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CLARION REVIEW ★★☆☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

Kiddie Cruise

Ron Pettit
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Frank White a troubled dental technician in the Navy is at the center of Ron Pettit's novel *Kiddie Cruise*. This character has a history of rebellion and his current assignment (barracks detail) is a punishment for past clashes with the military. White thankfully only has a few months before his "kiddie cruise" enlistment is over.

What drives this novel is not White's character or his search for redemption but the plot: Chief Kotch a wounded World War II hero is a serial killer. His protégé once accidentally killed two sailors and this event disgraces Kotch eventually pushing him over the edge. Unfortunately for Frank White Chief Kotch believes him to be "Dentalman Reilly" the protégé who caused his failures and there's nothing worse than a military man with a grudge. Pettit is a skilled storyteller and his book is not a typical piece of good and evil. He shows the cause of Kotch's derangement and does an admirable job of humanizing his killer and showing the reasons behind people's actions.

However the author seems a bit too intent on making his protagonist come off as a bad boy with a heart of gold: the character is too much of an archetype one the reader already knows (he was kicked out of high school has trouble obeying orders in the Navy and had a disapproving mother). The relationships and interactions between characters seem stiff and sometimes unbelievable (for example White encounters and forgives the man who knocked up his girlfriend) but the novel's suspense is fine-tuned and deliberate. Pettit definitely knows how to craft a rollercoaster of a novel.

Pettit is at his best when describing the looks of people rather than their emotions. The novelist's talent shows when he skillfully articulates the complex look of a Navy uniform or zeroes in on how a person walks or smiles. He also knows when to shift scene thoughts or scenarios. This novel may not win any major literary prizes but it is interesting in ways that other novels are not.
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