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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

A World Gone Crazy

Richard J. Lukenda
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Richard J. Lukenda's debut thriller, *A World Gone Crazy*, introduces readers to Zeke Ocean, a forty-eight-year-old New Jerseyite who feels his glory days have passed. Once a top-secret special-ops soldier for the US, he has retired from the military and struggles to pay for dental school and for the small apartment he shares with his girlfriend, Jenna. After sustaining a temporary leg injury, Zeke travels to Florida to beg money from his wealthy Aunt Stella. Unbeknownst to him, forces collude to draw him back into the very life he thought he left behind.

Lukenda has penned a high-octane, globe-trotting, action-packed novel, complete with exotic locales, beautiful women, widespread conspiracies, and envelope-pushing technology. Zeke is a James Bond figure, and while he exudes impressive masculine attractiveness, strength, and combat skills, these factors never overshadow his humanity. This is because Zeke experiences the common emotion of confusion and is, in fact, out of his depth for most of the story. The women he woos, Jenna, Helena, and Carol, all have complex personalities and motivations as well, so they become more than the typical sex kittens.

As the drama unfolds around Zeke, his Aunt Stella, and the women in his life, terrorists—some Cuban, and some Arab—chase one another in search of a deadly gun. While it takes a while for the threads of Zeke's story to connect with the actions of the terrorists, both plotlines move along at a fast pace.

The downside, however, is that it grows tricky to distinguish the villains from one another as they multiply at an alarming rate. That, and many of these bad guys are stereotypical Arab terrorists and anti-Castro revolutionaries. The chapters remain short, like jump-cut scenes within a movie, and at points, the reader may wish the focus would linger longer on Zeke and his adventures than on the terrorists.

In addition, given his background as a former top-secret operative, it takes Zeke far too long to become aware that he is involved in a conspiracy bigger than himself. Apparently, in an effort to make things more exciting, the author tangles his plot too much by making the scope of the dastardly plans that Zeke uncovers reach all the way to the Vatican, and to an elite group of people who are ruling the world.

It would have been pleasurable enough to watch Zeke navigate his relationship with all the women in his life without having him enter into such a far-reaching web of deceit. If readers can hang on for the long stretches in which the focus shifts away from the protagonist, they will find themselves rewarded with a novel about a man who is equal parts super human and simply human, trying to find his way in a world that seems to be falling apart.
JILL ALLEN (October 16, 2012)

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