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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ THRILLER

Laura Denfer: Prison

Anne-Marie Bernard
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When readers meet accused international spy Laura Denfer, they will have many questions. Why is this French woman languishing in a North Korean prison? Is the newest prisoner trying to save her, or is he setting her up for further torture by her captors? Is the British military responsible for her rescue, her continued detention, or both? Author Anne-Marie Bernard winds and unravels such mysteries in this complex thriller.

Bernard presents her protagonist's story in the first person, allowing the reader to learn only what Laura is willing to reveal. Laura is a reluctant storyteller, more comfortable interrogating others than explaining herself. As such, the pieces of the puzzle take some time to fall into place.

Much of Laura's tale comes out in lengthy exchanges with the British team that has her sequestered aboard a ship for the bulk of the novel. Bernard employs an unusual convention in her dialogue, setting off each character's words with only a beginning dash rather than quotation marks. The punctuation, along with conspicuously absent attributions, creates a detached quality that suggests interrogation more than friendly conversation. While the effect is appropriate given the characters' basic mistrust of one another, prolonged dialogue becomes confusing, particularly when more than two people are speaking.

The dialogue is broken up with graphic scenes depicting attempted abductions, double-crossings, and explosions reminiscent of a Hollywood thriller. Laura is not just a victim here, but proves more than capable with expert evasive maneuvers and an unflinching willingness to fire guns at point-blank range. Bernard describes torture methods and gunshot wounds with cinematic clarity in a series of short, violent scenes. She also holds little back in her depiction of sex, allowing pleasure and pain to coexist in Laura's explicit memories of sexual abuse and her frequent romantic encounters aboard the British ship.

Paced like a spy movie, the story alternates between personal moments revealed in Laura's dreams and memories, and dramatic fight scenes that keep the action moving. Formatting problems and questionable word choices slow down the momentum, however. It is difficult to stay invested in the action when victims are "trashing" about in their restraints and commanders are issuing two-hundred-page "rapports" on the mission. Cleaning up these misused words and the occasional mid-sentence hyphen would restore the reader's attention to the story.

Figuring out what actually happened to Laura Denfer, and what she intends to happen next, requires a reader's full concentration. The twists and turns are many, and few of the characters remain who they seem to be at first glance. It is likely that more will be revealed in future volumes, as this book ends with an unresolved interruption that hints at an action-filled future for Laura and her compatriots.

SHEILA M. TRASK (November 28, 2012)

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