

Requiem for the Phoenix

Skip Allen

iUniverse (Aug 21, 2006)

Softcover \$25.95 (474pp)

978-0-595-40319-6

This action-packed thriller features a highly developed cast of characters.

Hidden agendas are enmeshed in *Requiem for the Phoenix*, Skip Allen's intelligent political thriller. Matt and Annie Garret, undercover members of the US government's top-secret Phoenix Task Force and key players in *Out of the Ashes* (2004), return for another adventure. A mystic link between the two characters ups the intrigue.

Matt and Annie rejoin the task force as it pursues a deadly international plot involving high explosives and biological weapons. The Garrets, their colleagues, and the conspirators are spread across the world, from England to Russia, Costa Rica to Afghanistan, Florida to the US Midwest.

A large, diverse cast—including presidents and other high-ranking world leaders, rookie jihadists, al-Qaida operatives, CIA agents, and microbiologists—are on various sides of escalating international tensions. Looming is a potential, major terrorist attack on the Midwest. The size of the cast realistically shows the intricacy and reach of modern terrorist plots. As the story progresses, Allen systematically and effectively eliminates lesser characters, bringing into focus those who most matter to the resolution. Even so, too much space is devoted to the personal backgrounds of minor characters, especially since most of them are expendable. The story generally clips along, but it's intermittently slowed by this level of detail. A little less development of the minor characters might have improved the pace, without compromising the overall plot.

The relationships of the primary characters are plausible and mature. Allen resists the urge to involve characters in romantic trysts that don't advance the overarching plot. The minor characters that remain are well developed; even the cold-blooded murderers are human beings, sometimes feeling troubled and guilty over their actions.

Typical of a good spy novel, those who appear to be on the same side do not always share the same loyalties or agendas. There are double agents. There are old personal and political scores to settle. Fanatical beliefs lead some characters to defy protocols and to topple plans they are purportedly behind. And it's a US presidential election year, rife with agendas, vendettas, and payoffs.

The incorporation of technology is savvy. Allen weaves a modern tale of espionage in which characters, using the latest communication tools, often know what the other side is about to do. And they often know that the other side knows. It comes down to outsmarting the enemy by covertly changing course, which lends suspense. Though intense, the action is skillfully restrained to feel plausible. It's broken up with just the right amount of cultural interludes. Characters pause to enjoy an ethnic meal or a day of sightseeing. They engage in family life, and there are flashbacks to childhood events that shaped their adult motivations and destinies.

The book is well edited, and it has an appealing cover design.

Requiem for the Phoenix is action-packed, well-woven recommended reading, especially for the politically minded. It will leave readers wondering how safe they are in the post-9/11 era, and how much their government is really telling

them.

KARYN SAEMANN (May 7, 2014)

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