

Talking to Her Pillow

Jonathan Hewitt

CreateSpace (February 2010)

Softcover \$10.00 (123pp)

978-1-4392-4497-5

In this roller coaster ride of a novel, the first from author Jonathan Hewitt, Francis Dale-Blenkinsop leaves high society life in England for international business dealings, the mafia underworld, and espionage work with the Italian authorities. Along the way, he learns winemaking in France, begins a business seeding clouds to end destructive hail storms, falls in love, changes his identity, and trains for an elite squad in the Italian Carabinieri. All of these experiences converge when Francis finds himself on the wrong side of the mafia and is drawn into a web of danger and intrigue.

"[Francis] turned back the tissue paper, and there, lying on a bed of white cotton wool, cold, still and menacing, was a short, black automatic pistol, with two clips of ammunition," Hewitt writes. Francis's problems with the mafia prove truly compelling. These action sequences keep readers moving through the story, but the writing often turns passive and, at times, plods with flat characters and misguided attempts at erudition.

Although the concept of this story is solid, there are other issues that mar the work. The author's voice changes throughout—from ostentatious to colloquial and from third to first person. And while some aspects of the plot are compelling, such as the idea of a businessman turned spy, others are unbelievable. For instance, it is hard to believe that one man could be so adept at winemaking, international business, and espionage. Occasionally, the story elements seem disconnected. Beyond this, the book feels as if it doesn't know if it wants to be a spy novel, a character-driven story, a romance, or something else.

Moments of strong, creative writing do glimmer from time to time, as when Hewitt writes, "Despair gripped him and slithered its clammy tentacles all over his body and down his legs." The end of the book leaves readers with a fascinating twist.

Talking to Her Pillow will interest those who enjoy a story of international intrigue in mysteries or spy novels. It will also draw those who appreciate travel tales, since the settings are prominent throughout the book. However, readers expecting a pleasant path of reading may find themselves feeling trapped in a disappointing cul-de-sac as they wait for the book to become exceptional. A ladder is lowered halfway through the book, when the intrigue kicks in, but it arrives too late.

DIANE GARDNER (July 1, 2010)

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