

"Back Roads,"
by Tawni O'Dell,
Viking, 338 pages,
\$24.95.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Whenever writers tell a story set among the dirt poor and uneducated, they inevitably create a hero who is smart as a whip. Tawni O'Dell's debut novel, set in rural Pennsylvania, is no exception.

This sad little story, spiked with humor, is about Harley Altmyer, a 19-year-old diamond in the rough whose mom is in jail for killing his dad. Harley may have had little or no schooling, but give him 10 minutes with an art book and he'll stammer out a pretty good definition for impressionism.

That wins the heart of Callie, a married woman with two kids who lives down

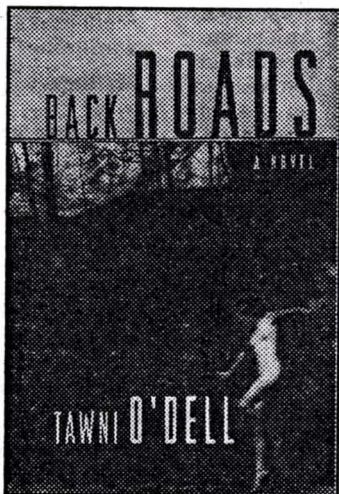
the road.

Trying to raise his three younger sisters and hold down two jobs while squeezing in appointments with a therapist, Harley has his hands full. But being a virgin and having an honest-to-goodness woman let him do things with her, Harley finds the time.

Although Harley's dad beat all of his kids regularly and maybe even molested one of his sisters, the townspeople shun the kids as if they were to blame. Even Harley and his siblings seem more angry at their mom than the father who abused them for so long.

The oldest of Harley's sisters is 16-year-old Amber, who

sleeps with any boy she can get her hands on. Her love-hate but mostly hate relationship with Harley is the best thing in the novel.



Their awkward attempts at understanding, mingled with a vaguely sexual undercurrent, is disturbing and fresh.

Ultimately, though, "Back Roads" relies more on not-so-surprising plot twists than on the complicated people O'Dell has begun to unearth. Angry confrontations, breakdowns during therapy and shocking revelations are all in abundance here. But these moments of melodrama aren't nearly as compelling as the small truths that are scattered throughout this fitfully promising novel.

Leuci off from it forever.

Leuci knows cops — particularly New York City cops. But his new book seems to draw as much inspiration from portrayals in movies and on TV as it does from actual policework.

"Blaze" heroine Nora Riter is far from an average detective. Tough as nails, she's a rising star in the force and drop-dead gorgeous, with hair that falls down to her waist. It's hard to imagine other cops taking her seriously with all that flowing hair, but they clam up when hearing her arrest record.

Based on that, Nora's superior

assigns her to track down a small-time hood named Blaze Longo, a psycho who cuts off the ears of people who owe him money. Nora can't quite figure out why the case is such a

priority. (It turns out her boss is sleeping with a gangster's moll, whose dad was threatened by Blaze.) Plus, she has her own problems.

Nora is getting a divorce from her husband, who bats her around and steals a gun out of her safe-deposit box. Nora's partner is retiring and all his pent-up romantic feelings for her are coming to the surface. Worst of all, she's attracted to an informant named Nicky the Hawk, who comes with a kid he adopted off the streets.

Leuci's prose takes some effort to plod through, but he knows the territory, especially how good cops can be compromised when they ask for favors. And when he reaches for a happy ending, you can't fault Leuci for wanting fiction to work out more satisfyingly than reality.

"Blaze," by Robert Leuci, Avon, 382 pages, \$24.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Robert Leuci was a narcotics detective for 20 years when he blew the whistle on police corruption. His bravery was immortalized in Robert Daley's book "Prince of the City" (later turned into a film, starring Treat Williams). But it was a bitter victory. Defending the integrity of the work he loved ultimately cut

