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General

The Dark Room
Julia Cameron
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It might come as a surprise that Julia Cameron's spiritual quest led her to write a novel about child molesters and pornography addicts. This novel, with its violence and crude language, is not what most would have expected from the author of The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity.

The Dark Room, the author's first published novel, is a blend of detective, mystery and horror genres, seasoned with 12-step recovery sagacity. The novel has its strengths and its flaws; the former its insights into the nature of the pornography central to its plot, the latter a rushed-to-market, unfinished sense. Its crime-behind-a-crime plot is solid, but it unfolds more quickly for the reader than for the main character, veteran Chicago cop Elliot Mayo. His job is to solve a rash of porno-related murders. He's not particularly good at it, and the body count climbs. To the reader, seeing clues and making connections he doesn't seem to notice, makes Elliot look a bit dense.

It would have been kind of an editor to temper Cameron's giddy selection of character names. Dr. Violet Winters for the mystery woman and Johnny Vanilla for a flashy hoodlum are only moderately heavy-handed, but whatever possessed the author to introduce us to "bald little Roger Rogaine," who lingers for a page and is never heard from again?

The dialog, which is much of the book, sometimes has a stilted jauntiness that makes the love interest between Elliot and Violet seem positively irritating. On the other hand, there are inspired exchanges. "Don't try to seduce me, doctor," Elliot says in one of these inspired moments. "Don't try so hard not to be seduced," she responds. "That's a seduction, too, Elliot."

As the tentacles of a cabal of sexual predators grope and intertwine, one reaches out and grabs Elliot's own son. Elliot merely frets and flirts. His aware doormen and other minor characters are feeding information to Mr. Big, but he never shakes them down. When someone breaks into his apartment, he ducks behind a counter in the lobby and lets the culprit get away. He gathers information and sometimes even acts upon it, but rarely with effect. Stuff happens,

and he's there or shows up afterward. Perhaps Cameron, laughing up her sleeve, named him Elliot Mayo because she imagined him a condiment instead of the main course.

The author is on solid ground when dramatizing her hero cop's vision of evil. There's a nice horror-movie bit about salt baths that leave a gray ring of evil in the tub. The gray represents the shadow that beckons the unclean to a greater darkness. In one of the best passages of the book, Elliot speaks wearily and with chilling conviction about pornography and its place on what he sees as a spectrum from innocent eroticism to abuse of power to absolute evil: "The truth the shadow hides from us is there is no absolute limit, final boundary, no place we can say, with absolute certainty, we would recoil. By the time we get there, we may be ready to go further."

That's an authentic voice. It'll be interesting to see whether Cameron will linger at the next stop on her quest long enough to make sure that's all we hear next time.

Rich Wertz