Clarion Review

General

Crisis
R.C. Shields
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Three Stars (out of Five)

"I guess I'm going through a crisis of some sort, at least that's what people, friends and foe alike, whisper behind my back when I say or do weird things, which have become my style of late," admits fifty-something Sam Collins.

Life has been generous to the Collins family of Baltimore—Sam, his wife of nearly thirty years, Lisa, and their two grown children. The untimely deaths of two close friends serve as the catalyst for change in his life. Sam has taken early retirement from his job and looks forward to taking it easy by becoming a partner in his neighborhood hangout, Harry's Bar. Then he meets his "soul mate," Donna, a beautiful blonde nurse, under the worst of circumstances.

About halfway through Shields' nearly 500-page tome, Sam and Donna become accidental witnesses to a professional hit. This leads to a mystery involving former high school friends which seems to be inserted into the story almost as an afterthought. Sam discovers that tragedy has impacted the lives of three schoolmates he'd lost touch with over the ensuing years. The tragedies seem more than coincidental, and as Sam struggles to put pieces of the puzzle together he places himself and his loved ones in ever more danger.

These loved ones include: Uncle Anker Hawkins, a retired career diplomat who owns a private estate on the Eastern Shore of Maryland; Eric Lewis, a longtime friend and newspaper columnist for the Sun; Buddy, Sam's brother-in-law and owner of a family restaurant in Little Italy; and Harry Hanrahan, the bar's crotchety owner who, "has a habit of referring to himself in the third person, which can be annoying and endearing at the same time." The endearing portion wears off fairly soon for the reader.

This is R.C. Shields' debut novel. He lives in Pennsylvania and is working on his second novel. Adult readers may enjoy this very adult story: they are presented with innumerable glimpses of Sam and Donna's adventuresome sex life and nearly every character, especially

Sam, uses the F word as part of normal discourse. Awkward tense structures and punctuation occasionally detract from Sam's thoughtful, humorous soliloquy as he searches for meaning in his life with the people he cares about. However, the author hits home runs with sentences like this one: "The bullet entered my back up high, went downward through my lung, waved hello to my heart as it passed within a half inch of it."

Sam is an Everyman who reaches a point in his life and wonders: "I just think I would do things a little different. I'm content with where I'm at now, but at the same time I'm ready to move on, but where is the question."

Robin Farrell Edmunds