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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ GENERAL FICTION

Siam: A Voyage

Steven M. Webb
Noble Woods Press (November 2009)
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Leon Rose has a problem with his past: It's not his. A city planning commissioner in modern Oregon, Leon finds himself overwhelmed by firsthand memories of trench warfare in World War I. He soon discovers a past life as a British soldier, a life in which he loved and lost a staunch pacifist, Jenny. Both Jenny and the grim details of his experiences on the front lines haunt Leon as he tries to figure out the purpose of these visions. Why is he, a man whose greatest battle is a mayoral race against the charismatic autocrat Jim House, experiencing such memories? Why does House have similar WWI flashbacks? Steven M. Webb's *Siam* sets Leon and House on a collision course as they try to unravel the mysteries of their pasts.

Born in London, raised in Sydney, and now settled in Oregon, Webb takes on his first novel without fault. The modern sections, told from a U.S. citizen's point of view, contain appropriate idioms, while the WWI sections, from a British perspective, ring true as well.

Siam takes a little while to get going, but when it does, it roars ahead with full steam. Webb either was a planning commissioner in a previous life or he has done his research thoroughly. He enlivens the minutiae of Leon's job with a true sense of urgency. Leon and House wrangle over which site in the town they wish to offer Exacting, a tech company that the town is wooing. This conflict, the center of which contains the nitty-gritty of 100-year flood lines and water tables, remains interesting and engaging, even to a non-technical audience. Webb displays a detailed knowledge of town politics, but his brisk, workmanlike style never allows the novel to seem dull.

Webb alternates his story between the mundanity of Leon's mayoral race against House and the lurid memories of warfare that the two experience. Here too Webb shows a sure hand. Descriptions of the mud and misery of trench fighting immerse the reader in another time. Simultaneously, Webb draws the central character of Jenny, Leon's beloved from the past, with deftness and detail so that she is more than just a symbol or an ideal. While both sections of the novel are well done, the WWI segments outstrip the modern ones in pace and passion.

As a mystery thick with historical fact and emotional resonance, *Siam*, with its strong characters and realistic presentation, may attract readers who are not usually into stories of time travel or historical fiction. History buffs, WWI enthusiasts and people who like romantic love stories will also enjoy *Siam.*
(October 6, 2009)

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