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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

Looking For J.C.

John D. Fitzmorris
John Fitzmorris
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John Fitzmorris's *Looking for J.C.* chronicles a series of convoluted journeys. On the one hand it tracks middle-aged Dan McDevitt's reluctant search for his mentor, Father J.C. McAlese, in the deepest jungles of Magdalena. J.C. is trying to convert Panteguarani Indians by showing them glimpses of a comet through his telescope. On the other, it follows McDevitt's and others' quests for their destinies. Basically an action adventure novel, its drama and suspense are disrupted by too many typos and annoying line breaks to overlook. And the narrative, although built on an interesting premise, could be shortened by pruning a backstory digression or two. Nevertheless, there is a vitality to Fitzmorris's writing that sweeps one past the rough spots to see how, as one character says, "[W]e tailor our enemies to our own images."

A disillusioned and dispirited Vietnam vet, McDevitt reluctantly accompanies oil consortium LOGCO security chief, Red Prendergast, to Magdalena to retrieve swindled funds from government officials. For McDevitt, the trip also provides an opportunity to search for J.C. They helicopter into a hotbed of warring factions, an emerging civil war, and a ransom plot.

As the story progresses through numerous cutbacks and crossovers, family relationships emerge between the characters, and McDevitt is assailed with Vietnam memories. Present and former connections are depicted between fleeing company executives, government officials on the run, wartime scavengers, and members of Hitler's wartime regime. One of the latter, Magdalena's dictator, Adolpho Streggemann, a war criminal in hiding, has become a raving, racist lunatic who captures children to extract their blood for horrific experiments to find a life-extending elixir. Streggemann has also kidnapped a female American agricultural researcher, Caitlin Kane, and her doctor companion. He demands that J.C. arrange for a $2 million ransom and that J.C. bring his telescope to him. He knew J.C. many years ago when they studied for the priesthood, and he wants to view the passing comet which he believes holds insights into his destiny for world domination.

The novel's settings include a city under siege, Streggemann's dungeon hideaway, and the "lost city of Cibola" in the forested mountains of Magdalena. Various members of the Panteguarani nation appear, including a mysterious Lady of the Mountain, a chieftain named Tu-Macha, a Peace Officer called Hummingbird, and a masked teenaged whelp, Jaguar Man. All play significant roles in bolstering or challenging McDevitt's mistaken identity as a reincarnated, red-bearded "Red Warrior, the Messiah of the Mountain."

Fitzmorris has developed his characters well, even minor ones, and he artfully depicts in an entertaining way how "[W]e tailor our enemies to our own images." Several thrilling episodes keep up the pace, and the ending is classically satisfying.
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