

# Wine and His Times

Reviewed by [Kevin Burton Smith](#)

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What a long, strange trip it's been. Almost 30 years have passed since Roger L. Simon first started gleefully poking a stick at the soft white underbelly of the myths of the 1960s, when he introduced Moses Wine, his cynical Los Angeles hippie dick, in the classic novel *The Big Fix* (1973). For a country still reeling from that fractious decade and its fallout, it was a courageous move, a brave slap in the face that acknowledged that the times hadn't changed quite as much as or necessarily in the ways that everyone had expected. Or hoped.

Now, Moses returns in *The Lost Coast*, the seventh installment in this long-running series, made widely available for the first time. Although originally released in hardcover in 1997, the book was "unceremoniously dumped" by its former publisher, as Simon explains in a preface to this new trade paperback edition from iBooks. But Moses is a survivor. Even as he suffers one mid-life crisis after another, he still wears his heart -- and his conscience -- on his sleeve. For all his hard-earned cynicism, he still believes.

Like his 60s brothers and sisters, Moses has been through some changes: marriage, children, divorce and disillusionment. Oh, and guilt. If there's one thing this former pot-smoking, blue-jeaned "people's detective" has plenty of, it's guilt. He may be a sharp-dressed, chardonnay-sipping, Beemer-driving big shot nowadays, with his own small but lucrative investigative agency boasting of "a half dozen employees," yet, he's at least upfront enough to admit that he's "living the kind of bourgeois life he once reviled." Some of his brethren have come to terms with the Big Chill, but Moses hasn't. In his own manner, he's fought it (and is still fighting it) every step of the way. Not always successfully, either -- which is where his real guilt comes in.

And damn, if that guilt doesn't rear up and sucker punch him on the very first page of *The Lost Coast*. A "wake-up call from Hell" (actually from the LAPD) informs Moses that his 20-year old son, Simon -- supposedly a peaceful, apolitical art student safely tucked away at a university in Oakland -- has been accused of murdering a logger with the Allied Lumber Company. Unbeknownst to his dad, Simon has apparently aligned himself with the

Guardians of the Planet, a radical environmental group that claims credit for "spiking" redwoods in a disputed Northern California logging area, hoping to protect the trees from destruction. Unfortunately, when the ill-fated logger's blade hit one of those metal spikes, his "chain saw flew back at him like a boomerang. Practically cut the poor man in half," Moses is told by Special Agent Nicholas Bart, a rather less-than-friendly FBI point man who harbors no great love for environmentalists, never mind eco-terrorists.

Suddenly Moses the parent is awash in a sea of guilt (where did I go wrong?), denial (who would set my son up for this?), paranoia (why has someone set my son up for this?) and fear (what if he is actually guilty?).

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These are tough questions. But, of course, this series has always looked to the past -- not just exploring the familial ties that bind, as [Ross Macdonald](#) did, but also delving into the generational chasms that lie between children and parents, the myths and lies one generation dispenses to the next when trying to explain and justify its behavior. And just as blood can't be denied, so, too, do old prejudices crawl out of the shadows to spread new harm in a new age. Moses' knee-jerk distrust of the FBI, for example, is more than matched by agent Bart's hostile dismissal of Wine as "some kind of retro sixties asshole willing to hang anybody to get [his] kid off."

Moses is certainly willing to take extraordinary measures to save his boy. After hooking up with his caustic ex-wife, Suzanne, and agreeing to (at least temporarily) shelve their past marital grievances, the pair rush north to find Simon -- before the FBI can grab him. But they're not exactly welcomed with open arms. The small coastal logging town of Humboldt, already sharply divided between the "tree-huggers" and those who make their living off the great forests, has only been torn apart further by this latest tragedy -- and Moses and Suzanne are, after all, the parents of the accused killer.

It's not bad enough that his parents haven't any idea of where Simon is. They must also deal with the cold suspicions of Humboldt residents and dodge the unwanted attentions of local and state police, the FBI's International-Domestic Terrorism Squad and a mysterious but well-armed vigilante group, California Forest Protection, which claims to be a private-security firm defending logging interests.

As the estranged couple zip back and forth along the twisting highways between giant redwoods and Douglas firs, trying to find their son before the law does, the Make-Love-Not-War era dogs their footsteps like an unwelcome flashback. Fellow travelers, as well as other survivors and casualties, surface: Daniel Springer, a once up-and-coming Silicon Valley journalist who dropped out to edit a Humboldt newspaper that mixes local

gossip with alternative press reprints; a former lumber baron who abandoned his career to establish a winery; Springer's assistant, Samantha Backus, an idealistic young reporter with her own agenda; and the elusive Claire Hannin, a former radical who remains on the lam after a suspicious, long-ago car bombing. Also putting in an appearance in these pages is scriptwriter-turned-commercial dope grower Gabriel Levine, Moses' former best friend and the man whom Suzanne left the detective to be with. No wonder Moses refers to Northern California as the "Siberia for the Sixties."

