ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

Backazimuth
Mike Smith
CreateSpace
978-1-4515-4935-5
Four Stars (out of Five)

Mike Smith's first novel, *Backazimuth*, is a tidy thriller set in the Arabian Desert. Bill Slade, West Point graduate and combat engineer, is a reformed drunk, with bottle-fueled misadventures scattered along the tracks of a nearly derailed military career. He's assigned to the 24th infantry division, poised on the Saudi-Iraqi border and waiting for Operation Desert Storm, the attack order to liberate Kuwait. Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard lurks across the horizon, which provides danger enough, but Slade has discovered a conspiracy, one which has left a trail of dead bodies leading back to a California military training center.

Major Slade's life is at a crossroads; he is seeking redemption from an unhappy childhood, a devastating revelation at his mother's death, his misfit West Point years, and a floundering military career. Slade is not a sympathetic narrator, and the story is slightly flawed from the beginning, since the seminal change that alters his character occurred before the novel opens.

Backazimuth encompasses forty-eight chapters, many of which are flashbacks to Slade's early career or to incidents that reveal the conspiracy. To differentiate between the settings, the font changes from standard roman, to boldface, then to italics to relate each flashback. The chapters are short, and the story is told in the first-person by Slade.

Somewhat off-putting is the overuse of the phrase "fungus green" to describe images seen through night-vision goggles. The narrative also relies too often on clichés like "heart raced," "drilled into my brain," and "disembodied voice" rather than utilizing original, well-crafted phrases. That's disappointing, considering the author can ratchet up the tension with able action scenes. For example, Smith writes:

> *An artillery barrage couldn't be adequately described. There were simply no words to express the noise, the violence, the blast, the*

> *heat, and the terror. This blast knocked me off my feet and propelled me forward about five meters…Staying where I landed with my face in the dirt, I couldn't feel my body, and I couldn't hear anything.*

Smith's effort is tautly written, and the author's own military experience—he is a West Point graduate and served as a combat engineer officer—makes his work believable, right down to his sardonic descriptions of military "types." Slade describes his battalion commander as one of the "dilettantes and charlatans," who are "more interested in promotion, social climbing, and name dropping than in doing any actual work. You can usually find them at the Officer's Club or the golf course or some congressman's reception."

Readers should be warned. *Backazimuth* ends with only partial resolution. "To be continued" means that readers must wait for *Line of Departure*, the second book in a planned trilogy.

Backazimuth is a page-turner with an action film feel that could easily be transformed into a screenplay.

Gary Presley