



Crooked Lines: A Novel of the Near Future

Jeffrey F. Meyer

IngramElliott (Sep 18, 2020)

Hardcover \$29.99 (290pp)

978-1-952961-00-7

Crooked Lines is a cerebral satirical novel that dwells in a perilous, divisive near future in which a handful of believers band together to make their mark.

Jeffrey F. Meyer's *Crooked Lines* is an incisive cat-and-mouse thriller in which a radical Catholic leader provokes the government.

After a car bomb almost killed him, Bishop Donovan wakes up in 2027 and discovers that he's under surveillance, as ordered by the American president. Agent Reese—whose cover is that he's guarding Donovan, but who is in fact spying—suspects that his target has regained his memories. Out of caution, Donovan pretends that he hasn't. Meanwhile, Catholic higher-ups claim that Donovan is a heretic because of his controversial talks about the Virgin Mary. This intriguing present splices with rearward gazing chapters that detail the critical events that led up to the attack.

Before he was attacked, Donovan and several religious leaders joined UNESCO's Project 28 to brainstorm about the world's climate change problems and increasing authoritarian governments. The attack on Donovan led to the project's disbandment. In the present, Donovan goes into hiding, posing as homeless and still determined to deliver the project's message. On the streets, he meets a former preacher and pessimist, Molly, and a Chinese Buddhist, Monk, who join his quest.

Conspiratorial, adventurous, and sometimes uneven, this back-and-forth plot makes far-fetched scenarios exciting. Waning democracy is a potent theme, though it's abstract within the story. Much of the focus is on Donovan's immediate survival. Sections about Project 28 are filled with secrecy and explanatory conversations, rendering its project members pensive, concerned founts of information. Sideways references to contemporary political situations arise in mini-speeches, references to conservatism, and a time frame that spans the run-up to a US presidential election, all of which have an element of satire.

Characters vary in their depth. Donovan's background is explored through memories, and between his theological questioning and the realization that living as a bishop wasn't authentic, he's a fascinating everyman who's placed in rare circumstances. Molly, a dreadlocked voice of reason, is a rewarding sidekick, though Monk is more of a caricature—a Shaolin master whose skills break loose in showy encounters. Monk's English is deliberate and broken, his Asian features are described as "simian," and his instincts are "animalian." In a story that lampoons outdated views—even including a man in a "red cap" that alludes to MAGA—this rendering is out of place.

Donovan and his misfit companions travel to Scotland in hopes of giving a speech; theirs is a parable-like race against Agent Reese's attempts to track them. The book's sudden conclusion is both surprising and fitting.

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KAREN RIGBY (November 4, 2020)

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