

Head On: NYPD Takes On ISIS

John Monaghan

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John Monaghan's *Head On: NYPD Takes On ISIS* is an engaging thriller that's grounded in the real world and packed with pulse-pounding action. The riveting book pits New York City's Finest against a terrorist cell of suicide bombers.

Head On centers on New York Police Department captain Jimmy Gallagher, who followed his father onto the force, as he investigates why Islamic terrorists are meeting up with the Russian mafia in Brooklyn's Brighton Beach neighborhood.

He gets called off the case by the FBI and then suspended by a supervisor. The ruthless manager of the ISIS terrorist cells in New York City plans a high-profile attack while hundreds of thousands of bystanders watch the historic passing of ships by the Statue of Liberty in a ceremony slated to include a massive fireworks display. On his own and faced with a stop-at-nothing adversary out of his weight class, Gallagher must race to foil the plot and save countless innocent lives.

Though set firmly in the contemporary world and dealing with weighty geopolitical forces, the novel breezes along thanks to gifted storytelling. While it is plot driven, the book excels at characterization, making even its bad guys three-dimensional people with actual motives.

Head On shines most when it is detailing the inner workings of the police department, such as what it's like in a detective's bullpen or how investigators act after finding a corpse. The book rings with authenticity, including when describing crime scenes, office politics, or a tragic attempt to collar a suspect in a bodega robbery. A sprinkling of police acronyms and jargon give the narrator's voice verisimilitude. Staccato, matter-of-fact dialogue feels based in experience.

The novel is less convincing when focusing on the terrorists behind the scenes, including such well-worn beats as a villain who can't tolerate an underling's incompetence and who has a stony, silent, mysteriously scarred enforcer to carry out his merciless bidding.

The ending is anticlimactic despite its high stakes. It feels out of place with the rest of the novel. The majority of the story is a rip-roaring and engaging read, a novel that could establish its lead within a series.

A book so captivating it could be consumed in a single sitting, *Head On* is escapist and entertaining.

JOSEPH S. PETE (November 30, 2017)

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