Clarion Review

General

Pack Leader Down
Nathan B. Tracy
CreateSpace
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Three Stars (out of Five)

Any dog lover can tell you: every dog is different. They all have their own personalities, their own strengths and weaknesses, their own loyalties. Bart Casey, the protagonist in *Pack Leader Down*, would be one to know. He's owned seventeen dogs over his life, all of which arrive to help him when he gets caught in the cross hairs of a psychotic drug dealer who wants him dead.

Casey thought a sailing trip down to the Florida Keys would be fun and relaxing, the perfect antidote to his job as a surveyor and insurance adjuster. Plus, a local bad guy, King, has gotten the idea that Casey is a potential problem. Unfortunately, King follows Casey and his two dogs south and manages to shoot Casey in the head.

Luckily, Casey's pack of devoted followers appear to help. All the dogs he's ever loved appear by his side. Some lick his head wound, others guard the perimeter, a couple figure out how to get food into Casey's mouth during his more lucid moments, and another, Buster, acts as commander in chief. Once King arrives to find Casey's body and finish off his evil job, the dogs put their heads together to defeat the criminal without betraying their foremost job of helping their leader. Meanwhile, Casey fades in and out of consciousness while holding lengthy conversations with God in a place between life and death.

Combining crime drama with science fiction and Christian literature, Tracy fills the gaps between combat scenes with discussions of morality, wisdom and religion. The two elements – war and religion – offset each other awkwardly and the characters – both human and canine – rarely react to the plot in an organic manner. Instead the action and the dialogue feel stiff and inauthentic, and the plot acts as an obvious structure on which to hang the moral lessons.

A subtler hand at combining religious teaching with fiction may have been more effective. Instead we find lines like Buster's speech: "Being domesticated has made it real hard,' continued Buster, 'because it goes against the innermost dictates of the ages. When He is with

us it is easy because we slip into His way because He is the Leader. But now, on our own it pulls me in the opposite direction. I want to be like him but my paradigm is the pack, and not goodness and mercy." Not only are the humans subject to moral lessons, the dogs struggle, too, with just as obvious a lack of poetry.

Readers searching for religious lessons embedded in an action story may appreciate this book, but the writing isn't quite strong enough to attract and hold readers just looking for a good story.

Andi Diehn