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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ THRILLER

In the Company of Wolves: Thinning the Herd

James Michael Larranaga
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Quin Lighthorn is not what he appears to be. A half-Sioux, half-Irish college student, Quin, the protagonist in James Michael Larranaga's thriller, *In the Company of Wolves*, is dressed to kill in a secondhand Armani suit and silk tie for his internship with Safe Haven, a company in the gruesome business of viatical settlements: it offers an advance against life insurance benefits to policyholders with terminal illnesses.

Larranaga does a bang-up job creating an ominous opening to his thriller, with solid descriptions of scenes and characters. On his first day of work at Safe Haven, Quin drives his rusty Chevy to the corporate offices located in a converted McMansion near Minneapolis. There, Quin is greeted by a grizzled corporate officer wielding a shotgun.

Quin is shown around the office before he heads out with his new boss, Harvard MBA Ben Moretti, to greet a client. The client has been stopped by the police for speeding, and, with a few misdirected words, the boss teases the client into displaying a pistol. The result? The client is shot dead by the traffic officer.

There's a dark side to the viatical business. Safe Haven needs money to close a ten million dollar viatical settlement, and Ben and his colleagues are whacking clients to bring in the money. Simultaneously, Ben is financing political shenanigans by Minnesota's boy wonder, US Senator Paul Almquist. The conspiracy has been aided by the sheriff and the female deputy who shot the client. What the bad guys don't know is that Quin, a professional bounty hunter, is supposedly working undercover for the FBI.

The mystery soon takes a double twist. Quin is seeing a psychiatrist for "a severe case of introjection … he becomes overly empathetic to people around him," and his FBI contact, Spencer Lunde, is actually a corporate spy for Safe Haven's prime competitor, Benson & White.

Organized into day/time segments rather than chapters, the story moves quickly. Each segment opens with a meditation on wolf pack behavior: "The mood of a wolf pack varies greatly, and tensions may rise by mid-winter as food runs low." However, the author occasionally goes overboard in attempting to link various characters to wolf-pack behavior.

Larranaga's plot is somewhat convoluted, and Quin's hallucinations sometimes provoke confusion about who is real and who is imagined. Frustratingly, he often packs dialogue from two characters into one paragraph, which can also be confusing, since readers often expect to find dialog from a different character in a new paragraph.

However, the author successfully creates characters who don't think there's anything wrong with betting on the impending deaths of terminally ill patients. In some instances, the bad guys are better drawn than Quin, whose character sometimes strains believability.

With *In the Company of Wolves*, Larranga offers an exciting and interesting premise and the promise of a series in the making.

GARY PRESLEY (February 27, 2013)

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