



Thieves' Dozen

Donald E. Westlake

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Featuring Westlake's hapless hero John Dortmunder, this original compilation of short stories ties in to the author's latest Dortmunder hardcover, "The Road to Ruin."

Thieves' Dozen Details

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Author : Donald E. Westlake

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From Reader Review Thieves' Dozen for online ebook

thefourthvine says

This is an interesting read, mostly on a meta level; it's fascinating to see how structurally different these stories are from Westlake's full-length Dortmunder books. Basically, this book is an excellent education in how to craft short stories as opposed to novels.

So on that level, the book is awesome. Unfortunately, a lot of the things I truly love about the Dortmunder series don't work as well in short form; there can't be any complicated plotting, for example, and the partners in crime mostly don't appear in these stories. So mostly these are - well, vignettes, almost, little pieces of Dortmunderiana, if I can use the term. It's great if you're jonesing for a Dortmunder fix, but I'm not, not right now. In a way, I wish I'd saved these stories for a while.

Still, there are some stories that stood out for me. The last one is probably the most interesting - and, again, this is mostly a meta level. Westlake at one point thought he'd lose the rights to the name "John Dortmunder" to a movie studio, so he started looking for another name for the character. He came up with John Rumsey. He never had to use the substitute name, but he did write a short story using Rumsey and co (Algy, Stan Little, Big Hooper) just to see how it would go. It's like a perfect little canonical AU, and it's also a great story.

Basically, I'd consider this collection well worth reading for fans of the series. Anyone else won't find much to appreciate here.

Spiros says

Yes, I am desperate for Dortmunders: they are almost all out of print. It was with reservations that I desperately clutched at this slim volume when I chanced upon it at Aardvark; I couldn't imagine the brilliance that is Dortmunder translating into the short story format, since the glory of Dortmunder lies in the slow, inexorable build-up.

Needless to say, I was selling Westlake short; these stories represent a pure distillation of Dortmunder, including a story generated when some evil Hollywood execs were threatening to take the "Dortmunder" name away from Westlake; so we have a one-off featuring "Rumsey", Dortmunder's short doppelganger. Whether Rumsey would share Dortmunder's unfortunate, reflexive action of giving the nom-de-crime of "Diddums" whenever pressed for an alias ("it's Welsh") is something we'll thankfully never know (he presented fake ID as "Jefferson", but that was just what was in his wallet).

Jon says

The world cannot have too much of John Archibald Dortmunder, and these twelve short stories about our favourite thief did very nicely until the next full-length novel came out. Technically only 11 stories are about Dortmunder and his crooked cronies, because the 12th story is about ... um, someone else. Kinda. Mr. Westlake explains it all in the foreword. It is, however, the funniest of the 12, and caused my father to fall out bed laughing, and hurt himself. (It's OK, Don; he won't sue). Westlake practically invented the comic crime genre, and these stories (none of which have appeared in book form before) illustrate why he became and remained the master of his craft. Intelligent, witty, well-plotted, with well-rounded characters and (of

course) very funny indeed ... what more do you need to know? Go buy the thing.

Ralph says

Sheer delight. Westlake presents a selection of finely tuned comic pieces featuring John Dortmunder

Lori Hatch says

Really enjoyed this book, 12 short stories with truly funny off-beat humor.

Kemper says

It turns out that short stories about luckless professional thief John Dortmunder are just as enjoyable as his novel length adventures.

As the late Donald Westlake explains in a brief introduction, he never planned for Dortmunder to be more than the main character in a single novel, but that turned into a very successful series. Over the years, he'd have the occasional odd idea that wasn't enough for a novel, and somehow found that he'd written enough short stories for a collection.

Most of these are what you'd expect for stories about the gloomy thief who constantly finds himself pulled into elaborate and outlandish schemes. My favorite one in this collection is *Too Many Crooks*. Dortmunder and his buddy Andy Kelp tunnel into a bank vault after closing time only to find out that the bank was being robbed by somebody else and the vault is full of hostages. Hilarity ensues.

One of the more interesting things in the book isn't a story. Westlake explains in the introduction that it once looked like he might lose the rights to the Dortmunder character due to the assholery of some Hollywood lawyers. (I assume that this is related to the movie version of *The Hot Rock*.) In case he lost the legal battle, Westlake had a plan to have the main characters operate under new names after being wanted by the police, but he had problems coming up with a suitable name for Dortmunder.

He finally decided on the name of John Rumsey, but Westlake was shocked to realize that when he tried to write a novel with the different names that Dortmunder became different despite the fact he was supposed to be the same exact guy. As Westlake comically explains it, Rumsey was shorter than Dortmunder.

The lawsuit was eventually dropped, but Westlake included a John Rumsey story. To Westlake, Rumsey and his cohorts are a version of Dortmunder and his gang from a parallel universe where everything is slightly different. It was a fun twist to add to the collection.

bookczuk says

I just love Dortmunder, or Diddums (it's Welsh), and all the gang. The regulars at OJs always make me laugh out loud. These stories are a smattering of Dortmunder, but still grand.

