fresh and suspenseful.

The novel put you right into the mind of Burke, a man in a situation that we can all relate to in this modern

job market. I could especially relate to him, being a freelance worker and having to deal with competition everyday. I was with him all the way. I related to his desperate need to take action, I felt his frustrations every time his plans met another obstacle, cheered for him every time he cleverly got his way out of trouble, and morbidly enough, I wanted to see him succeed.

Bill says

About 20% of the way through this one, I wasn't sure it was going to be so great. It's written in the 1st person, and with a fun concept: a 51 year old man who has been unemployed for 2 years decides to start killing off the competition for a job he wants.

The reason I was losing my enthusiasm early on was that it seemed the novel was becoming redundant. Well, that changed about a third of the way in. I got hooked big time.

Like the human train wrecks of *A Simple Plan* and *The Big Picture*, we ride alongside our anti-hero as he plots his path of murder. This is not a sympathetic character. He is a psychopath. Although he feels entirely justified, this does not wash with the reader (one would hope). His actions and thoughts expose an amoral sociopath, and as a reader, you keep going because you just have to see how this is going to turn out.

(view spoiler)

This is the first novel I've read by Westlake, and I happily have the first Parker novel on my to-read list (by his alter ego Richard Stark).

The Ax was a fast, compulsive read, and exactly what I needed at the time. 5 stars for sheer entertainment.

Dan Schwent says

Burke Devore, line manager at a paper mill, gets laid off and is unemployed for two years. Then one day he gets the idea of a lifetime: start killing the people he's competing for job with...

Wow. This thing is a damn masterpiece. Westlake takes an ordinary Joe in a situation we can all relate to in these uncertain economic times, and sends him on a killing spree. What separates Burke Devore from other killers on the paperback racks is that he's almost just like us.

The way Westlake tells the story of Burke Devore makes him a sympathetic character. He's not a cold blooded killer, just a guy driven to desperate measures to feed his family and save his marriage. While he's doing reprehensible things, you still wind up rooting for him and hoping he doesn't get caught.

If you're looking for some suspense, look no further.

Cathy DuPont says

The Ax? Well, forget about the one with the handle which you chop wood with.

Get this book. Read it. How, oh how, did Westlake come up with his idea for one of the best books I've read in six months?

:0

David says

Donald E. Westlake updates the Gold Medal-Everyman formula for 1997. Not much has changed for honest, hardworking guys since the Frustrating Fifties: They still chase the American Dream like dogs chasing cars, and, when they can't stand the frustration any longer, they cross over to the noir side. Westlake's Everyman antihero is Burke Devore, a middle-manger in the paper industry who has been downsized out of his birthright to the middle class. Though Westlake's narrative is flabbier than your typical Gold Medal PBO, his plot begins more quickly. While Gold Medal antiheroes typically cross into lawlessness by degrees, Burke Devore is fully noir on page one. This is a risky narrative choice: Before readers have a chance to feel sympathy for Burke, they must face the extremity of his behavior.

Veeral says

Bill MacDonald's review piqued my interest in this book. I was not even aware of Donald E. Westlake's works a few days back, so I thought this would be a good chance to change that.

And tell you what, I am already a fan!

The plot of this book is simple enough. A man in his early fifties gets laid off from his job and remains jobless for a couple of years due to severe competition. What to do? Remove the competition. Permanently, of course!

There was not even a single dull moment in the entire book and to top it all off, the ending was even more brilliant.

To cut a long story short, this is one of the most brilliantly horrific yet enjoyable books I have ever read in the crime genre.

Trudi says

First-line-fever: I've never actually killed anybody before, murdered another person, snuffed out another human being.

Kemper says

Wanted: Middle management for the oversight of an assembly line in an industrial paper factory. College degree and experience a must. Homicidal maniacs welcome to apply.

Burke Devore was a typical middle-aged guy with a steady job, a wife and two college aged kids. However, when he gets laid off, he spends two years looking for new employment and realizes that there are far too many people with more education and experience looking for similar work.

