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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ GENERAL FICTION

Forty Feet Below

Johnny Rockenstire
iUniverse (June 2010)
Unknown $20.95 (348pp)
978-1-4401-8216-7

There's plenty to hold the reader's interest in *Forty Feet Below*, a mystery-action-adventure novel by Johnny Rockenstire. For anyone intrigued by the conspiracy theories of *The Da Vinci Code* and the legend of the Knights Templar as popularized in the film National Treasure, this book will prove fascinating. A team of treasure hunters discover that they are being hotly pursued by shadowy religious extremists bent on thwarting their surprising discovery about Christopher Columbus. Both sides desperately race to find a long-lost treasure containing dark secrets that could destroy the foundations of the Catholic Church. Well-paced flow, unflagging action, and a grand conspiracy theory that dictates the plot combine to make Rockenstire's thriller an entertaining read.

Right from the start, readers are swept into the high-pitched action when a bizarre and deadly terrorist attack occurs at a Columbus Day parade and a revenge killing follows days later. It soon becomes apparent that a number of extremist religious orders are involved. While the FBI tries vainly to put the pieces of the puzzle together to ascertain who is responsible, a team of treasure hunters halfway around the world unwittingly draws the attention of the evil extremists.

With its assortment of young heroic characters, the book will appeal to young adult readers. The team members demonstrate a wide array of skill sets with which readers can identify and the ingenuity to help solve some of the riddles regarding the legendary Knights Templar—especially the surprising mystery of why Columbus chose to explore the New World. However, it is hard to believe that some of the team members are so masterful and accomplished at such a young age; greater characterization and an explanation of how each member developed their talents would have helped. Nonetheless, Rockenstire deftly facilitates the reader in relating to the characters. When April's sister Amber expresses disbelief during one of the team's daring quests, for example, April replies, "You're not around normal people, sister. You're in the world of the uncertain, the world of adventurers."

Rockenstire's imagination and appetite for high-action combat scenes come as no surprise since he is a corporal in the US Marine Corps. The author enriches the story by weaving a complex and creative tale and taking the reader to many exotic locations.

The author is also to be commended for his research into the life of Columbus and the holy military orders in the Catholic Church. One might be tempted to label the author's theories as far-fetched, but Ruggero Marino's recent scholarly tome, Christopher Columbus: The Last Templar, lends credence to Rockenstire's theory that Columbus was connected to the Knights Templar and that he possibly sailed to the New World to find a place to build the New Jerusalem. Curious readers will likely want to delve into the mysteries of the Knights Templar and the life of Christopher Columbus—which is exactly what the author hopes they will do.

GARY KLINGA (July 22, 2010)

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