

The Vipers of Islam

Douglas Vigil

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Richly detailed cultures provide the backdrop to a heart-pounding debut thriller.

Douglas Vigil's debut novel, *The Vipers of Islam*, is a fast-paced and richly layered story of two undercover CIA agents fighting terrorism overseas in the wake of the 2001 attacks on the United States. With complex characters, detailed cultural settings, and gripping action scenes, this cloak-and-dagger thriller is a must read.

The story follows Jack Thompson (a.k.a. Khan) and his partner Hamid, two CIA agents posted to Pakistan in the days leading up to September 11. After the attack on America and the surge of allied troops to the region, Jack is recognized on the street by known terrorist mastermind Ali Selamat Bashari, who had crossed Jack's path once before in Southeast Asia. Their cover is effectively blown.

As the partners prepare to leave the country, they are attacked in their home and injured. Hamid is taken to Germany to recover, while Jack requests reassignment to Indonesia to continue his counterterrorism work. There, he is determined to apprehend Bashari, only to narrowly escape death after an ambush that leaves him floating unconscious miles out to sea. Once Jack reunites with Hamid, the pair works to foil plans for more attacks by Bashari and to break apart a growing and dangerous network of international terrorists.

The story is told largely from Jack's perspective, with helpful sections showing the actions of other characters. Generally, this is seamless, though the point of view does shift jarringly in a few instances, as when an old woman watches Jack and his partner investigate a warehouse in Indonesia. Here, the perspective moves abruptly away from Jack's viewpoint to a third-person account of characters from outside the scene. In most cases, though, the approach is used well and can often help build suspense.

Vigil's writing is direct and approachable, and the story convincingly weaves together a fictionalized narrative with real events, like the Bali nightclub bombing of 2002. Added to this is the author's extensive knowledge of the regions and cultures he uses as settings, and his ability to place readers directly within those locales. The result is a realistic and exciting story that quickly engages.

Although the story offers little in the way of criticism about the American-led invasion of Afghanistan and global antiterrorism activities, neither is it burdened with the overt patriotism or xenophobia that can so easily infect this type of novel. Instead, Vigil paints a picture of a CIA officer focused on doing his job and protecting innocent people. If the antagonists are somewhat two-dimensional, it is forgiven by how well the author uses the complexities of the cultures that Jack visits to paint a rich and satisfying backdrop to the action.

With its global perspective and heart-racing drama, *The Vipers of Islam* is highly recommended for readers who enjoy well-crafted and complex stories of cloak-and-dagger operations set within the grittiness of a globalized modern world.

ERIC ANDERSON (September 26, 2014)

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