

Natural Born Banker

J. Jashanmal

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A wonderful blend of mystifying characters within a twisted narrative, Jashanmal's debut novel is absolutely fascinating from cover to cover, entertaining to the very end.

Natural Born Banker centers on the separate lives of middle-aged twin brothers Hugo and Maxwell Baume. J. Jashanmal's debut novel is a riveting story replete with themes of greed, power, scandal, and sibling rivalry.

Wealthy heirs to their frail and senile grandfather, mogul Lord Baume, barrister Hugo and banker Maxwell find themselves in a convoluted set of circumstances. While Hugo struggles with the onslaught of media attention resulting from a best-selling defamatory biography of Lord Baume, Maxwell is caught unawares in Dubai when he learns that not only has the London-based International Capital Investment Corporation (ICIC), of which he is the head, gone belly up, but also that he is blamed for the bank's demise.

Jashanmal has set this third-person narrative in 2008, during the global financial crisis. The novel, which is divided into three parts, opens with a disconcerting culminating moment that quickly reverts to the events leading up to it. Part 1 carefully juxtaposes the disparate lives of the twins with their ailing grandfather. The story line in part 2 swiftly picks up the pace and becomes fairly elaborate as more characters enter into the mix when ICIC closes, other situations go awry, and investigations begin. Most poignant are the contrasting scenes of poverty that Maxwell experiences and observes overseas while his twin is cushioned in opulence. Jashanmal adeptly builds the narrative by alternating concurrent scenes of prominent characters, and deftly draws it to a close in part 3.

The featured characters are the twins. Hugo, who is married with children, takes his prestigious barrister position seriously; he is all business. Maxwell is single and wants to keep it that way. He's quite happy with his playboy lifestyle until he discovers that there is a warrant out for his arrest. On the run from the authorities as he attempts to return home, Maxwell's scenes include a varied and interesting cast of characters.

Much of Jashanmal's writing style is centered on twisting scenes that are juxtaposed between chapters, and, in particular, portraying his characters in a mixed light. The variety of three-dimensional characters, each drawn with varying degrees of malice and greed, make it difficult to distinguish the protagonists from the antagonists until the end of the book. This question of who is good and who is not is one of Jashanmal's most unique tools used to keep the narrative moving. There is Lord Baume, labeled a pecuniary tyrant by the media but addressed only in terms of endearment by his immediate household. And Nyvina, Hugo's wife, who seems to have eyes for Maxwell. Even more perplexing is Janis Silko, the New York author who penned Lord Baume's notorious biography. Her negative stance toward the old mogul appears to wane when she enters a scandalous relationship with Hugo.

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ANITA LOCK (August 11, 2014)

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