I'm sure there are people who will be quick to dismiss all of this, to accuse Moses (and author Simon) of trading in lame nostalgia for a bygone era or generational navel-gazing. But Simon's too smart and too honest (and, often, too wickedly funny) to let readers off that easily. The lines between "us" and "them" have never been more blurred in this series than they are in *The Lost Coast*, and both sides take their lumps. Consider this snatch of Moses' soul-searching:

*I always wanted to believe I could communicate openly with my sons. We wouldn't be like previous generations, where chasms of austere traditions created an unbridgeable gap. ... So why had this happened? Why this extreme exaggeration of everything I stood for -- or, even worse, this complete rejection of it?... Was rebellion necessary for every generation, no matter what? Had we -- had I -- boxed them into a corner and given them no room to differentiate themselves, standing approvingly in the background when they bought their first condom or Bogarted their first joint?... Had deeper forces, older than Abraham and Isaac and as immutable as our DNA, been at play all along and finally come back to haunt me?*

Novelist Simon deserves credit for not simplifying things, or offering pat motivations -- although the temptation to do so must be great. As one character assures Moses, "Life isn't an Oliver Stone movie. It's usually pretty much the way it appears, unfortunately." Moses himself ruefully admits, "The infuriating thing about conventional wisdom is that it is often correct. I spent my whole life rebelling against it -- it felt like a box to me, repressing my freedom -- but in the end I would usually succumb." Moses Wine, however, for all of his cynicism, doesn't give up easily. Despite the odds, sometimes the truth is actually out there, and this P.I.'s constant quest for it -- combined with his not-quite-blind faith in his son and his trust in ideals that others long ago discarded as inconvenient or unfashionable -- makes him, of all things, a hero.

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Unfortunately, Moses succumbs to one hoary detective fiction tradition that goes back even further than the 1960s -- the annoying, but seemingly obligatory, dream sequence designed to clue readers in on the detective's thoughts and fears. Such supernatural foreshadowing is out of place here.

Moses is not some hippie-dippy airhead; his idealism has always been tempered by an unflinching recognition of the sins and weaknesses both of others and of himself. When Suzanne accuses her ex of once joining a political organization just to get in some girl's pants, he readily -- if reluctantly -- admits that it's true.

It is this sort of hard honesty and savage humor, this willingness to simultaneously embrace and disparage the past that hooks you on the Moses Wine series. For all of his steadfast self-examination, his unflinching honesty and his disillusionment, the private eye still believes that there are things worth fighting for. He may not always trust, but deep down Moses still abides in such antiquated notions as peace, love and understanding.

Roger L. Simon has penned six previous Moses Wine books and numerous screenplays, including his adaptations of *The Big Fix* and of Isaac Bashevis Singer's novel, *Enemies: A Love Story* (which earned Simon an Academy Award nomination in 1989). He was also a co-founder of the International Association of Crime Writers.

Whatever the twisted publishing history of *The Lost Coast*, this is a fine novel, courageous enough to not just point fingers, but to look into the mirror without blinking. As I understand it, iBooks intends to reprint the entire Moses Wine series over the next few months. In fact, *The Big Fix* is already available, featuring an afterword by Simon and a new introduction by Richard Dreyfuss, who played Moses in the 1978 film adaptation.

It is a shame that this always-smart and often-provocative series seems to have fallen out of favor, because it's one of the few that has dared to chronicle not just the life of a man, but of an entire generation. *The Big Fix* (the title being an obvious and rather brazen allusion to Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* -- clearly staking out the scope of Simon's ambitions) created quite a splash at the time of its publication, earning praise from such diverse sources as *Rolling Stone* and Ross Macdonald, who called Simon "the most brilliant new writer of private detective fiction in years." The book also won a Mystery Writers of America Special Award and Great Britain's prestigious John Creasey Award for Best First Crime Novel.

Subsequent entries in the series continued Moses' assault on the yawning gap between the ideals and the realities of his generation. They took on the sexual revolution (*Wild Turkey*), communism and the North American far-left (*Peking Duck*, which sees Moses and his beloved Aunt Sonya actually traveling to China), the yuppification of the Woodstock generation (*California Roll*), therapy and standup comedy (*The Straight Man*) and religious fanaticism and terrorism (*Raising the Dead*, set in Jerusalem). There's real humor here, and sometimes a little pain. Perhaps that explains the series' fading commercial luster. Simon has never taken the easy way

out, never compromised the sometimes-uncomfortable honesty with which Moses has looked upon his generation. His characters have always been real people with real motivations, real faults and real virtues. But his approach isn't exactly in vogue these days, when the 60s are already beginning to be conveniently dissected, distorted and dismissed as some harmless cartoon from the past, populated solely by long-haired buffoons and stoned clowns. Fortunately for us, Moses was there and has lived to tell the tale of his people with a sly wit and, as Chandler once put it, "a disgust for sham and a contempt for pettiness."

That this woefully underrated series is about to get some long-overdue respect is good news for all fans of detective fiction. And really, what's so funny about peace, love and understanding, anyway? | *May 2000*

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