



Massacre at Sirte

Pierce Kelley

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There aren't many subjects tougher to tackle than the continuing threat of terrorism and the religious beliefs that fuel it, but Pierce Kelley triumphs with *Massacre at Sirte*, a simple but searing tale of "what if."

Kelley set out to write about the persecution of Christians, he explains in the book's epilogue, so when twenty-one Coptic Christian migrant workers from Egypt were kidnapped and executed by ISIS in Sirte, Libya, in February 2015, he had the event to pin his tale upon. The "what if" in this scenario: What if one of the men had survived? What story would he tell? So, in Kelley's reimagining of this real-life event, twenty-one men captured becomes twenty-two, as the youngest of the group, a character he names Mekhaeil Zacharias, is drawn into the action but is spared rather than executed. "Go and tell the world what you have seen," his young ISIS captor says upon his release, and this statement takes on great meaning for young Mekhaeil.

For such a simple writing style, Kelley's prose is effective and vivid. You're there, uncomfortably chained with the others on the floor in this pitch-dark, dingy, smelly building with no food or water, no toilet. You're hearing each voice sound out into the darkness in an organized and respectful hypothetical discussion among the men about their lives and their beliefs. One at a time they speak, and Mekhaeil only listens, not feeling he has anything to contribute at such a young age, only wanting to learn from the others. And learn he does. Kelley guides the teen Copt through a gentle evolution of thought pattern and confidence. His growing sense of purpose in the kidnapping's aftermath is predictable but is sweet and satisfying nonetheless.

These men are fully convinced, as they're all trapped there together, that they're going to die, so they confess their sins and reaffirm their beliefs. As it gets down to brass tacks in these moments, their most treasured items are each other's thoughts. Kelley shows them embracing their humanity by sharing and valuing their views. The goal of the more self-assured among them is to prepare each man to meet his maker in the morning with a greater understanding of history and why they have been captured. Questions are confronted: Why do these Muslims hate Christians so much? Should they convert to Islam to live, if given the choice, or die for Christ as he died for them?

Kelley uses the captives' respectful discussion to parallel an overarching point, which he then sums up in his afterword: "Since it is extremely unlikely that Christians will convince Muslims, Jews, or any other religious groups that they are wrong and Christianity is the right answer, or vice versa, the real issue to be addressed is how to find a way to prevent men from killing other men in the name of their god."

There is a strong sense of despair during the captivity part of the story, and one of Kelley's most effective tools is when the men wonder if their country, or another country like the United States, will come to save them. That's a "no," and it's a painful one from this perspective. For those who don't understand why these sorts of terrorist acts happen, *Massacre at Sirte*—particularly with its extensive history lesson—is a most illuminating read.

BILLIE RAE BATES (November 4, 2016)

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