ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

Never Had a Chance to Say Goodbye
A. Mohit
CreateSpace
978-1-4752-2526-6
Three Stars (out of Five)

"Welcome to Dubai, the dream city of every jobseeker from the subcontinent." That is the greeting delivered to one of the key characters of this novel, which the author says "commingles" the facts of his personal experiences with some fiction. How much of what happens to the group of young Indian and Bangladeshi engineers hired to work on a dredging project and power station in the United Arab Emirates in the late 1970s is true and how much is made up is for the author alone to know, but in its details and emotions, most of it rings true.

Mohit's novel opens with a sweet, faintly humorous, and slightly romantic jaunt by a young married couple who by accident stumble upon a palace deep in the jungle. They are treated like honored royal guests, and the fairy tale continues as the wealthy host offers the husband, Osman, a young engineer, a dream job in the Emirates.

Osman, however, is but one in a group of men to be lured from the subcontinent to the Gulf. Another, Krishna, will see the darker, sadder side of this process, as he shares a crowded plane ride with mostly illiterate char force workers being shuttled en masse to the Emirates.

Mohit obviously knows about the life of foreign workers in the Gulf States, and about the hierarchical structure there that sets Arabs, Europeans, and Asians (of varying racial hues, educational and class backgrounds, and national origin) apart. The stories of these men, and their wives who come to live with them far from home, are very human and very believable. Their experiences, concerns, and emotions are very identifiable for anyone who has lived and worked outside their native country.

Unfortunately, these stories are not terribly exciting. These are day-to-day, going-to-work, and getting-on-with-life stories. Mohit does inject a crisis at the power station in an attempt to infuse the novel with some tension, but even that is about nothing more serious than preventing a power outage and the failure of desalination plants. There is an airplane crash and tragedy in the story, to which the title alludes, and while that, too, may be more fact than fiction, the event only adds a layer of sadness to an otherwise rather mundane story.

Mohit is a decent casual writer. His prose is not forced and his descriptions are not overdone. The opening scenes of Osman and his wife in the jungle, and of a group picnic trip to a mountainous area, are both very colorful and convey the author's sense of wonder and excitement at visiting these locales.

As this is something of a memoir drawn from the real life of rather average people, there are no villains. The characters are heroes, but only in the sense of working men and women getting on with the duties and difficulties and joys of daily life. As it is set in the 1970s, the story is a bit dated and bereft of modern tensions and references. It does, however, have some historical and sociological value, as *Never Had a Chance to Say Goodbye* provides a window into the creation and construction of the nation-city of Abu Dhabi.

Mark McLaughlin