ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

The Cracked Chessboard
Elizabeth Emberton
Xlibris
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Two Stars (out of Five)

As British scholar Lord Acton declared, "Power tends to corrupt." Elizabeth Emberton's debut novel, *The Cracked Chessboard,* illustrates quite clearly how the thirst for influence sullies ambitious officials from the Mercia Region in England. The author's combined experience in county politics and sitting on committees for the UK's National Health Service (NHS) gives her an insider's view of how the desire for prestige motivates the unscrupulous behavior of her characters.

The book has an ensemble cast who jockey to elevate their positions while retaining what stature each already has. While a new face gets introduced in nearly every chapter, the story always returns to Sir Dennis Deane and Paul Vere-Rugglestone, who represent different approaches to wheeling and dealing. Dennis uses his money, title, and disdainful attitude to steamroll into the office of regional treasurer. He barely conceals his homophobia toward Paul, manipulating the gay man to benefit himself. As a new member of Parliament, Paul preaches collaboration and calm to appease the voters. He must hide his sexual orientation and use bribes to hush allegations of child molestation. The other characters' morality lies somewhere between that of Paul and Dennis, none being spotless.

Emberton allows readers to listen in as each person justifies his or her actions. Some characters fancy themselves as knights of truth, yet Emberton's deft use of omniscient narration allows readers to see how the characters construct reality for their own benefit. For example, a reporter fancies himself an honorable newsman out to unmask Dennis, but in actuality, the man behaves like a stalker paparazzo. By showing the audience the reporter from both his point of view and the viewpoints of others, one can see how deep the cracks in the chessboard really run.

It takes much concentration to keep characters straight, because the author briefly mentions people's professions and appearances but goes for long periods of time without reminding the audience of how players are connected. Similarly, one fact about a character (e.g., the name of the company Dennis headed at one time) is mentioned at the beginning of the story

and then never referenced again until such information becomes crucial to the plot. The book jumps from scandal to scandal without any sense of growing momentum. In fact, an assassination attempt loses its power because Emberton makes the character talk about it afterward, rather than relating the incident *in medias res*.

Confusion around the book's era also prevails. Dennis talks of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister. Just as readers get used to the idea of a Thatcher-run UK, a bomb threat gets sent from an unknown e-mail address in a later chapter. Emberton makes only vague mention of time passage in the book, thus giving the impression that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and e-mailed bomb threats coexist. Younger readers may not understand that governments used email before the public did, and may become confused about when the book is set. While Emberton successfully chronicles the consequences of shady politics, her plotting, pacing, and characterization could use improvement if she wishes to garner a larger following.

Recommended for die-hard political afficionados, *The Cracked Chessboard* will appeal to those who can distinguish among multiple characters, keep track of disparate details to connect plot threads, and find interest in the goals and machinations of local officials. Prior knowledge of UK politics will enhance a reader's enjoyment of the novel, as there aren't quite enough context clues for the uninitiated.

Jill Allen