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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ MYSTERY

Dial 999

H. L. Raven
Reality Asylum Books
Unknown $0.00 (pp)
978-0-9718673-1-4

Passion for the punk music scene in London, circa 1977, shimmers throughout H.L. Raven's debut novel, *Dial 999*. Discovering who might be behind a series of heroin overdoses mowing down friends of young American transplant, Jon Hunter, propels this fast-driving mystery.

Raven adeptly captures the pace of Hunter's lifestyle as he and his friends engage in tooth-popping fights with Teddy Boys outside of clubs and concerts, and spar with police detectives at crime scenes. The reader is immediately swept up into this punk world. Raven leads with an arresting scene depicting our hero mopping up his post-fight wounds in a friend's bathroom, while another mate searches for a suitable vein for her heroin fix, her arm propped up at just the right angle on the toilet bowl. The images are vivid, the language raw, and the scene crystallizes the mood of this time and place.

A familiarity with British slang will help the reader enjoy this novel more fully. From the very title (999 is the UK police emergency hotline, as 911 is in the US), the book is peppered with Britishisms. Pop culture mavens will delight in the many music references. Hunter works along with his reggae-loving friend, Paul, in a record stall, organizing record album displays and putting together artwork and articles for his music zine. In the midst of all this intensity, the author provides a hilarious scene in which a detective gets a punk makeover to go undercover at an X-Ray Spex concert.

Raven's virtuosity in conjuring up vivid scenes and metaphors is captured in this gem: "My cigarette was now an oxygen tank, and I inhaled desperately." Unfortunately, her imaginative skills don't quite carry over to the development of her characters. The author does not explain much about each character aside from what they might do for a living, and maybe some identifying physical trait, e.g., one policeman chews pens, Hunter's girlfriend has freckles and dyed hair. Even with the great description of scenes and atmosphere, it is hard to care what happens to such thinly described characters.

A cozy mystery this is not, but if one wants to travel back in time to feel the edgy intensity of London at the height of the punk scene, this book is pitch perfect. Raven's treatment of pogo dancing, binge drinking, drugging, barbed wire wristlets, frenetic concert scenes, violence, and inventive sex will take the riveted reader there in short order. The author is planning another book in the series, and if she can develop the portraits of her characters more fully, it will be worthy of attention.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (November 9, 2010)

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