



The Critical Task

Bryan A. Mantz

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Secret societies, artificial intelligence, and wild action meet in The Critical Task.

First-time novelist Bryan A. Mantz packs every page of *The Critical Task* with action and, frequently, humor. MBA student Jason Bryant, despite his Robert Ludlum-esque name, is a seemingly unremarkable guy who finds himself suddenly thrown into a very dangerous world after crossing paths with Acies, an ultrasecret global fraternity of criminals dating back to the days of imperial Rome. He teams up with Teri Knoebel, a sharp private investigator who is tough but likable, and what follows is a whirlwind of biological engineering, government infiltrators, artificial intelligence, guns, submarines, and more.

After a somewhat puzzling beginning, detailing a number of strange births in which children are born with remarkable abilities, the plot takes off the moment Bryant is attacked by an apparent mugger. Reacting with surprising speed and precision, he kills the mugger. After that, it's go, go, go in a story that's Hitchcock-meets-*Fringe*, with a touch of Dan Brown.

A peculiarity of *The Critical Task* is its use of a supercomputer for a storyteller. Noah, as the artificial intelligence is called, is short for "know-it-all" and functions as a semiomniscient narrator. It explains, "I have been assigned the task of compiling information about a series of recent events and converting it into flowing prose. This is one of many urgent tasks that I must complete before my organic central processing unit deteriorates to the point of being nonfunctional. My demise could happen at any minute." While certainly an intriguing concept, Noah only occasionally comes across as a character of its own. The computer-as-narrator device, even with its built-in sense of impending deactivation, seldom impacts the story more than any third-person omniscient narrator would.

While the frantic pace of *The Critical Task* befits a thriller, the narrative often moves too fast; numerous minor characters are brought into the story and taken out with little impact. This creates an abundance of nonessential details, and the effect is somewhat bewildering. The novel also tends to rely on heavy exposition, especially early on. Given the unique voice of the narrator, this information could perhaps have been better worked into the story line.

These challenges aside, *The Critical Task* is nicely designed, printed with an easily read variety of fonts and a captivating cover. The snappy dialogue between the protagonists is often a lot of fun, especially in the flirtation and growing romance between Bryant and Knoebel. They're easy to like and entertaining to read about as they find themselves in an increasingly tangled web, running further into danger with every turned page.

JASON HENNINGER (February 10, 2014)

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