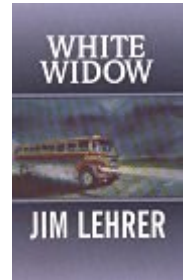


**Jim Lehrer.** *White Widow*. New York: Random House, 1997. 307 pp. \$21.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7862-1088-6.



**Reviewed by** W. M. Hagen

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Jim Lehrer will be familiar to most in PCAACA, if not as an author, at least as half of the old McNeill-Lehrer Report. His comic detective stories, featuring a one-eyed lieutenant governor of Oklahoma who has too much time on his hands, have a considerable following. In six previous novels, Lehrer has shown strengths in the kind of efficient characterizing and plot-weaving that readers of popular fiction expect. Less expected, hence more pleasurable, are the inserted bits of local lore: town or regional stories that may or may not have happened, notable features of the human or natural landscape that insiders can sometimes recognize or wonder about. (Should we accept his fiction as possible fact: Is Oklahoma a state where protected witnesses or retired spies are sometimes relocated?)

Readers of his previous novels, too, will have tumbled to the fact that Jim Lehrer knows one heck of a lot about the big cross-country buses, loves everything about them, which love apparently started when he was a Trailways ticket agent in Victoria, Texas during his college years. *White Widow* is, I suspect, a book he knew he would have to write, dedicated to people like him-

self, "the bus people." Its protagonist is Jack T. Oliver, known as "On Time" for his regular arrivals and regular ways, who during the course of the book receives the gold badge for his cap that marks him as a "Master Operator." But coincident to this expected peak in his career is the arrival, each Friday, of a knockout woman traveler, a "White Widow," in the lingo of bus drivers. They know the type, or rather they know the distraction or temptation she represents for them. Indeed, this particular "White Widow" never does a thing to encourage Jack, except be her elegant self. Jack, however, allows his middle-aged mind to wander, names her Ava for most of the book, and imagines scenes with her while he should be attending to driving. His Fridays become "bad luck" days for him when he arrives late. The jokes and small talk at his expense, the fact that his wife notices his distraction and starts to wonder if he's faithful are the outward signs of a moral conflict, that imaginative sin can deform behavior. What begins slowly becomes a rather profound study of a moral slide, without becoming melodramatic in its outcomes. I was very impressed by how Lehrer

handled this disruption of a regularized person's life.

The bus lore is quite interesting. The feel of the different buses, the rhythm of a driver's life, the limited community of drivers and agents, the relationship between a driver and his vehicle and the passengers, the hierarchies of vehicles and drivers and how one can distinguish them--all of this is picked up while the reader is on the road with Jack Oliver. Add to that the pressures of the post-WWII economy on the bus industry, with more and more Americans turning to private cars for long distance travel, and the reader gets a long, loving look at a piece of popular culture that has passed away. The only thing missing are pictures; the power of Lehrer's words makes one want to SEE the GMCs, ACF-Brills, Becks, Flexibles, and even the wartime Pony Cruiser. Perhaps he will bring out an illustrated edition of this novel--or a coffee table *Book of the Bus*.

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