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CLARION REVIEW ★★☆☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

Islam's Fire

Joseph M. Pujals
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Novels, like any art form, are collaborations: both writer and reader must trust each other. The reader trusts the writer to create a world populated by multidimensional characters who can be empathized with. The writer trusts the reader to engage fully with the experience. As James Joyce put it, “the demand that I make of my reader is that he should devote his whole life to reading my works.” Most writers are content with a mere couple of uninterrupted hours.

In his debut novel, *Islam’s Fire*, Joseph M. Pujals mostly fails to build a level of trust between himself and the reader.

Capitalizing on post-9/11 fears, *Islam’s Fire* follows the investigation into the theft of hundreds of millions of dollars from the World Bank by an Islamic terrorist sect, the eponymous Islam’s Fire. Relying on fear-based stereotypes, Pujals presents a unidimensional organization using college campuses as fertile grounds for cherry picking recruits, and Al Jazeera as a mouthpiece to broadcast radical, anti-American messages.

The heroes, Carl Lukin and his fiancée, Ann Curlin, are equally unbelievable. Both are impossibly perfect: rock-hard abs for him and noteworthy breasts for her, fluent command of several languages, and god-like resources to tap whenever a touch of *deus ex machina* is needed to move the plot along.

Not only do these issues prevent readers from buying into the story, they obscure what the author does well. With twenty-eight years of experience in computer security, Pujals identifies flaws in the World Bank’s computer system with a succinct grace that draws upon his deep understanding of the subject: “Testing uses a set of specifically developed test data as well as live production data. After the testing is complete, Department managers must approve the changes and test results before any changes are placed in the production stream… .After all approvals have been received only one production manager has the authority and password to update the production team.”

In two paragraphs, Pujals reveals a vulnerability only someone intimately involved with computer securities could have seen. And he does it in a way that makes it understandable to even his least tech-savvy reader.

In the end, however, the greatest weakness in *Islam’s Fire* is not the reader’s inability to empathize with the characters or buy into Pujals world. Rather, it’s Pujals’ inability to trust the strength of his own narrative to carry the plot along. As if the author were looking over his shoulder to ensure his reader was with him, he recaps the entire story every time a new character is introduced□at least once a chapter and sometimes more.

It’s a disconcerting effect. One that ultimately undermines any chance of building a collaborative reader-writer relationship.

JOSEPH THOMPSON (February 16, 2012)

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