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Clarion Review ★★★★★ THRILLER

Conclave Conspiracy

Burnham Philbrook
Burnham J Philbrook (Sep 5, 2014)
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This thriller is a must-read for anyone with an interest in the Vatican and its role in the modern world.

Set in the near future when the Catholic Church faces critical and daunting challenges, *Conclave Conspiracy* is both a gripping story of a modernizing world and a reflection on the role of the Holy See. Burnham Philbrook showcases his extensive knowledge on the topic in a story whose freshness reflects the delicate balance of tradition and progress faced by today's church.

Three popes have died in quick succession, leaving the Vatican scrambling to portray a unified front and elect a leader willing to take on the burden of a failing institution. After the longest papal selection conclave in modern history, the cardinals are gridlocked and unable to choose a new leader from among themselves. As the weeks roll on and tensions build, an unexpected name is added to the list of contenders. Jimmy Flahvin is a devoted Catholic, a respected community member, and a powerful international lawyer with the experience required to lead the church away from impending financial collapse. The only problem is, he's an unordained layman, a widower with children, and far too liberal for many in the Vatican hierarchy.

As Pope James I, Flahvin faces a church that is on the brink of bankruptcy, is rocked by shock waves from the priest child abuse scandal, and is suffering a severely declining membership. To save the church and realign its message with that of Christ, James needs to make some dramatic changes that threaten centuries of tradition. But change comes slowly in one of the world's oldest institutions, and not everyone in the Vatican supports the new pope's radical decisions. Now James must face not only the pressures of leading the Catholic Church, but also the dissenting whispers of those who falsely claim to support him.

An enormous amount of research into Vatican procedure and history is immediately evident, and is presented well through Philbrook's crisp, accessible writing style. He includes a level of detail usually overlooked in other novels that instead focus on the prestige and mystery of the Vatican; for instance, the Vatican's reliance on international exchange rates to balance the books, and the difficulty of making procedural changes without a sitting pontiff. The book uses the election of the new pope as a way to thoroughly deconstruct the complex issues faced by the church in recent years, including the celibacy of priests, gay marriage, and even the Vietnam War. While the author's progressive politics show through, each topic is handled delicately, with a full understanding of the complexities of effecting change in a traditionally conservative global organization.

While this level of detail and consideration is one of the book's strongest features, it can also lead to long sections that bog down the narrative with procedural explanations, such as in chapters 2 and 3, which deal extensively with the period of deliberation leading to the selection of the new pope. However, even these sections leave readers with a lot to consider, and their length only reinforces the time and delicacy required in every step the church takes.

Conclave Conspiracy is highly enjoyable, both as an intriguing story of the near future and a lesson on the vast complexities of the world's most prominent religious office. It is a must-read for anyone with an interest in the Vatican

and its role in the modern world.

ERIC ANDERSON (October 10, 2014)

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