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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ GENERAL FICTION

Agent of Influence: A Thriller

Russell Hamilton
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The gruesome killing of a prize racehorse in Kentucky in 1973; the murder of two tourists on a Las Vegas roller coaster decades later; the naturalization of Nevada Senator Zach Hardin, whose Egyptian childhood is a closed book: Seemingly random events pile up in this thriller faster than potato chips pouring out of a bag, and before long, the bad guys are in position to deal the US a blow from which it might never recover.

Agent of Influence starts out with a tease, as President-elect Hardin, the horniest president since JFK, encounters a beautiful chestnut-eyed stripper called "Marilyn"—just in time for the Secret Service to ruin all his fun.

But Marilyn's plans are soon altered when the "pre-training exercises" she's performing to test the mettle of new CIA recruits turn into the real thing. As Alex Bryce and his CIA handler Anna Starks, a.k.a. Marilyn, delve into the new president's past, they discover disturbing evidence of Zach's connection to the shadowy "Muslim Brotherhood" and the "True Muslim Caliphate."

Author Russell Hamilton does a good job of presenting believable motivations for all the characters, including the bad guys. Readers can understand why Egyptian nationals like Hussan, for example, might resent having their lands "carved up like pie and divvied out to gluttonous victors who did as they pleased [after World War I]." And why they might want to change things. Readers might not agree with Hussan's ideology, but they will understand how he got there when he says:

> [Your father] realized the truth; the truth that killing Jews was pointless, regardless of how good it made some of our countrymen feel. Hitler learned this the hard way. To truly bring the Muslim faith back to prominence, the entire animal of the West would have to be slaughtered, not just the Jewish parasite invading it.

But an "Agent of Influence"—someone whose political actions and arguments are alleged to serve the interests of a foreign power—can be used wittingly or unwittingly, cooperatively or not, to influence politics and history, and very few in this engrossing novel ever know the full story or the true stakes of the world events they're messing around in.

Hamilton's prose is mostly quick and clean, and if he has a tendency to drop in bits of Middle East history in rather large chunks, at least they're interesting and probably new to most readers. The settings are exotic; the characters serious.

A native of Louisville, Kentucky, Hamilton holds a business degree and has worked mostly in the financial industry. His favorite reading material is espionage and world history, particularly twentieth-century nonfiction. With sixteen years invested in the reading of real-life espionage stories and historical non-fiction of the twentieth century, Hamilton might as well have a PhD. in thrills. This is one roller coaster ride readers won't want to get off.

HOLLY CHASE WILLIAMS (July 1, 2010)

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