Clarion Review

General

Change: An Adventure In Life And Afterlife
Simon Oliver
Trafford Publishing
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Life's a bitch and then you die; after that the real difficulties commence. Billy Quick learns this when he makes the acquaintance of a spirit named Phoenix who reaches from the Astral Plane to modern day London armed with a compelling cautionary story. *Change* alternates between two narratives one essentially a frame of the other. The outer tale centers on purported protagonist Billy's stymied attraction to a computer consultant named Tara and her circle of psychic-abled associates. Burned by a bad relationship Tara holds back from new entanglements. Phoenix advises patience and imparts his life-then-death account to Billy through means of trance writing and other forms of communication.

The framed narrative covers Phoenix's fast and loose criminal life as a high-flying drug distributor to the transatlantic hippie counterculture of the '60s and '70s followed by a mercenary misadventure in an African civil war. Between overdoses caused and atrocities committed it's hardly surprising that Phoenix winds up in Hell. Though he finally gains a measure of enlightenment the path forward is through excruciating suffering: Phoenix explains: "I escaped again and was recaptured again many times. I was brutalized […] crucified and fried alive but I was convinced that in the Void I had found a way to change myself." The lower realms of existence are conceptualized with poetic justice—the floor of one is made of spent shell casings and rusted tanks another is a wasteland of useless currency which its craven denizens quarrel to possess.

The sure-footed inner narrative is almost visually three dimensional and more naturally engrossing than the outer framing story with its central figure inevitably overshadowing the live hero. Billy Quick is a talented seafood chef an amiable considerate young man but Phoenix bears close listening as the rarest of beings one who has triumphed over Hell through resolute commitment to a few iridescent memories of his better self. Billy's evolutionary arc is slight and

his sins are pedestrian whereas Phoenix achieves an incredible inspiring reversal which may give hope to those locked in circular patterns of destructive decisions.

The adjective-wealthy prose is vividly descriptive from visceral horrors to saluted beauty of the natural world or the feminine form. No passing bosom goes unmentioned not even the "racey Zeppelins" of Billy's elderly aunt. Intelligent philosophy provokes further speculation and scattered doses of humor provide relief from anecdotes of war and murder. For example the spirit says of the longtime nemesis whom he's battled in multiple realms: "…that solitary hyena liked kids but he could never eat a whole one…" When Billy is frightened by the near proximity of a lion he says "'It registered about 9.5 on the Sphincter Scale…'"

The diversified Simon Oliver is a sculptor a muralist specializing in the trompe-l'oeil method and a channeling medium with previous experience as a television writer a hypnotherapist and a commercial fisherman. *Change* his first novel succeeds in turns at frightening readers toward better ethics and encouraging them to face personal demons with self-critical honesty willpower and if possible the aid of reliable friends.