Clarion Review

Thriller

Burden of the Desert
Justin Huggler
CreateSpace
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Five Stars (out of Five)

"There are saints in Baghdad, but none of them are journalists," Jack Wolfe quips to his fellow reporters while on assignment in Iraq in 2003. That sentence by a key character, along with the admonition from one Iraqi to another to "trust no one," sums up the theme of Justin Huggler's wartime novel, *Burden of the Desert*. A correspondent who covered the war for a British newspaper, Huggler has taken what he saw and felt while on assignment to fill the pages of this massive but fast-moving thriller.

Huggler's principal characters are, like the author, journalists, and for the most part they are a shallow, self-centered bunch. His heroine, Zoe Temple, is the exception, a naive reporter who wants to tell a story that will make a difference and help people. Unfortunately, she, like everyone else in the novel, is caught up in a swirling, seething situation that is quickly spiraling out of control. Arriving in Iraq shortly after the capture of its capital in the summer of 2003, she and the other characters witness and are caught up in the escalating violence of infighting and insurgency, complete with terror bombings, assassinations, kidnappings, beheadings, and accidental massacres of civilians by jumpy soldiers.

The novel chronicles the transformation of Baghdad from the headiness of freedom following Saddam Hussein's fall to a city where, only months later, "fear seemed to huddle in the darkened corners, waiting to ambush anyone who ventured out, as if the shadows were people by the ghosts of those who died." The story also follows the paths taken by a number of other characters, including three Iraqis: Zoe's driver and two men who join the insurgency.

Huggler writes crisply; despite the length of the book, he wastes few words. His descriptions provide just enough detail to feel authentic without being weighed down with filler, and his dialogue is often dramatic and usually right to the point. There are no long lamentations or ponderous pontifications; what soliloquies there are tend to be short and effective. The battle

and terror scenes are brutal and bloody without being sickeningly graphic, and the love scenes tend to be tender rather than titillating. The courtship of Zoe's driver, Mahmoud, a Muslim, and Saara, an Iraqi Christian he met while at university, is particularly well done, as Huggler captures the hesitancy and yearning of a star-crossed pair of lovers.

That Iraq was a mismanaged mess overseen by politicians, officials, soldiers, and others who had no idea what they were doing or getting into comes across very solidly. Huggler pulls no punches in that regard. Rather than launching into lecture, he refreshingly lets his point come across through the story and the experiences of his characters. Those experiences are exciting and terrifying, wondrous and sobering, and there is action and adventure aplenty to keep fans of this genre turning the pages late into the night.

Although a thriller, *Burden of the Desert* is more than just a wild ride with explosions and gunfire. It is also a solid, thoughtful chronicle of the people on all sides who have had to pay the price for politicians' follies in a war gone wrong.

Mark McLaughlin