Clarion Review

Thriller

Decatur's Dig
CreateSpace
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Four Stars (out of Five)

“History without legend would be pretty drab stuff,” or so the marine archaeologist and heroine in Ray M. Schultze’s *Decatur’s Dig* tells the president of Portugal after uncovering a priceless artifact on the Lisbon waterfront. “We Portuguese luxuriate in the past,” responds the president. “It’s all about history.”

This passion for the past is the driving argument of *Decatur’s Dig*, a novel that combines a treasure hunt worthy of an *Indiana Jones* or *National Treasure* movie with themes involving mobsters, the illegal black market in stolen antiquities, and ancient secret societies. Schultze tosses in a healthy dollop of steamy romance-novel sex, a dash of soap-opera-style, daddy-issue angst, and a pair of treatises on the price and evils of empire and the persecution of the Iberian Jews.

Fortunately, Schultze does not hit his readers with all of this at once. The first one-hundred pages of the novel are tightly written, narrowly focused, and, at times, exciting and riveting. The adventures of his heroine, Dr. Catherine Decatur, make for an enjoyable and entertaining read, even with the little sideshows that Schultze stages on the periphery.

Unfortunately, by mid-book, the author starts opening even more sideshows, each of them adding layer upon layer to the plot. By page two hundred his characters are juggling up to three priceless artifacts, the fate of which involves international smugglers, organized crime, corrupt officials, and a secret, centuries-old vigilante group known as The Order. As they start the final third of the book, readers may tire of tracking so many characters and subplots, and some may even sigh with relief when all of the pieces are wrapped up by book’s end.

Adventure/suspense novels are usually best as beach reads, and the first half of the book fits that bill very nicely. The action is well-paced, and the main character, Catherine, is a brilliant but refreshingly flawed protagonist. The supporting cast is strong and colorful. Notable among them is a mobster named Barbosa; most of the people who met him, writes Schultze,

“experienced an ill-defined discomfort … akin to rubbing up against something rough, oily, irritating to the skin and probably toxic.”

While Barbosa and his corrupt boss figure prominently in the book, many of Schultze’s characters are similarly memorable even if their appearance is brief. One such character is Elston Raines, a wealthy art collector who is obsessed, notes the author, with “being able to touch something that belonged to any great figure in history,” as it would forge a “connection, a sense of that person’s larger-than-life power and accomplishment.”

Schultze has done his homework on Portugal, its history and legends. There is more than enough material here for two books, and while *Decatur’s Dig* is enjoyable, it would probably have been better if Schultze had written it as a series, rather than including everything into one thick volume.

“History is everything,” the president of Portugal reminds the heroine at book’s end, but it is often better digested in small bites.

Mark McLaughlin