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Clarion Review ★★★★★ GENERAL FICTION

Smoke in the Wind

Tony May
FriesenPress (Sep 27, 2012)
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Tony May writes in language as crude and dirty as the oil his characters pump. Though the prose and sentiments in his novel about oil workers in the last quarter of the twentieth century are anything but politically correct, May has faithfully rendered the mood, banter, and experiences of hard men working an even harder job.

Bubba Cottonmill, Gnarly Tooth, Bangkok Bob, California Ken, and other characters come across as so real that few readers will realize *Smoke in the Wind* is not a memoir. May, like his characters, also worked in the energy industry in Alaska, Thailand, Indonesia, and Kuwait, where he helped fight the oil fires set by that “Wacky Iraqi” (as he calls Saddam Hussein) in the 1991 Gulf War.

These men work hard and play hard, risking their lives and health in frigid North Slope wastelands, steamy Southeast Asian jungles, and broiling Arab deserts. Their perils are compounded by corrupt cops, spear-chucking aborigines, and the jealous boyfriends, pimps, and angry neighbors of the prostitutes they sleep with. Sex for hire is a big part of this world and May does not sugarcoat this or any other unsavory aspect.

May’s writing is not perfect: There are a few minor typos, an occasional failure of capitalization, and one or two questionable spellings of foreign words. His writing is at times choppy, yet none of this detracts from the feel of the book. In some ways these little failings give it an authenticity that a more polished writer might diminish by cleaning up.

Readers who look beyond the cursing and the fornicating (and May uses the far less polite “f” word) will catch more than a glimpse of the harsh world in which these men work. Neither companies nor countries show them any kindness or loyalty, and even their fellow coworkers cannot always be trusted. Serious injury and death are part of their fourteen- to sixteen-hour daily grind, as is loneliness and an inability to settle down for long. May brilliantly and authentically captures this gold rush-like lifestyle and presents it devoid of any romance. The author makes it clear that this is a life few are fit for, and any who contemplate a career in this field should first be made to sit down and read his book.

Smoke in the Wind is very much what would once have been considered “a man’s book,” the kind of rough and tumble sexed-up novel that would have been serialized in adventure magazines of a bygone era. While these magazines went out of style (and publication) in the mid-seventies, men like Tony May and his characters continued on with their knuckle-brawling, booze-guzzling, and death-defying lives. This book is packed with all of that and more, and is presented without apology, regret, or remorse. As the main character is often reminded, “ain’t no sympathy in the oil patch, Bubba.”

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (December 3, 2012)

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