Clarion Review ★★★★★

Calculus of Death

Joel Spring
Phoenix Books (Nov 30, 2016)
$14.95 (340pp)
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This satirical commentary on the lack of empathy within contemporary society also has a complicated main character.

Joel Spring’s Calculus of Death strikes a satirically violent tone as it deconstructs a deeply flawed and damaged man’s rise through the economic consulting world.

Billy is raised by a neglectful and promiscuous mother, a situation that damages him to the point of complete withdrawal from normal human emotions. He begins to have violent fantasies early in his life that, paired with his razor-sharp intellect, seem to be taking him down the path of a serial killer. But when he does kill, it haunts his dreams.

His path is inexorably changed when he comes upon Ayn Rand’s teachings in college. Based on her philosophy of individualism, Billy attempts to explain himself and the world around him based on economic models of loss and gain, which leads him to a lucrative career in economic consulting and a twisted route of corrupted morality.

The novel is detailed around free enterprise systems, communism, and consumerism, suggesting thorough research and providing an interesting look into how consumerism impacts political decisions. In working to strike a satirical tone, though, the book simplifies concepts and overemphasizes the evil players involved. Its dark and disturbing situations are clearly meant to illustrate a point but are unnecessarily graphic.

The characters in Calculus of Death are not as well developed as the book’s economic concepts. Billy is impossible to relate to, and his reactions to situations are uneven and at times unfathomable. Many of his actions are undoubtedly aimed at making a point about contemporary culture, but his character is not consistent or fleshed-out enough to make the points hit home.

The only other developed character is Rosa, the ex-Stasi member who becomes the only person Billy cares about. However, instead of standing as her own person, she comes off as a female version of Billy. Other supporting characters are little more than sketches, meant to represent types: the money-grabbing developer or the clingy girl who just wants to be loved. Descriptions of characters avoid heavy judgments, though, which allows room for interpretation.

Spanning the main character’s entire life, the book tends to make huge leaps in time that are jarring and disruptive. Dialogue is too expository, often telling where the action should be showing, and rarely sounds natural.

Joel Spring’s Calculus of Death is a satirical commentary on the lack of empathy within contemporary society, with a complicated main character.

ANGELA MCQUAY (March 1, 2017)
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