Clarion Review

General

Aquarius Falling
Michael J. Tucker
CreateSpace
978-1-4750-4212-2
Five Stars (out of Five)

The cheerful 1960s pop music that weaves its way through *Aquarius Falling* creates a warm, nostalgic feeling. Don't get too comfortable, though. While the Beach Boys soundtrack promises a carefree summer for twenty-one-year-old Tom Delaney as he hits the beach in Ocean City, Maryland, a far more complicated future awaits him in Michael J. Tucker's tightly written page-turner.

Using realistic conversations to establish his characters, Tucker introduces readers to the searchers and seekers of the sixties, like the aptly named Misty Vail, an aspiring astrologist who talks of portentous new moons while simultaneously working the streets to make ends meet. There's also John E. "Jack" Walker, an impulsive wanderer with few plans and fewer scruples, and Wendy Morrison, the quintessential surfer girl. With each new person he meets, Delaney faces decisions about how he wants to live his life.

The learning curve for the naïve former Georgetown University student is steep. Tucker paints Delaney as an orphan raised in institutions that sheltered him from independent decision making. His innocence gets him into plenty of trouble, starting with the bad planning that leads to the loss of his Georgetown scholarship.

Delaney needs the money that work in Ocean City might bring, and Tucker makes it clear through his protagonist's two part-time jobs that he is a hard worker. Still, Delaney gives up respectable hotel work to participate in one illegal money-making scheme after another, each more risky than the last. Delaney shows just enough introspection to indicate he is learning from his mistakes, but not enough to keep him from danger. Readers may find themselves mentally urging him to change direction as his life spirals out of control and into a world of prostitution, drug deals, and Mafia bosses.

Delaney's loss of innocence plays out against the backdrop of the nation's own growing

pains. The Vietnam War is causing controversy, and Delaney worries about the draft. Civil rights demonstrations turn to riots at nearby Maryland State University, and Delaney witnesses discrimination in practice as black families are turned away from beachfront restaurants and hotels. These larger issues echo the ethical struggles in Delaney's own life.

Tucker's dialogue flows easily throughout the novel, wasting little time on unnecessary attributions or long-winded explanations. The characters talk like real people, and their personalities come to life through their words. The quick exchanges enhance the already brisk pace of action in the story as Tucker turns up the tension in each subsequent scene. How Delaney will reconcile his relationships with his newfound friends, as well as what direction he will take at the end of the summer, remains a mystery to the very end, and perhaps beyond. Tucker is at work on a sequel.

Sheila M. Trask