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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ SPIRITUAL

The Best of All Possible Worlds

B. Steven Verney
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Set in Amherst, Massachusetts, in the 1970s and 80s when Eastern spiritual teachings and philosophies were just beginning to take hold in the West, B. Steven Verney's *The Best of All Possible Worlds* is the story of Sam O'Connor, a young philosophy student and PhD candidate whose encounter with the teachings of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi transform his life, and almost lead to his death.

A personal invitation from the Maharishi to study Transcendental Meditation with him leads to a challenge that is to change the course of Sam's life and catapult him into a prominent position on the Amherst faculty. Sam accepts his teacher's challenge to create a course of study that would integrate Eastern and Western philosophies, and his decision to also include personal meditation experience makes his course very appealing to students at the same time as it arouses conflict with a jealous faculty member.

The commission also exposes him to the rage of a confused and mentally unstable fundamentalist Christian, who stalks Sam and his wife as they are on a tour to promote Sam's wildly popular book on Transcendental Meditation. A tragic event at a book signing leaves Sam in a state of shock and fear, sending him into a downward spiral that leads to nine years of seclusion from the world—years in which he undertakes deep and transformative inner work. It appears that Sam's public life is over until a chance encounter with a young Amherst philosophy student reawakens his passion for teaching and helps him to embrace his destiny.

Verney's debut novel demonstrates deep and intimate knowledge of his material; the author began studying Transcendental Meditation in 1974, became a TM teacher in 1976, and earned a BA in philosophy from Maharishi International University, in Fairfield, Iowa, in 1981. His book offers readers of a philosophical bent an intellectually stimulating story with personable characters, realistic dialogue, and convincing emotional and physical details. It also describes the turmoil that the introduction of Eastern ideas into the psyches of typical Americans could create at that time.

Action lovers may find the pacing of the novel somewhat slow, as the characters devote much of their time to philosophical conversation. Fortunately, the discussions are thought-provoking and often playful in nature, making for pleasant reading. The novel would have benefitted if Verney had fleshed out the character of Sam's artist wife—letting readers into her inner life would illuminate the effects that the story's events have on the couple's marriage and enhance the narrative's emotional appeal. In addition, there are a sprinkling of typographical errors in the text.

B. Steven Verney has cracked the code to keeping readers engaged in a thriller without employing the clichés of explicit sex and excessive violence often seen in the genre. That he is able to do so through characters that express thoughtful, tender emotion, and the desire to be of service, is commendable.

KRISTINE MORRIS (November 7, 2012)

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