Clarion Review

General

No Vacancy
Bob Erlich
Robert N. Erlich
978-0-9669749-4-2
Four Stars (out of Five)

Poor Eli Rose can't catch a break. Just when he gets himself out of one jam, the plucky hero of Bob Erlich's 1960s-era crime and espionage novel *No Vacancy* gets caught up in another scheme. Try as he might, Eli is never the master of his own fate; when he fulfills one demand from the mob, he finds himself drawn into an even worse situation with the CIA.

If *No Vacancy* were only about the misadventures of young Eli Rose in Miami, Cuba, and Costa Rica, it would be a fairly standard spy/crime/action-hero beach read. One character, however, makes it rise out of the sand-and-surf genre: Vicente Amaron.

Mentor, protector, teacher, sidekick, surrogate father figure, and *éminence grise* to Eli, "Mr. Slick," as Vicente is first introduced, is a charming, funny, noble, solid, and mysterious gem of a character. A key figure in the anti-Castro Cuban exile movement, with ties to both the Miami Jewish mob and the CIA, Vicente is more than just the second banana in this book's dynamic duo. Vicente drives the action, and he does so with style and grace.

Erlich forgoes the cheap fractured Spanglish to which so many authors and script writers resort. The speech patterns are authentic, written in a way that can only happen when an author takes the time to get to know and listen to people of the class and caliber represented by Vicente Amaron.

This is a "guy's" book. As Ian Fleming did with his original James Bond stories, Erlich has his characters act in a solid, believable manner that is appropriate to the time period. He takes care to get the details, tone, setting, and feel of the 1960s without pandering to the cheap seats. The result is a story that feels authentic, with characters that feel real.

No Vacancy starts as a coming-of-age story. It then segues effortlessly into an action novel populated by a "desperate group of individuals playing a desperate game" of espionage, sabotage, greed, revenge, and personal and Cold War politics. There are fist fights, gun battles,

jungle skirmishes, and sea-going chases; plenty to keep an action-genre junkie happy. The book is short on female characters, but the three Erlich creates are wonderful. For example: “He couldn’t possibly explain it to his friends from other parts of the U.S., who had never experienced the sensory overload of a *Latina* in full battle dress—a mini skirt short as a bathing suit, tight, low-cut blouse, and long dark hair and eyes to match, a killer combination for the unsuspecting *gringo* who failed to see the oncoming trap.”

That is, however, about as salacious as Erlich gets. In writing about sex, as in writing about violence, Erlich is a master of restraint, demonstrating an old-school sensitivity meant to tease, not pander. The result is a solid, enjoyable, and fun read. Best of all, *No Vacancy* is the first book in a trilogy, one that is off to a very promising start.

Mark G. McLaughlin