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Project Egypt: A Politically Incorrect View

Mr. Pat
Patrick Roelle
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Construction workers and project managers in the United States may think they have it rough sometimes, but compared to their counterparts in Egypt, their jobs are a walk in the park. For Americans, doing any kind of business in most of the Middle East requires a sublime amount of patience. Delays in shipments, language barriers, cultural barriers, arguments among key players, calamitous traffic—all of these problems and many others are the daily reality of operations in Cairo.

American Mr. Pat readily admits that his stores of patience began to deplete soon after he entered the city. He discovers the Egyptian way of processing immigrants at the airport: “When, after forty-five minutes, I had not moved an inch and new arrivals kept crowding in ahead of me, what little *patience* I had left dissolved and I resigned myself to following the example of the other passengers. I did some pushing and shoving of my own…” A year-long contract as project director in Egypt seemed like a good way to wait out the statute of limitations on his trouble with the IRS, but the job he originally thought would be easy proves to be a headache as the projected completion date moves further and further into the future.

To make his professional life more bearable, Pat takes a couple of fishing trips to the Red Sea and travels to a few tourist destinations. During these excursions, Pat notices the abject poverty that much of the population endures and becomes uncomfortably aware of the great rift between those with money and those without. The willful blindness on the part of those in power leads him to question his own role in the impoverishment of lower class people.

The majority of the narrative focuses with tedious detail on the building project and the constant frustrating setbacks, but Pat displays more talent when he writes about the poverty that touches him so deeply. He might have done well to shift the concern of the book towards his observations of Egyptian street life.

A couple of other issues will keep readers from fully appreciating Pat’s experiences as an expatriate in Egypt. Verb tenses shift between past and present; this, in addition to other grammatical errors, interrupts the flow. Also, Pat tends to repeat phrases to the point they lose whatever humor they may have originally harbored, such as his reference to the sitcom *Three’s Company* in describing his living situation with two female roommates.

The rich and the poor societies of Egypt and their emotional effect on a visiting American could be a deeply moving subject for a memoir. Pat writes, “It was impossible for me to accept the plight of the multitudes for what it was. When I reflect on it, I am sometimes reluctant to relate life as I saw it, because in telling it, it becomes real.” His reservations are fear, are valid perhaps, but they ultimately prevent him from producing a better book.
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