



The Prophecy Gene

Stuart D. Schooler

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The action-thriller novel is popular in large part because it allows readers to experience (if only vicariously) situations that would never occur outside its pages. Stuart D. Schooler's *The Prophecy Gene* delivers this feature in spades. Among the thrills awaiting readers are telepathy with an advanced alien life form and trips to the north and south poles.

The story follows the globe-trotting exploits of two young cousins: environmental scientist Sarah Baskin and journalist Michael Seagal. A trip to Uzbekistan puts them in dreamlike communication with an alien called M'low Cloom and sets them on a mission to decode the secrets of its message.

Schooler notes in his acknowledgements that this book was twelve years in the making, and while that time has been well used in creating a framework with tight pacing and plenty of action, the novel isn't always graceful in its delivery. A night sky is referred to as "a colander of stars." Schooler's description of the exploration of a deep pit is clunky and confusing: "She attached the flashlight to her forehead and slid down the hole to her pelvis while Michael wrapped his legs through a thorny bush and clamped his arms tightly around Sarah's muscular legs."

Some chapters feature historical quotations along with the chapter titles, but most do not; it seems like a halfhearted measure that should have been used in every chapter or not at all. Elsewhere, the narrative switches from past tense to present tense when relating scientific information, making the material seem like a disjointed aside from the author or editor rather than a part of the story.

The two central characters are intriguing, but they are ultimately undone by unlikely characterization (Michael, the journalist, minoring in "magnetism") and questionable moral choices (Sarah sleeping with an established—and married—professor to get funding for a research trip). Readers will find it difficult at points to root for these protagonists. On the plus side, Schooler seems to have done his homework on the locations featured in the book, which helps ground the story and lends it authenticity. The narrative itself also keeps the reader's interest: Just what is the alien's intention?

It is clear that Schooler has worked hard on *The Prophecy Gene*, going so far as to create a complex genealogy for Sarah and Michael that he reveals in the book's final pages. It's a shaky outing at times, but for lovers of thrills, this is a roller coaster ride that might be worth strapping in for.

PETER DABBENE (November 21, 2012)

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