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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ LITERARY

The Sabbatical

Frederick Pinto
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Digital music king Charles Barca tumbles from his throne in the first few lines of this fresh, irreverent novel about the people behind the popular music industry. With the opening words, “Well, not *fired*, Charles,” Pinto grabs the reader’s attention and runs with it. The engaging, fast pace continues throughout *The Sabbatical* as Charles works on what comes next in a world that never stops reinventing itself.

Pinto portrays Charles as the brilliant founder of digital-music startup PlayLouder, a company credited with changing the way music deals get done. Who needs the expensive middle man when you can give listeners the songs they want on demand? With this philosophy, PlayLouder revolutionizes music, making Charles himself a trendy, sought-after commodity. Until he’s not.

What’s an aging icon to do? It takes Charles a while to come to grips with his changing status, and Pinto makes the journey a delight to follow. Charles is a witty narrator, and charmingly flawed. Clever he may be, but he is not beyond making some major blunders. Readers will wonder what mess he might step in next as he lingers in the spotlight a little too long.

Pinto uses Charles’s predicament to shine a light on contemporary society and the ever-changing definition of “new.” He notes that digital music may indeed have become old news, saying, “AOL was founded over twenty five years ago. Zuckerberg hadn’t said his first brilliantly manipulative words. Lady Gaga wasn’t even born.” These days, deal makers use the word “text” as a verb, and everyone assumes their every move will be recorded and broadcast. Pinto’s humor successfully skewers the absurdly superficial tone of the entertainment world.

Still, at heart, this is a story of a man questioning the value of instant gratification. Even as he makes a stunning appearance at the music industry’s annual convention, MIDEM, Charles begins to see the fraying edges of the world he has woven. It is still a seductive world, though, and Pinto doesn’t let Charles escape too easily.

Pinto balances perspectives evenly, taking Charles on an outward journey (from Canada to France to South America) as well as an inward journey, remembering why he was first attracted to the music business. It is a classic quest in a modern world, and Charles meets colorful characters along the way. Pinto never sacrifices the momentum of the novel to formally introduce these characters; their interactions with Charles reveal their personalities seamlessly. Pinto doesn’t just write about industry executives, either. Among Charles’s teachers are laid-back beach bums, serious musicians, and a socially conscious graffiti artist.

Charles struggles with the dilemmas of modern times: the roles of corporations and individuals in society, and the impact of constant, instant communication. Pinto is critical of these things, but never negative. Instead, readers are led to wonder what sort of phoenix Charles will be when he rises from the ashes.

SHEILA M. TRASK (August 20, 2012)

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