

Book Review: Nightshade
By Michael Connelly

I have come to expect Michael Connelly's books to throw me into the heart of the action on page one. And "Nightshade," the first in his Catalina series launched in 2025, and "Ironwood," the second book in the series, are no exception.

As the narrative unfolds, we find Los Angeles County Sheriff's Detective Stilwell exiled to policing Catalina Island, a 22-mile-long picturesque atoll off the coast of Southern California. His exile, we soon learn, is based on his inability to just go along with department politics. And on Catalina, nothing has changed.

Right out of the chute Stilwell is hit with a report of a body found weighed down at the bottom of the harbor. Simultaneously, he receives notice of poaching on a protected reserve. And, as he has always done, Stilwell crosses all lines of protocol and jurisdiction – including his captain's orders – to work and solve both cases. Both of which will lead to closely guarded secrets that could make or break his career.

As with all his protagonists, Connelly successfully encourages the reader to root for Stilwell, despite – or perhaps because of – his distaste for rules and regulations. Similarly, it's easy to loath the villains and cheer when they get what's coming to them.

The pacing is excellent, especially into the second half of the book when both investigations ramp up, and the layers of deceit are more rapidly peeled back. I would even go so far as to describe some of the segments as intense. And the vivid descriptions of the Catalina landscape add a nice visual dimension, especially for someone who has never been there.

As always, Connelly makes it inviting to work along with Stilwell in putting all the pieces of the puzzle together.

Five enthusiastic stars for "Nightshade."

“Ironwood” also bolts from the gate. When a potential drug bust at an airfield on Catalina goes horribly wrong and two deputies are shot, one of them fatally, Stilwell is seemingly thrust into a complicated web of deception.

Except, his captain (Captain Corum) puts him on the bench and says the LAPD will handle the investigation. The captain also seems to thwart Stilwell at every turn. Why? What’s being covered up?

Meanwhile, Stilwell stumbles onto a cold case with links to a serial killer. That ‘stumble’ leads him to team with Det. Renee Ballard (the protagonist from an earlier Connelly six-book series) and her cold case unit to solve the years-old puzzle. It’s a nice blending of two likeable characters, a technique Connelly does well.

The pacing, like most Connelly books, is fast and furious, with a touch of levity spread around to keep things from getting too dark. And the ending seems (I hope) to open the door wide to a third book in the Catalina series. If it doesn’t, I (and I’m assuming many of Connelly’s readers) will be sorely disappointed.

Five stars for “Ironwood.” Yet another excellent crime thriller from Michael Connelly.