Clarion Review

Thriller

The Camel Spider
Scott Gaille
CreateSpace
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Four Stars (out of Five)

A spy-thriller hero who's just an ordinary guy brings depth and believability to this conspiracy-theory novel.

What if the real leader of al-Qaeda were a Saudi prince who used bin Laden to unleash a terror war just to drive up the price of oil, thus transferring wealth from the West to prop up his family's teetering rule? That is the supposition behind Scott Gaille's *The Camel Spider*, a rousing yet smart action-filled spy thriller set in the Muslim world in the two years immediately following 9/11.

As conspiracy theories go, Gaille's is neither outrageous nor unbelievable, as throughout history there has been many an *éminence grise* who manipulated people and events from behind the scenes. Ferreting out this particular princely puppet-master should be a job for a pro; instead, Gaille has an American intelligence agency recruit a rather ordinary lawyer, Ray Culver, for this dangerous task.

Culver is not only hunting a puppet master, he is himself a puppet—and an eager one at that—of an exotic Lebanese beauty, Mariam, who happens to be not just a top CIA officer but also Culver's former college sweetheart. It borders on the preposterous that any secret service would press anyone into acting as a courier or a spy, let alone as a sniper and an assassin (and at one point a race car driver), if he or she did not have training in some of these arts. Yet with a little more suspension of disbelief than usual, even for this genre, here it works.

Gaille's first-person narrator hero makes mistakes, often big ones, and it is these errors in action and judgment that help drive the story, adding uncertainty, tension, and believability. After all, Culver is not a professional, and he rarely acts like one. This is one spy who needs rescuing almost as many times as he rides to the rescue. As an amateur, his failings are

predictable but also welcome in a genre that often has its heroes demonstrate godlike prowess on the battlefield and in the bedroom. There is plenty of action on both of those fronts in *The Camel Spider*, and as both the sex and violence are PG-13, the book is suitable for a wide audience.

The writing here is simple, clean, and workmanlike. Gaille rarely pauses to look for or deliver poetic or purple prose, yet there are hints of the romantic within. This comes out particularly in those scenes where he describes the many colors of the desert dunes, or how, upon seeing Mariam for the first time in so many years, Culver feels as though he had "dropped the book of [his] life, and it had reopened to a forgotten chapter."

The twenty chapters that have not been forgotten are brief and tightly written, and they take the main characters all over the Middle East and into South Asia. Gaille gives readers a good taste of what it means to be a Westerner in the Muslim world and pulls back the veil to show the decadence of the very rich that goes on behind the curtains of religious propriety. He does so without denigrating the people or insulting the culture.

The Camel Spider is an exciting and smart spy thriller, perfect for a summer read on the beach or in the car on the way to the shore.

Mark McLaughlin