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CLARION REVIEW ★★☆☆☆ THRILLER

Rendezvous in Baghdad

Ben Sheldon
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Fast-paced thriller with unique cultural voice pairs personal stakes with international tension.

Ben Sheldon's novel *Rendezvous in Baghdad* is a slim volume that tells the story of Sami Yusuf, who is on a quest to restore honor to his family.

As a child, Sami was molested by a Catholic priest, Father Paul Rogan. Now as an adult, Sami faces his own father's illness and Rogan's new role—pope. The story opens with Sami and his lover, Luke, watching television coverage of the next pope's election. Both had been molested by Rogan earlier in life.

The narrative has familiar elements in the examination of sexual abuse of boys within the Catholic Church: shame about what happened, silence of both the victims and the Church, and the potential relationship between homosexuality of the perpetrator and the victim. Sami is a member of the US Air Force, so the military's stance on homosexuality is also a familiar theme. Sheldon gives the book unique qualities by spreading the plot's events across the globe—most prominently San Francisco and Baghdad. Sami is an Iraqi-American, adding a unique cultural voice and tension to the backdrop of traveling to a US-occupied Iraq.

Throughout the book, the high personal stakes for Sami and Luke are coupled with rising stakes on an international level—including an Al Qaeda plan to execute the US President. Sheldon's narrative pace is quite fast, accomplishing a huge volume of plot in forty-six short chapters and about two-hundred pages. To accomplish this, Sheldon relies heavily on summary, and as a result, readers will often feel that the action is distant rather than like they're right in the thick of things.

While the story is intriguing, some grammar and word use problems prove distracting. Excessive use of commas makes the text a bit choppy, for example, "A groan went up, as a plume of smoke puffed out of the stack. It was black, telling the world that no pope was elected, with the cardinals' ballots, that just went ablaze in the conclave's fireplace." Also, dialogue tags often work too hard at originality and description instead of simply letting the reader draw conclusions from the character's words. For example, Sheldon writes, "'Why do you think I'm in San Francisco?' Sami fidgeted." Overuse of adjectives and adverbs also hinder readers from drawing their own conclusions: "Nostalgically, Sami recalled buying *Dragula* from City Lights book store."

While the novel is not sexually graphic, it does contain frank discussion of sexuality that may make some readers uncomfortable—like the fact that being on the bottom in homosexual intercourse is "a deadly male no-no, in Muslim culture." The text also uses the f-word in a sexual context. Most readers, though, will find that Sheldon limits these elements to places where they're needed to explain or add realistic features to the book.

Overall, *Rendezvous in Baghdad*, aimed at readers of high stakes international intrigue, falls short of the depth of writing needed to stand out in its genre.

MELISSA WUSKE (July 10, 2013)

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