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General

**Ultimate Weapon**
Chris Ryan
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When a fiction writer concocts a plot in which the fate of the world is at stake, the reader becomes a confederate, suspending belief in the expectation that plenty of fun will result. The author has an obligation as well: He or she can't go too far. As the hero or heroine saves the world, implausibility is acceptable; inanity isn't.

Think of the plots of Alistair MacLean, for example, whose thrillers also made popular movies. They are improbable but entertaining, for the most part, as in *Where Eagles Dare*. In *Ice Station Zebra*, however, the clumsy, silly climax ruined everything.

In *Ultimate Weapon*, Chris Ryan unleashes a tight, fast-moving, and violent yarn worthy of MacLean at his best, only to have the whole thing skid to a thudding climax with some story twists that probably would have MacLean cringing in his grave. It doesn't help that he occasionally em-ploys clichés and his characters hiss rather too often.

Ryan's strength is lean, muscular prose and the ability to keep the plot moving without stopping for breath. He also has an obvious grasp of, if not love of, the weaponry and techniques of the techno-thriller. Ryan was a member of the British Special Forces in Iraq during the Gulf War. His first-hand knowl-edge gives the story authenticity.

Iraq is the primary setting here, and Saddam Hussein is the sinister bad guy whom readers will have no trouble hating. Ryan's two main charac-ters are both Special Forces survivors. Nick is retired, aging, and somewhat broken. Jed is young, tough, resourceful, and able to kill on a moment's notice. Nick's daughter Sarah happens to be an erratic but brilliant nuclear researcher who mysteriously vanishes. As Sarah's father sets out to find her, Sarah's boyfriend Jed is involved in secret missions in Iraq that represent the best parts of the story and some of Ryan's best writing.

It will give nothing away to say that everything comes to a head in and around Iraq. In, you might say, the Nick of time, the ultimate weapon is snatched from Saddam's hands quicker

than any weapon of mass destruction. The final plot twist arrives with one of the characters spending a lot of time explaining motivation. Ryan dispatches this baddie with a particularly gruesome goodbye. Call it a good example of ending a story with a bang.

*Dick Cady*