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CLARION REVIEW ★★☆☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

Last Passage to Santiago

John F. Rooney
Senneff House Publishers (January 2009)
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Sex espionage penguins and tango feature in John F. Rooney's fifth novel which deals with a life-changing trip to South America.

The author lavishes as much detail on locations including Buenos Aires Santiago Montevideo Punta Arenas the Falklands and a small town in Patagonia as he does on his plot and the book occasionally reads more like a travel guide than a novel. A lot of this local color seems culled from what tourists might actually see on a tour and it seems likely that Rooney has taken the trip he describes.

Stephie an NSA analyst and her husband Ben a journalist decide to take a cruise around the tip of South America. Ben books a room for his girlfriend Ann on the ship and the hotels on their itinerary intending to visit her for sex at his convenience. He promises her that he will leave Stephie after this final trip. Stephie for her part becomes concerned that they are being followed.

Despite his stumbling prose and inability to express nuance Rooney has created a believable female protagonist. Apart from her willingness to settle for such a useless husband for so long Stephie's history preferences and affections ring true. Other highlights include amusing (if often reductionist) character sketches of cruise ship staff and people Stephie encounters in the Falklands. There is also a charming but saccharine interlude where Doctor Lambert the biologist flirts with Stephie in order to enlist her assistance with his simplistic but informative presentation on the lives of penguins: "'After we prepare our burrow we'll have twenty whole seconds of bliss for the actual breeding so don't blink mon cheri. It may be the best twenty seconds of euphoria that you'll ever have.' Stephie blushed deeply. Lambert let out a series of ungodly brays."

Unfortunately Rooney limps his way through clumsy lurid and almost clinical sex scenes between Ann and Ben—one of which is marred by an unfortunate misspelling: "Ann moved her body persuasively and skillfully against his and soon she was thrilled with multiple organisms (sic)."

The espionage subplot feels tacked-on providing slender explanation for Stephie's abduction or the persistent surveillance that worries her through multiple countries. Rooney's handling of the only homosexual character in his novel is also unfortunate; in books written by men lesbians frequently fall in love with straight women and Rooney follows this tiresome pattern.

Although Stephanie Ably-Ranier is a comparatively realistic female protagonist awkward syntax simplistic language and poor handling of the espionage subplot make this novel less than successful.
(August 21, 2009)

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