

The Sheltering Tower

Mack R. Hicks

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"Someone I trust paid a total stranger to deliver this," reads the first line of a mysterious letter Homeland Security agent Dr. Juanita "Juan" Aznar receives in Mack Hicks's latest novel, *The Sheltering Tower*. The cryptic letter, written by her dead coworker, Linda Rodriguez, informs Juan about an ongoing government conspiracy to predict future behavior through the use of doppelgängers. She receives this letter immediately following a trip to Texas, where Juan was introduced to her "twin," a woman whom she had never met who looks and acts just like her. The letter and the encounter, combined with Linda's sudden homicide, fuel Juan's quest for the truth. As the plot develops, Juan begins to distrust those closest to her and ends up enlisting the help of a stranger, Linda's priest. What results is an unlikely alliance between the brassy, defiant agent and a self-deprecating priest named Monk, whose parallel story is equally compelling.

When Monk meets Juan, he is grappling with his faith while simultaneously attempting to save his church from bankruptcy. Unlike Juan, who darts back and forth between various locations, Monk's interactions are confined within the church walls. He spends his days talking to several spirited individuals, including a homeless soothsayer named Abe and Monsignor Garcia, a senile member of the church whose reputation is put into question. Monk also struggles with his personal vices, alcoholism and gambling, and ultimately bets the church's future on \$36 during a visit to the casino.

Although the two narratives seem disparate at first, Hicks subtly unveils the ways in which the stories are dependent upon one another. He places the protagonists in precarious positions where their livelihoods are at stake, and they develop a deep sense of trust even as their situations become more tenuous and convoluted. Their relationship is convincing, although they rarely enter into each other's storylines. Hicks's novel is fast-paced and captivating. As the author of two other novels and two nonfiction books, he knows how to maintain the reader's suspense and propel the story forward. Hicks crafts language in a deliberate fashion, relying on his background in clinical psychology to help him formulate compelling, multidimensional characters within a complex narrative. *The Sheltering Tower* is exemplary of Hicks's storytelling talent and would appeal to readers of all ages. As the narrative unravels, Hicks poses the intriguing question of whether trust in total strangers leads to destruction or salvation in the end.

JACQUELYN LAZO (November 13, 2012)

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