After Burke reads an article in a trade journal about a factory doing the kind of work he specialized in along with an interview of a manager there, he realizes that it's exactly the kind of job he's suited for. Broke and desperate, Burke comes up with a unique solution. He'll kill the manager and apply for his job. But with so many unemployed in his industry, there's bound to be a better candidate. So Burke places a phony ad in a trade journal, collects the resumes of the people who would apply for the job, selects the ones who would be the most competition and sets out to eliminate the six people he's identified. Burke knows it will take a terrible toll on him, but he's determined to get that job.

The late Donald Westlake wrote this in 1997, but his publishers really missed an opportunity during the last economic bust to reissue this book with great fanfare because it's even more poignant now.

I've noted before that I'm amazed at how Westlake was always able to shift gears between his comic writing in books like his Dortmunder series and the hard boiled Parker crime novels he wrote as Richard Stark. This is another facet of his writing. The concept seems almost darkly funny at first, and this could have been played for black humor easily.

But Westlake wrote a taunt and tragic tale of an ordinary guy committing horrific crimes, and he makes the point that it's more than just economics driving Burke. His identity is wrapped up in his job, and he has come to conclusion that he's acting in self-defense to preserve himself and his family. I also liked how Westlake portrayed Burke going through various kinds of emotions related to his murders. Sometimes he's overwhelmed with guilt. Sometimes he gets incredibly angry at the people in his way. Sometimes he has nothing but contempt for his victims for not being as willing as he is to do what it takes.

The whole book is pretty chilling, and Burke comes across as a character that you'll both sympathize with and fear.

Greg says

1.

My dad told me a story about something he used to do. Back in the dark ages, when people didn't use the internet they relied on other means for doing things that we now do with just a few keystrokes.

For example, if you're in the construction industry today, and you are a salesman you can log on to a website

and see all the projects that are being worked on, being bid on and use that website to place your own bid to do work.

Back then they had clunky big blue books that served this purpose.

I'm not sure when this story takes place. It was in the eighties, since we were living in Tenafly at the time. But my dad had various sales jobs during this time. What I'm saying is I don't know exactly what my dad was selling at the time and if I did it wouldn't matter much to you anyway because it's just concrete, some sort of concrete something or other that goes on floors.

Apparently, my dad would take out ads sometimes for fictitious future construction projects in these clunky big blue books, or in some similarly unwieldy print resource (it boggles my mind to even think that at one point I had even done research for college papers using something like the *Readers Guide to Periodicals*). Then he'd wait for his competition, people who sold similar products to what he sold to submit bids so that he could see what prices they were offering and then he could adjust his own price accordingly.

Apparently, a few times confused salesmen showed up at our house, thinking they were going to be doing a cold call at a business only to find a little suburban home with two cars in the drive way, a basketball hoop and a shit ton of toy guns scattered all over the yard.

I never knew this until last year.

2.

This novel is like that story (but much more engaging, interesting and better written).

The novel centers around a man who a couple of years earlier had been laid off from a paper company.

Times are tough.

He's not alone in the mid-90's downsizing.

He was good at his job, but not spectacular. He is competent and would be a great addition to a company, but he has no knack for resume writing. He doesn't know how to smooze his way through interviews.

He's had no luck.

So he makes up a fake company name and places an ad in a widely read paper manufacturing trade journal for what he thinks of as the job he is ideally suited for, with his experience and all of that. And then he waits for the resumes from other unemployed hopefuls to roll in, so he can see who his real competition is.

And then kill all of the people who look better on paper, who have more experience, who he would hire instead of himself if he were looking to really fill this fictitious position.

Because he also has in mind an actual position at with a near by paper company, a position he would be perfect for if only something were to happen to the person who holds the job now.

Of course he must go, too.

3.

Reading this I kept thinking, how has this plot not been done before?

Maybe it has and I don't know about the book. It's possible since there are millions of them.

4.

The book follows our hero as he goes from being a mild mannered unemployed middle class everyman to being a serial killer.

It's pretty fun, kind of painful (in the awkwardness and sometimes gruesomeness of the situations, not in the writing) to read at times, and it does sort of drag for a bit towards the start of the second half, but it's a good mixture of the comedic aspects of Westlake's work with the darker side of his Stark persona.

This isn't necessarily the first Westlake novel I'd recommend to someone, but it's worth reading, and might appeal to people who aren't all that interested in reading his more crime oriented novels (like murder isn't a crime? (well you know what I mean, the heist sort of novels)), or who want to read something in the same vein of Thomas Berger's non-early books.

