

The Mud Room

Robert Cook

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The Mud Room is a cryptic thriller in which an analyst and a charming trickster seek a hidden treasure to protect humanity's future.

In Robert Cook's thriller *The Mud Room*, a government analyst discovers a magnificent secret hidden within the art and manuscripts of ancient philosophers.

A government analyst whose methods are eccentric, Chase has garnered begrudging professional respect and is the go-to for off-book operations. His intuitive leaps and instincts almost never fail him. But when a mission in Tanzania goes awry and around thirty US soldiers end up dead, Chase is thrust into an unusual mystery, left to interpret the writings of Archimedes and hidden messages in ancient art.

A message—or warning—repeats in his research, suggesting that “the origin of life” is a physical location on Earth and that an evil with the potential to destroy all life waits there. With an old friend, Ellis, and a new potential love interest, Mercy, Chase embarks on a globe-hopping adventure to find the location before a powerful adversary reaches it. Chase finds an unlikely ally in a strange man, Faan, who pops up in random spots with mysterious but helpful information.

Ambiguity directs the story, beginning with Chase's unexplained intuitive powers. The information he gleans from his research is open to interpretation, and Faan speaks in abstruse riddles and seems to be centuries older than he appears. The adversary who's on Chase's heels is a clear indication of a tangible threat, but the mystique around both is vague.

Chase is a compelling hero. He makes mistakes often, but he learns from them. His progress in the field is often stymied, too, either by the revelation of new information or because of sudden fights for his life. His determination to learn, understand, and help others prevails nonetheless. At his opposite, Faan is endearing and outlandish, fleshed out through details such as his fondness for odd T-shirts. At times, he seems untrustworthy, but as one of Chase's few sources of information, his esoteric help remains essential to the book's progression.

As Chase moves from dealing with the trauma of the failed operation to pursuing clues and being pursued by an enemy, tension mounts. And as Chase moves around the globe, he shares evocative details about the places that he visits and his experiences there—he notes a ramshackle arrangement of buildings, the stinging sensations of a brutal desert, and the electric thrill of falling in love with Mercy. Nonetheless, the ending itself is too inconclusive, featuring a disappearance and the suggestion of ulterior motives. A connection to the failed operation that prompted Chase's adventure somewhat ties the pieces together, though.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (May 12, 2023)

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