

The Balkan Secret Conspiracy

Barbara Shenouda

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The world seems forever in danger of succumbing to an evil madman. In *The Balkan Secret Conspiracy* author Barbara Shenouda explores the effects of one woman's tragic past on her comfortable present and follows her on a journey that culminates in the discovery of a plot to resurrect Adolf Hitler using supernatural forces.

Zlata Pierce has lived much of her adult life buoyed by the cozy pleasures of her husband children and successful career. Nobody knows that her childhood was marked by death violence and the frigid temperatures of Yugoslavia. A visit from an old neighbor reopens the question of her brother's death and leads her to suspect he was mistakenly killed on orders from deep within the Third Reich.

Eventually Zlata and her group of heroes including her husband her psychic and a forensic expert travel to Toronto to hunt down documents which they believe provide proof that Nazi forces infiltrated Balkan countries and staked neighboring populations against each other during WWII. There they find supernatural forces hard at work and a more sinister scheme than they had anticipated.

The author's greatest strength lies in her ability to propel the plot forward towards a dramatic conclusion. However major weaknesses in the narrative make it difficult for readers to suspend their disbelief and fall willing victim to the book's story.

The characters for example rarely earn their epiphanies. Rather they arrive at sweeping conclusions through hurried extrapolation that leaves the reader reeling from sudden jumps in logic. For instance Zlata introduces the idea of a supernatural plot this way: "To me it sounds like there is something more unearthly involved here. I mean I don't believe in spirits ghosts and ghouls but what I know is that other people do and when those beliefs become a bit crazy they take it overboard. I think that this might be one of those times." No evidence of supernatural over zealotry is available to the reader before this.

Setting is another area the author neglects. The first line hints at a book rich in sensual detail: "It was cold bitterly cold." However the rest of the novel fails to follow suit and descriptions are brief and formulaic if they exist at all. When Jane the forensic pathologist climbs into a dumpster to check on a suspicious suit bag there's no mention of the look feel or smell of the dumpster. The characters are well supplied with descriptive details; applying the same focus to the world around them would have done much to convince and engage readers.

This book also needs better editing. Verb inconsistencies erroneously capitalized words randomly italicized sections and fallible details get in the way of true enjoyment.

Despite its problems *The Balkan Conspiracy* does offer readers a competent peek into a horrifying scenario. Barbara Shenouda has a rich imagination; hopefully she will work at honing her craft and her next novel will be a more thrilling experience.

ANDI DIEHN (October 9, 2007)

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