Tom Swift says

This is a really good story revolving a downsized middle manager in corporate America faced with the possibility of losing everything. What's to do? Keep sending our resumes month after month? Or, maybe he could take control of situation.

My first Donald E. Westlake novel. I have already checked out another title from this author.

Bryan Alexander says

The conceit: a middle manager is laid off from his job, and is increasingly desperate to get another. He hits upon the idea of simply murdering competition for one good position.

On the one hand *The Ax* is a clever crime novel. Westlake builds tension expertly, making each incident plausible yet filled with ways to go wrong... which means he also leads you into cheering on our homicidal hero. Burke is also plausible in his crime spree, an innocent man who turns to crime with a certain ironclad logic.

On the other, *The Ax* is a political novel about the modern economy. This isn't me interpreting it. The book is very explicit - at least from our narrator's point of view - that things have changed from mid-century to the 1990s, that society has shifted from a sense of connected labor to an atomized, competitive arena. Burke learns through the course of the story that he cannot trust formerly trustworthy entities: not the police, nor the courts, not coworkers, certainly not employers. He ends up as a master criminal, nearly paranoid, deeply canny, ready to do anything to succeed.

“Even Upton “Ralph” Fallon was not my enemy, I knew that. The enemy is the corporate

bosses. The enemy is the stockholders.

These are all publicly held corporations, and it is the stockholders' drive for return on investment that pushes every one of them. Not the product, not the expertise, certainly not the reputation of the company. The stockholders care about nothing but return on investment, and that leads to their supporting executives who are formed in their image, men (and women, too, lately) who run companies they care nothing about, lead work forces whose human reality never enters their minds, make decisions not on the basis of what's good for the company or the staff or the product or (hah!) the customer, or even the greater good of the society, but only on the basis of stockholders' return on investment."

The Ax is, in short, one of the best works of popular fiction about neoliberalism.

Glenn Russell says

When asked by a student what it takes to be enlightened, a great spiritual teacher replied: "You must want God as much as a drowning man wants air."

Once, as a teenager, swimming in the rough waves of the ocean, a panic-stricken white haired geezer grabbed my arm and cried out for help. In that instant I knew what it meant for someone to want air so badly he would have pulled me under so he could continue breathing.

The narrator of Westlake's tale, Burke Devore, is one such drowning man gasping for air. In Burke's case, drowning is being over fifty and unemployed with a wife and kids. Air is a job.

Burke has spent his entire career as a polymer paper specialist. It's the 1990s, the post-Reagan years - he was downsized along with hundreds of other dedicated employees many months ago. The money is about to run out. Burke stands to lose his nice house in Connecticut, his car, his possessions, any remaining shred of respect from his family. As far as Burke is concerned, he stands to lose his life. No doubt about it, Burke Devore needs a job. Fast.

After trying to win a job these past months their way, the way society says you have to win a job, Burke realized the odds were stacked way too high against him, too many other equally qualified job hunters in his specialized field and too few companies looking to fill his position.

Burke Devore knows what he has to do. He goes up to the attic, locates the chest with the Luger pistol his father brought back from Germany as a souvenir after the war. He sets his plan in motion, a plan to pinpoint those other qualified job hunters competing for a polymer paper manager job, his job.

Can he really do it, kill off the competition? With his very life on the line, you bet he can.

American author Donald E. Westlake wrote *The Ax* at age sixty-five, with more than forty published novels to his credit. Mr. Westlake brings a true writer's wisdom to this work I judge an overlooked classic. Through the magic of entering the heart and mind of Burke Devore, the author makes credible the incredible, plausible the implausible, how an everyday kind of guy, a law abiding citizen can take drastic measures to

reclaim his life.

You read *The Ax* with a combination of shock and fascination. Your jaw drops. Can this really be happening? It can. And the more pages you turn, the more you appreciate the tale's black humor. Wow! Donald E. Westlake. Why haven't I heard of this guy before?

And there's such an acid critique of society. Burke Devore reflects on capitalism's underbelly, how politicians, stockholders and the CEOs are the real enemy. The rich don't care about a workforce toiling, bleeding sweat and sweating blood to keep their company in the black. Not one bit. What the rich at the top care about is maximizing profit. If merging with another company or moving their plant overseas can squeeze out the most profit, that's what they'll do. Thousands of men and women who have created a life around their job means nothing. Let them and their families eat cupcakes. Don't go away mad, gang, just go away.

