

Skyscrapers

Jill Wilson Brennan

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Skyscrapers is a satisfying, and often surprising, work of crime fiction.

Jill Wilson Brennan's novel, *Skyscrapers*, is a fast-paced tale of corporate intrigue that weaves complicated family dynamics and social commentary into its mix. The book is compulsively readable, offering narrative gems among its quick twists and turns.

Vern Webb, an unrelenting CEO with a spotty past, is introduced first among the novel's many complicated characters, and remains its most prominent protagonist throughout. As the story opens, he's a bundle of nerves, both harried by a medical diagnosis and plagued by the sins of earlier days. But Vern soon has much bigger problems to reckon with, as that selfsame past produces a few demons ready for revenge.

A nefarious plot to overthrow Webb's not-entirely-innocent business dealings unfolds, even as trouble arises at home. Kidnappings, shootings, and corporate turnovers all happen in quick succession, introducing an element of surprise from the particulars of even anticipated upheavals.

Brennan's prose sometimes drifts into pot-boiler territory. The opening paragraph, in which Webb's expressions fluctuate dramatically as he sits at his desk, is an unfortunately positioned example of an overset stage.

Characters are sometimes burdened by weighty names, as with the Torquemada family, the late-nicknamed MystIQ, or the villain LaRue; "Webb" suggests Vern's past too heavily, and "Archer" is made to be an ironic evocation of Cupid's bows. The work is further burdened with occasional excesses of detail, including multiple rare maladies, improbable media attention, and too convenient romantic wrap-ups, all of which distract from the excitement of the bloody corporate coup at the novel's center.

Still, these deviations fail to fully undermine the novel's pace, and fascinating schemes remain a significant draw. Brennan's characters are complex, and their individual fates are always left in flux. Even the most valiant of the cast find their flaws exposed, and the story is appreciable for its lack of easy heroes.

While Vern winds his way toward just desserts, his once-foe Ellie Smith encounters the same nemeses, though they prompt her, instead, toward an ethical make-over. Glimpses at layered backstories, particularly within the Torquemada family, will leave readers craving more.

Lines such as "Alex ran his candroid; Vern Jr. ran their Mom. That was the virtual reality in the Webb house," and "the papers seemed thin, white, irrelevant—part of a bygone reality" add depth and purpose to mundane situations, more than making up for rarer narrative flaws. The interplays between the disparate fates of ruthless crime lords and noble single mothers lead to interesting questions of personal morality, and the availability of personal salvation.

The combination of intelligent diction and complex criminal situations should encourage investment, particularly as characters battle their way toward unlikely redemption. *Skyscrapers* is a satisfying, and often surprising, work of crime

fiction.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (December 16, 2014)

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