ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

THRILLER

True Calling
P.R. Slimko
FriesenPress
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Three Stars (out of Five)

People often wonder whether nature and nurture affect a child's destiny in equal measure, and P. R. Slimko's debut novel True Calling grapples with this conundrum and declares that one's inherent nature always shows through. The author, a former bodybuilding champion, creates a heroine much like herself, with stellar physical strength and coordination. Greg and Ann Daily, Maddie's adoptive parents, soon discover their new daughter prefers weight-lifting to socializing and scrutinizes people with an eerie gaze. But Maddie isn't the only one on alert. Ann thinks she sees men in black watching her and the baby near the park one day, but she shrugs off the incident. When Maddie turns sixteen, the men in black reappear to inform Greg and Ann that Maddie is the child of two snipers, who have since died. Maddie, full of raw potential and anger, must be trained to channel her aggression and follow in her birth-parents' footsteps, because leading a civilian life would be too dangerous. The men in black whisk the teenager away to a secret U.S. military base to undergo training to determine if she has what it takes to become a skilled assassin.

With the multitude of military stories starring gung-ho boys and men, True Calling represents a welcome change. While it becomes clear early on that the protagonist possesses the traits to be an elite shooter, Slimko never renders Maddie a stone-cold killer. Her love for her parents and fellow soldiers, sarcastic wit, and quick thinking are always on display. Refreshingly, neither the author nor Maddie's male peers view her as a sex object; instead, they see her as a powerful soldier.

Even more surprising, a romantic plotline is not part of Maddie's trajectory. For romance, readers will delight in Greg and Ann's passion. Slimko shows the couple's mutual affection strengthening over time, never losing its original spark. Greg, Ann, and Maddie all continue to adore one another, even as each struggles to accept Maddie's transformation into a killer. Indeed, the three seem to adjust with remarkable alacrity to Maddie's destiny.

At times, readers must suspend their disbelief as the Dailys encourage Maddie's path and

do not try to fight the men in black. For example, it seems unbelievable that doting parents such as Greg and Ann would immediately trust the government operatives, and, although Maddie is a fish out of water in civilian life, it seems unrealistic that she would readily leave home, given her strong love for her parents. It requires a further stretch of the imagination when Maddie does not contact Greg and Ann for nearly a year. In addition to issues of believability, Slimko has a tendency to tell instead of show the action, sometimes repeating the same words many times in one paragraph. Nonetheless, these problems will not deter teenage girls interested in action adventure from reading about this gunslinging, sharpshooting modern GI Jane.

Jill Allen