Clarion Review

General

Buckminster's Ball
J. A. Zaremski
CreateSpace
978-1-4537-5108-4
Five Stars (out of Five)

Everit Tyshinski wants to die. By gun, accident, heart attack, drowning—he doesn't care how, he just wants it to happen. Life is too hard without the woman he loves.

Tyshinski finds himself operating in a painful version of purgatory: drinking, smoking, eating at McDoogle's, and sleeping most nights in his van. It is this death wish that leads him to take a job coaching soccer at Thomas Paine High School, which serves one of the toughest neighborhoods in North Philadelphia. If ever a place might afford the opportunity to be murdered, this is it, he figures. What happens, though, isn't a death but a rebirth. As he coaches a motley crew of misunderstood kids, Tyshinski finds within himself a strength that once was lost.

J. A. Zaremski writes with a sharp ear for language and a terrific talent for landing his readers deep within the story on every page: "Like a king entering his court to the accompaniment of royal trumpets of announcement, the strong morning sun roused me awake, just another twisted piece of refuse amongst the scattered liquor bottles in various states of empty."

Zaremski's language is complex, brave, and ambitious. In the hands of a writer with less skill, the novel would perhaps not stand up under the sheer power of the vocabulary; plenty of books use difficult words and the result is distracting instead of clarifying. Zaremski weaves the SAT words into his text seamlessly, and he also employs his character to explain why language and words are so important. In this example, Tyshinski tries to rouse his team before a practice: "'Like a relentless siege of meteors against the dark, we will leave only the evanescent residuals of our vapor trails to illuminate the night before disappearing,' I stated proudly. There I was, wading into my maiden coaching foray, and all that could be heard in response to its inaugural articulation was the mid-day grinding of locusts."

While the human characters are all portrayed with depth and solidity, the city of Philadelphia enjoys its own personality. The streets, houses, and empty lots ignite under detailed descriptions and flame into a vibrancy many writers are never able to cast upon their settings. Zaremski writes: "Affixed to the tops of those poles were buzzing street lights that didn't so much illuminate as cast an ominous orange hue on the uncollected garbage commandeering the fissured sidewalk below." Philadelphia is the city that Tyshinski turns to for blissful death, and it is the city that almost fulfills his wish.

By combining the rapid play-by-play excitement of competitive soccer games with the methodical psychological breakdown and buildup of a troubled man, Zaremski manages to deliver a contemplative yet compelling book that lovers of language and sports will enjoy.

Andi Diehn