Clarion Review

Mystery

The Children of Shem
Omar Eljumaily
Roseland Media
978-0-9790390-0-3
Four Stars (out of Five)

No-bid contractor Bectburton Corporation is in the news, under suspicion of skimming government funds in an oil-for-food scandal. *The Children of Shem* follows Ahmed Alwani, a lifelong American citizen of half-Iraqi extraction, who works as a glorified code monkey in Silicon Valley. He subverts computer-based honesty tests so thoroughly that even Bectburton managers can pass. Ahmed is a loosely practicing Muslim involved with a fundamentalist Christian named Brooke, an active member of the crackpot End Times club. She's of a sunny disposition, but mischievous enough to sneak pork into his food. Best friend Jarvis, a former I.T. engineer, now works at Starbucks. Ahmed's former college roommate Naji is now a United Nations auditor investigating Bectburton. A red pickup truck follows Naji around; he seems wound tight lately to his friends. Ahmed takes abuse for his religion and ethnicity from Brooke's Rapture countdown crowd.

> *Sometimes I wondered if she was actually being serious or just bugging me for kicks. …all sanity went out the window when she started talking about religion.*

The quirky lives of Techies can be pitiable, as when they sneak into work for free on vacation days for lack of sideline pursuits. They hack of course, but the book is essentially a thriller of the post 9/11 brave new world, laced with a great deal of comedy—some light, some gallows variety. Business travel to Baghdad and an involuntary Caribbean getaway provide ripe opportunities to mix dramatics with social criticism. Portrayals of Iraqi-American quasi-dysfunctional family relationships are humanizing. Much of what Westerners identify as belligerent arguing is seen as normal discussion among Arab-Americans. The older men shout at

dishwasher machines. They call the kids for hints on items misplaced within their own homes:

> *…my dad was looking for a pot he wanted to use to cook some rice. For some reason he thought that I would know where it was, having lived there about seven years ago.*

An issue of genetic analysis works plot-wise but doesn't hold up scientifically. Despite having the moxie to mock the authorities at an offshore prison, Ahmed's actions illustrate a low-grade case of Stockholm Syndrome. He's in thrall of both a prison official and a seemingly assetless vanilla girlfriend. The degree of cooperation with those who work against his own beliefs and interests is not fully supported by a passive personality or any direct gain.

Omar Eljumaily is a programmer and financial analyst from Silicon Valley. His father is an Iraqi-born Muslim, his mother an American-born Christian. In this first novel, Eljumaily comments intelligently on religious extremism, and observes destructive irrationality from a healthy distance. *The Children of Shem* will make readers laugh, then think. Recommended for a broad audience.

Todd Mercer