Clarion Review

Literary

Searching for Shackleton
Kenneth Finkelstein
FriesenPress
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Three Stars (out of Five)

Every character has something to say in Shackleton's search for meaning in the universe.

Kenneth Finkelstein's debut novel, *Searching for Shackleton*, is a dialogue-saturated exploration of selfish preoccupations that devolves into a whirlwind of neuroses. Its self-effacing and chatty host of characters make this book an alternately humorous and frustrating read.

The story centers on Sam Shackleton, a man in midlife crisis who's battling both a failed marriage and a bout of existentialism. Through a series of dialogues that border on soliloquies, Sam launches a search for meaning.

His quest may be doomed to fail from the outset: those from whom he seeks answers prove as cerebral and talkative as he is, and their counselings never move far beyond self-interest. "Does she think of anyone but herself?" Sam's lover asks of her mother in the midst of a delivery that stretches for pages. The question may be well applied to all those around Sam, and to Sam himself.

Indeed, these characters tend to pontificate in place of conversing: Sam on consumerism and the rudderlessness of society, his friend Elise on the idiocy of those who purchase her art, and Sam's wife, Amy, and lover, Nina, on his romantic successes and failures, often in the same breath. While some facets of their speech are rendered perfectly—Elise's French accent comes across beautifully—other choices in diction straddle a line between the thoughtful and the unreal. "Society is in the business of murdering souls!" Elise declares dramatically, in a moment that works far better than Amy's "locket of emptiness … the idyllic stillness that is our relationship."

Sam's libido helps little. Between conversations, he finds himself trapped, against his mind's will, in complex sexual situations. Even these don't satisfy him for long, though—he indulges, but is always left feeling empty and disconnected. The author does a strong job of capturing contemporary social isolation, as even characters who declare their love with verve on one page are bound to leave their lovers in distress on the next.

Shackelton's neuroses and preoccupations, detailed in this stream-of-consciousness manner, may evoke Woody Allen for some readers, though the ultimate reward for his searching—the revelation that the search is the purpose—affords the audience an unexpected hint of hope. By the novel's end, Shackleton's story, though no closer to being resolved, becomes a curiously, if tenuously, endearing one.

Finkelstein's pages are garrulous and philosophical, and in their wide array manage to both exhaust and entertain. The situations in which Shackleton finds himself often border on absurd, and those with whom he finds himself trapped are a frequently unlikeable bunch. But there's an underlying charm that will secure reader attention, even through the lengthiest of monologues.

Michelle Anne Schingler