Burke cracks a wry smile. Fortunate in years past for those blue collar types, steel worker, miners, factory workers - when automation hit and they could be replaced by machines, at least they were unionized. But nowadays when computers replace white collar middle managers like himself, no unions. Your education and professionalism, so the theory goes, gives you benefits enough. What a joke.

Stopping to fuel up his car, Burke considers another solution to his problem: banditry. Simply pop into a convenience store like this one with a Pakistani behind the counter, point the Lugar at his face and demand all the cash in the till. He could rob such a convenience store once a week until Social Security kicks in. Now that's convenient!

No, that's not the solution. Burke knows the solution.

To find out how Burke will fair in his role as a methodical serial killer, I highly recommend reading *The Ax*. Middle America never had a more articulate spokesperson.

American author Donald E. Westlake, 1933 - 2008

Ed [Redacted] says

This book is about a dark time in American history. A large financial bubble had burst, corporations were laying off people in droves in a valiant effort to protect the lavish lifestyles of corporate leaders, jobs were hard to come by for the recently displaced and, as unemployment benefits started to run out, these displaced workers felt increasing, massive pressure to find a new job soon, or risk losing everything they have worked for their whole lives. So nothing like today *cough.

Anyway, it is in these difficult times that our "hero" Burke Devore finds himself at the end of his string and without prospects. He finds a job he would be perfect for, the only problem being the guy who currently holds that job. Devore decides to do the only thing that makes any sense. He decides to kill him. To ensure he gets the job, he decides to also kill other recently displaced workers who would be rivals for this job. Hijinks ensue.

This is a very good Westlake book. Not nearly as funny as much of his fiction and much darker. There are still some funny parts but the overall theme is very much of despair and hopelessness. Devore's transformation from his first, bumbling, efforts is fascinating to read and very well done. Somehow Devore remains an appealing and sympathetic figure despite his horrific acts. He is a well drawn character and frighteningly believable.

I would very much recommend this book in general. Westlake fans who have not read it yet should do so next.

Frank says

Westlake is one of my favorite crime novelists. He was a prolific author writing over 100 novels dating from the 1950s up to his death in 2008 and beyond (several of his works have been published posthumously). He wrote novels under his own name and under several pseudonyms including Richard Stark that he used for the gritty Parker novels. He also wrote the humorous Dortmund series which I really enjoy.

The Ax is a stand-alone novel about a man, Burke Devore, who was laid off from his middle management job at a paper company. He has been out of work for two years and finds that there is always someone with a little better experience or a better resume that gets the jobs ahead of him. So what does he do? He comes up with an idea to eliminate the competition by systematically killing better qualified candidates! But can he do this? He is just an ordinary man who had never killed anyone before but he decides that this is his only recourse to get his life and marriage back on track.

This is a very well written noir novel that makes you wonder how far someone can go to achieve his goals. Does the end justify the means? Overall a high recommendation for this one and I would also recommend most anything else written by Westlake if you are into crime fiction.

Tanja Berg says

To quote Louise Penny: "There is a killer in every village. In every home. In every heart. All anyone needs is the right reason". Burke Devore has reason - he has been down-sized from the paper company where he worked as a line manager. That was two years ago. Now he has his heart set on eliminating the competition. He puts a fake ad in the papers, receives lots of cv's, sorts them according to how "dangerous" they are and begins to cross them off. He wasn't a cold-blooded killer to start with, so he has some initial struggles. Some parts of this story is quite funny, or maybe I just have a morbid sort of humour.

Burke is not a particularly sympathetic character, but I could empathize with his situation anyway. It must be horrible to be unemployed - it's been one of my big fears personally, although I've not experienced it after I was done with school. I don't think a couple of days count in that respect. A man's got to do what a man's got to do. So how long can Burke go on without getting caught and will he reach his goal of employment in exactly the same type of job he did before?

Charles says

A very entertaining book. To adequately describe it, I'd have to put in some plot spoilers and I don't want to do that. Suffice to say I found it a fascinating look at what downsizing might, under certain circumstances, do. Perfect ending as well. Gave me a big grin. Highly recommended.
