



Degrees of Guilt

Jim Bennett

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Degrees of Guilt by Jim Bennett is a novel of military adventure, political intrigue, and courtroom drama that challenges conventional notions of guilt and innocence. Along the way, the book shines a light on human nature at its best and worst. As the title suggests, the novel demonstrates that even the most catastrophic events are seldom black-and-white where the human heart is concerned.

Decorated sharpshooter and Canadian special ops veteran Billy Wheeler suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. While hunting seals in the icy waters off Newfoundland, he shoots down a helicopter, killing four. The case against him seems cut-and-dried ... but is it?

Degrees of Guilt lays out the questions of who is guilty, and of what, with a matter-of-fact, almost documentary writing style that heightens the drama of personal relationships and action scenes. Details of the nonprofit industry and of military, courtroom, and media operations have a ring of truth that propels the narrative. Backstories bring even the minor characters to life, giving the novel intimacy and depth.

For a story suggesting that guilt and innocence may occur in shades of gray, many of the characters seem to be straightforwardly good or bad. Glenn, the nonprofit director who chartered the doomed helicopter, appears to have no positive characteristics at all. He's so irredeemably bad, however, there's a certain fascination in watching him scheme his way through and exploit the nonprofit industry.

Protagonist Wheeler is more multidimensional. Though obviously a "good guy," Wheeler finds himself in combat situations where he must do questionable things—actions that take a toll on his humanity. These scenes are among the book's most compelling, even verging at times on disturbing. Wheeler's resulting battle with post-traumatic stress disorder, and the damage it does to those he loves, makes his character believable as well as sympathetic.

Glenn and Wheeler could do with a bit of physical description. While well defined by dialogue and action, what they look like doesn't get much attention, whereas many of the minor characters do get such description. At times, the writing lapses into telling rather than showing, spelling out how characters feel instead of letting dialogue and action reveal those emotions naturally.

Nevertheless, tight plotting, compelling subject matter, and plenty of physical and emotional fireworks keep the novel on track. Pacing is fast throughout. Dialogue is to the point, advancing the story and defining the characters. Action scenes, including gritty accounts of hand-to-hand combat, are vivid.

From the calamitous action of its opening pages, *Degrees of Guilt* moves relentlessly through mazes of human motivation to its final courtroom verdict, and in doing so, delivers an entertaining and satisfying read.

GARY HENRY (December 9, 2016)

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