Clarion Review

Thriller

The Accidental Agent
Madhav Gokhlay
Trafford
978-1-4669-2928-9
Three Stars (out of Five)

Freshman author Madhav Gokhlay is to be congratulated for concocting a solid, tense, and quite believable political thriller involving rogue CIA operatives, industrial espionage, a dirty bomb, terrorists, and a Pakistani general who may or may not be willing to sacrifice his own career to stop a war. Weaving together all of these diverse threads and more into a complicated, yet comprehensible and, at times, exciting tale is not easy for any writer; for an author to do it so well on his first outing is a welcome surprise.

The Accidental Agent is not a masterpiece of the genre, but it is nicely done. Both its characters and its plot seem real. Although Gokhlay's young, Indian-American computer genius, Siddarth Joshi, is the character of the title, and ostensibly the story's hero, he is not the strongest or the most memorable member of the rather extensive cast. That honor goes to Iqbal Chaudhry, a general in Pakistan's notorious intelligence service, the ISI. Chaudhry is extremely well developed, with a dark, brooding demeanor that makes him human and compelling. In much of the novel, it is unclear whether he is a hero or a villain. Trying to figure out if he is good or evil is what will keep readers turning the pages of *The Accidental Agent*.

Much of the story is set in India's equivalent of California's Silicon Valley, but most of the plot takes place in Washington, DC, either at CIA headquarters or in the offices and playgrounds of sleazy lobbyists and the businessmen they blackmail and corrupt. Much of the book is more talk than action, and there are so many characters who quickly come and go that a dramatis personae (the literary equivalent of a scorecard) would have been useful.

The author has his characters act and talk like real people, and he avoids giving them any lengthy soliloquies to espouse or explain their motives or actions. Several characters do lapse into Urdu (a language used in Pakistan and Afghanistan) now and then, and while a translation would have helped readers over that hurdle, somehow the gist of what they are saying gets

through.

There is a romantic subplot, some chase scenes, a little bit of gunplay, and some of the technology that makes techno-thrillers thrilling. Gokhlay does give into the lure of tidying things up with an epilogue, in which he explains what happens to almost every character after the story reaches its climax. This is neither necessary nor particularly well done, especially as it seems a rushed afterthought.

The Accidental Agent is not a great book, but it is a good book, especially for a first-time author.

Mark McLaughlin