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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ MYSTERY

The Next Best Man

Bob Erlich
Robert N. Erlich
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In *The Next Best Man*, Bob Erlich continues the adventures of Eli Rose, the character he introduced in the Ian Fleming-style espionage story, *No Vacancy*. Although billed as the second novel in a trilogy, *The Next Best Man* reads more like the third in a series, a series in which the second work has gone missing.

No Vacancy is an exciting, fresh, action-packed adventure story set in South Florida, Cuba, and Costa Rica in the late 1960s. *The Next Best Man* picks up the story in Costa Rica twenty years later.

Throughout the book, Eli drops teasing gems about what happened during those missing two decades, and how those experiences have left him a sour, jaded, and semi-retired owner of a run-down beach bar in the back of nowhere, Costa Rica. Were this novel the reader's first introduction to Eli Rose, those hints at a mysterious past could be sloughed off as backstory. Those who enjoyed *No Vacancy*, however, will likely be disappointed that the author jumped ahead to 1989 in his second installment.

The Next Best Man, taken alone, is a decent read—the kind of book one enjoys on a plane or train.

While not terribly original, the story of an ex-CIA contractor-cum-mercenary lured out of a boring, self-imposed retirement by a gorgeous, Oxford-educated Chinese woman to retrieve a stolen antique, at least gets Eli off his sandy beach.

Although there are two brief encounters with assassins early on, there is more travel than action in the novel. Eli repeatedly tells himself that things are not as they seem with his new client, yet despite having the proverbial "bad feeling about this," he willingly stumbles into the inevitable trap. The only surprise is that it takes so long for the trap to be sprung.

Readers meet the bad guys late in the novel. They are less characters than caricatures from an old black-and-white movie. The trio of villains includes an elderly, yet spry Chinese millionaire, a greasily corrupt Communist Party official, and a faux-genteel opium warlord named "Old Tiger."

There are the obligatory torture and fight scenes, an escape, a battle, and a final confrontation with the villain. There are a few little twists but no big surprises. While entertaining and nicely written, the story is predictable.

In *No Vacancy*, Erlich invented some authentic characters. With the exception of Eli, none of them appear in *The Next Best Man*, at least not until the final chapter, and then only as a convenient set-up for the next book in the series, *Morgan 41*.

That brief reappearance of the best of those characters from the first book, including Vicente Amaron, plus the return of the story to its original Miami roots, suggests that the third book in the series will be more like the first—an exciting and memorable novel.

MARK G. MCLAUGHLIN (August 31, 2011)

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