Clarion Review

Fantasy

The Return: Book One of the Totoboan Trilogy
Maggie Allen
Outskirts Press
978-1-4327-6277-3
Four Stars (out of Five)

Ever since William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* was published, the fascination of placing humans in a environment where their animalistic nature reveals itself has permeated many genres of fiction. *The Return: Book One of the Totoboan Trilogy* is a fresh, offbeat contribution by a college-age writer who shows decided promise.

Virginia Wilson develops a crush on Nick, an American environmentalist she meets at summer camp. But instead of finding her romantic dreams coming true in Totoba, she enters a bizarre African realm where reality and fantasy merge. Nick is not what he appears to be. Virginia teeters on the edge of passionate admiration and fearful skepticism. Told in a confidential, first-person narrative, this conversational novel will appeal to an audience who has a need to wonder not only about the outcome, but about the purpose of this imaginary, or not-so-imaginary, excursion.

An entity known as the Black Force propels Virginia and her comrades into a confined, semi-protected abyss. Confinement with the object of one's infatuation could be a state of heaven—or hell, when there is no apparent means of escape.

In this scene, the author shows more than Virginia's confusion over the situation in her naive lack of understanding: "I couldn't even speak. No one else around me was scared at all. Was there something in the trip brochure I had missed?"

With a preponderance for extreme visuals, some aspects of Allen's descriptions verge on film industry special effects, a dramatic technique that will attract fans and critics. "We were wrapped in the black goo again, individually sealed like Christmas presents. A warm sensation flowed through me as it crept up my chest and over my head. I closed my eyes, finally able to feel some comfort, and when I opened them again, we were standing under a lighted pavilion. The vast savanna and starry night sky stretched out in front of me, an entire ocean of mystery."

A definite page-turner, the story's fluctuating tone, sometimes philosophical and other times commercial—brings the book's quality down a notch. Vacillating between high and low fantasy, the overall effect is difficult to define, leaving the reader questioning Allen's intent.

A native of Orlando, Maggie Allen is an environmental studies and sociology major at Whitman College in Washington. *The Return* is her first novel.

This entertaining, supernatural tale may be classified as escapist fiction, but the novel also provokes a deeper, intellectual response that makes us contemplate inner character and morality. It is a worthwhile debut by a promising new talent, and a strong opener to an innovative trilogy.

Julia Ann Charpentier