FROM THE PUBLISHER

On a literary landscape filled with cunning criminal masterminds, Donald E. Westlake's John Dortmunder is in a league of his own. With no scam too outrageous to contemplate, and no plan too simple to go wrong, this quirky career thief has stolen everything from money buried under a reservoir to a bank-the whole bank. Now the ultimate repeat offender returns in a first-time collection of short stories that prove that just like bagels and donuts, with Dortmunder it's always better by the dozen ... Thieves' Dozen.

Robert J. Sullivan says

Westlake is off and running from the title on in this collection of eleven stories, ten featuring that criminal mastermind-of-ill-fortune John 'Didums' Dortmunder, and one with Dortmunder's doppelganger. (Really, did you expect Dortmunder to not shortchange you on a dozen?)

John, with and without various members of his gang, tries to steal a 600 pound bronze statue, a horse, a famous broach, among other portable items of value, breaks into a bank in the middle of a hostage crisis, and, novelty of novelties, even finds himself falsely accused of theft.

This book is concentrated-funny, even more than Westlake's novels about the hard-luck criminals and contains a summation of John's character in two sentences: a cop takes Dortmunder's elbow to help him and John's wrists reflexively snap together. Perfect.

Brighten your day: read this, including the introduction. 4 stars

Joyce says

Dortmunder short stories - onto the next one, which I hope is a full novel this time.

David says

When you are done with the Dortmunder novels, you still have the Dortmunder short stories to read. Will you enjoy them? Of course. Would you trade them for one more novel? Of course.

Jesse says

So I read this excellent piece a while back in Grantland about Donald Westlake, and then found this very persuasive reader's guide to his work, which I, at least, found pretty useful; we seem to share the same aesthetic. (I also discovered from my 30 minutes of research that Ethan Iverson, the piano player from the Bad Plus, a band I kind of like [semi-ironic jazz covers of prog classics], is in his spare time a noir scholar, which is heroic.) Anyway, so I made my way through a lot of Westlake. I had read *The Ax* a while back, which I may return to, and I'd seen *Point Blank* with Lee Marvin way back when as well, which is a movie of the first Parker novel.

The returns: It turns out that the Parker novels, which he wrote as Richard Stark, are pretty good, in a pitch-

black/existential way--I particularly liked *Slayground*, which has a perfect filmic structure and apparently was sort of made into a movie, though mostly they just appropriated the title. So someone should make it, though I guess the last Jason Statham Parker film bombed. You can hurtle through 2-3 a day if you'd like (U. Chicago Press has reissued all of them, though sometimes with overly-revealing prefaces, about which, boo), and they show off an incredible economy of prose and plotting--and a formulaic construction that you can certainly read as allowing room for jazzy improv if you'd like. I kind of buy that, though I didn't read all 15 or so books. But I LOOOVE the Dortmund books, which are comic capers Westlake wrote under his own name, with particular preference for *Bank Shot*, *Jimmy the Kid* (in which our intrepid thieves attempt to pull off a caper modeled on a nonexistent Stark novel), and *Good Behavior*, the Rapunzel story crossed with some fake-Ludlum or -Forsyth mercenaries. Westlake's crackerjack plotting, to me, owes something to P.G. Wodehouse in the perfect interlocking of absurdities, and something to the Marx Brothers in the batty offshoots to which the dialogue is prone--there are recurring scenes in the thieves' bar featuring wildly misinformed regulars; driver Stan Murch and his Mom (always capitalized), whose entire life is concerned with the best routes into town; and Dortmund's sidekick Andy Kelp, who routinely brings in sure things that are anything but yet never forsakes his essential trust in the universe. They're just delightful; I found myself laughing out loud quite a bit. Hard to explain why to Isaac now, but maybe someday.

Really one of the most pleasurable additions to my life over the past 2 months, I'd have to say.

Roberta says

[(actually only 11 stories, get it?) (hide spoiler)]

Tiina says

No olivathan nämä täydellisen hersyviä juttuja kaikki!

Diogenes says

Sheer delight. A crook who will make you smile, perhaps laugh out loud, and have you rooting for him as he strenuously avoids an honest day's work.

Eleven Dortmund tales, among them Edgar award winner *Too Many Crooks*. The twelfth tale has an assortment of thieves, including an almost Dortmund substitute, in full mayhem. For fans, the introduction is worth it's weight in gold. The entire book is platinum.

Ann McReynolds says

There has never been nor will there ever be as witty a writer as Donald Westlake. In each of the 12 short stories which make up "Thieves' Dozen", his scheme is laid out in a few crisp sentences, such as stealing a champion race horse, Even the asides on names chosen (Abby's Elbow), and the delectable explanation for breeding the mincing stallion (Dire Straits) bounce merrily along as the pair make their way through the manure strewn pasture. Each story in this

collection shows the inimitable hand of the wittiest of American authors. "Too many Crooks" cannot be topped to show any aspiring writer perfection in crisp dialogue, plot line, scene setting and story telling. Wouldn't it have been wonderful to sit at the next booth in Armweary's?
