Clarion Review

Mystery

Point and Shoot
G. D. Baum
BookSurge
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Five Stars (out of Five)

> *At forty years old, I could still be stubborn and make mistakes. The difference was I knew I was making them and went forward anyway.*

In the North Jersey shadow of the George Washington Bridge, former cop Lock Tourmaline is struggling to hold together a semblance of a personal life. His girlfriend's cancer treatments aren't working and a cokehead ex-wife has vowed to sleep with fifty other cops, but still demands regular rescuing. His personality evokes something besides good will from others. Lock's small martial arts school hasn't proven as lucrative as expected, so he pulls bodyguard duty at a sit-down of rival Korean-American crime families. When a shooter slips by, he has a lot more to worry about than doomed, disappointed women and existential anomic drift.

Lock's reliable rock since childhood is his Shaolin Kempo Karate teacher, an Oprah fan employed as a bondage club bouncer who goes by the name of Grandfather. This invincible enigma serves a similar purpose as the Bubba Rogowski character from Dennis Lehane's novels, except Grandfather's arsenal is his total mastery of the more mystical martial arts, rather than a literal arsenal. Of all Baum's characters, only he operates beyond the rules of realism, downing attackers from a distance with invisible energy waves. All the story's other players exhibit reasonable failings.

The nimble dialogue includes dry humor as a defense mechanism when the situation is spinning askew and smart-alecky quips during intervals of low tension: [Pauline:] "You need to make the distinction between toying with the fringes of sexuality and violence, as opposed to actually engaging in sexual violence." [Lock:] "The first one is better?"

Point and Shoot is as much a study of compromised people in states of distraction and

irrationality as it is an action novel. In a place where no adult is morally pristine, the author handles the repeated theme of disdain for the helper with a reflective intelligence. Unappreciated gambles and sacrifices are part and parcel of this book: “I want to be the guy who does the heavy lifting for those around me who cant, even those who have utter contempt for me.”

Interplay between North Jersey’s ethnic communities is rather interesting but too briefly visited. The inner dynamics of Korean-American crime organizations are somewhat under-explored. Trouble has been taken to elucidate the strategies of successful physical attacks; depictions of martial arts are far from cartoonish. Explanations of fight details, although obviously expert, could be pared down modestly in future outings without diminishing the readers’ understanding.

The author, now a Tai Chi instructor, was once nationally ranked in Shaolin Kempo. His writing training comes from Sarah Lawrence College. Although *Point and Shoot* is Baum’s first published novel, he avoids rookie mistakes and presents readers with a high caliber, tightly woven story. There is no doubt a sequel is in the works. Considering Baum’s depth and handle on human complexity, it should be just as worthy of attention.