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Clarion Review ★★★☆☆ THRILLER

One Shoe and the Golden Medallion

Russel Frederick Ahrens
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“We will transform you into virtuous human beings,” claims eight-year-old Novia, an impoverished Haitian child who reaches enlightenment in Russel Frederick Ahrens’s *One Shoe and the Golden Medallion*.

When Maury Levet, a brilliant French philosophy student, is invited to save humanity from its current corruption, he can’t wait to begin. However, he soon suspects that the Society for Human Virtues, a “vast, secret and saintly organization,” is nothing more than a dangerous and reckless experiment. In order to prevent him from leaking information, the society demotes him to a field agent, where he undergoes a process that endows him with “heavenly dimensions” and “Christ-like proportions.” Only his correct use of his new powers will result in mankind’s salvation; if he chooses anything other than virtue, humanity is doomed.

While this story reads like a murder mystery, offering an abundance of clues for the reader to interpret, its main purpose is to engage the reader in an introspective debate on virtues, values, and the consequences of ignorance. Truths from the Bible, Native American tribes, and other ideas mingle together with quotes from Ayn Rand—which are sprinkled throughout the action scenes—as Maury questions his beliefs and choices.

Unfortunately, the enlightened ideas here are as conflicted and clumsy as the actions of one of the main characters, Henry Wainwright, whose lofty desire to save humanity tests the cliché, “the end justifies the means.” Henry is supposed to be a man whose refined virtues come from studying the lives and writings of John Adams, Rand, and Geronimo. As much as he uses his great wealth for a noble cause—helping third-world countries out of their poverty—he commits multiple murders in order to achieve his aims. For a man who claims the highest attributes of humanity, he has no problem smoking illegal Cuban cigars, drinking entire bottles of alcohol in order to “ease the conversation,” or eliminating one of his peers for daring to disagree with him. He also selects his “Virtue Agents” and “Virtue Warriors” from unlikely sources: Angela Hartman has sex on her first date in order to entice a “Virtue Warrior” to discover the sacred tattoo on her left breast, and Alexandra Anderson attends a wild beach party where she’s surrounded by orgies and drugs. For people filled with “virtue,” Ahrens’s characters seem to lack restraint.

Granted, such dichotomies invite the reader to consider the concept of “truth” and “goodness” more deeply. But many of the author’s premises are flawed. For example, the goal of his great experiment is to instantly endow children with knowledge and virtue, which will supposedly make them the sort of citizens who can break the cycle of poverty. Yet life offers no such instant fix, and the idea is an extreme stretch, even in fiction.

Still, fans of science fiction, fantasy, philosophy, spiritual matters, and mysteries will find plenty to digest in *One Shoe and the Golden Medallion*.

EMILY ASAD (February 21, 2013)

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