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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ MYSTERY

Chances: A Novella

Basil L. Brylcreem
The Coyote's Howl
Unknown $0.00 (pp)
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Phoenix-based Eskel “Worth” Worthman is content to be a low-risk private eye, trading in “cameras and skulking and stakeouts”—the tamer side of detection that keeps gas in his Corvette and a roof over his head. But when he takes on a case to track down the culprits behind a brazen daytime robbery attempt, Worth leaves his safe world behind. As the case unravels, Worth soon finds that the culprits dabble in more than just attempted robbery. Tracking down the would-be burglars through a network of secret phone lines, illegal websites, and weapons trafficking, Worth discovers a trail leading from the streets of Phoenix to Arizona ghost-towns and international drug cartels. Worth and his crew of friends find themselves in over their heads and pursuing a mystery far larger than they had imagined.

Basil L. Brylcreem packs a novel’s worth of twists and turns into his slim novella. Chances begins with a lot of action, and Worth encounters many dubious characters as he pursues his suspects. However, the biggest hindrance may not be the robbers, but Worth himself, who often side-tracks the investigation. The narrative slows when the detective takes a break to go shopping, swim a few laps in a pool, play racquetball, reflect upon the merits of classic literature, or race his cherished ‘vette instead of furthering the plot or pursuing the case. At 77 pages, this is a sparse detective tale, yet the length seems too much for this story, which begins to rush to a conclusion at the half-way mark. Sadly, a rollicking, satisfying wrap-up isn’t provided—simply an ending for the book.

“A student of history, however amateur, inevitably falls in love with Arizona,” Worth claims. “The human march to today’s society is all there: the primitive stone culture of the ancient ruins, the farmers and hunters and gatherers and warriors of Native American culture, the artifacts of military government, the mines and the towns and the railroads of the great boom in the copper period around 1900, and the modern high-tech fabrication plants and resorts that call the shots today.” Brylcreem supports his protagonist’s claim, and the best part of this novella is the depth of setting he invokes. As with Chandler’s Los Angles, Arizona becomes a character itself: a multicultural, over-developed, sweltering stage. This nearly counter-balances the noticeable shortcomings, such the hurried ending and the lack of physical descriptions. (FBI agents are described merely as “FBI guys.”) If the care used to create a setting and Worth’s character in the beginning had been sustained and fleshed out throughout the novella, perhaps pushing it to a longer length, the story may have been more satisfying.

“There is nothing actually missing,” Worth concludes of Arizona’s attraction for historians, and the same is true of Changes. It is a fast-paced burn through the hot landscape of Phoenix, complete with dynamic characters and international intrigue. There is nothing actually missing, except a bit of patience on the author’s part. Perhaps the next Brylcreem outing will keep the strong parts of this novel, the setting and voice, and flesh out the areas that are now thin

MICHAEL BEEMAN (July 1, 2010)

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