Clarion Review

Thriller

Unconditional Loss
Mladen Solar
Orrin Lippoff
unconditional loss
978-0-615-38404-7
Three Stars (out of Five)

What if we suddenly had to face a world without dogs? The thriller *Unconditional Loss* draws the reader in with that question, before moving onto a more typical plot scenario: How can one man manage to sound the alarm on a potential worldwide disaster?

Dr. Preston McBride is a researcher working to find a vaccine for a lethal new strain of flu, but his research efforts are scuttled by back-stabbing laboratory politics. He quits, moves back to California with his girlfriend, and tries to cope with a new set of problems, including his increasingly eccentric mother. But his personal difficulties are soon eclipsed by the rapid outbreak of a mysterious illness that's killing dogs. To his horror, McBride realizes that the vaccine he helped create for humans was inadequately tested and rushed too quickly to market, and it is causing canines to die. McBride tries in desperation to forge an alliance with his former co-worker and chief back-stabber, who is now at the top of the corporate ladder. But he encounters sinister motives and layer upon layer of conspiracy emanating from the well-connected, prestigious laboratory where the vaccine originated. The collusion ultimately implicates the highest government offices. McBride races against time to do whatever he can to stop an epidemic that he believes can lead to far worse destruction around the world.

Initially, the authors create a personality for each character (and several of the dogs) with just a few able strokes. Willis, the prime villain, smiles like " a shark…with a dead seal pup dangling from its toothy mouth." Eventually, action takes precedence over character development, but the narrative moves along deftly, and the descriptions of dogs being overtaken by a gruesome illness are vivid. The authors' medical expertise (both are physicians) lends authenticity to the horrific details. There are some well-placed, cinematic touches that help convey the vision of a global epidemic. The epidemic does much to carry the story forward, as

when it portrays increasingly desperate, grieving dog lovers destabilizing and turning against each other. The lesser plot lines, involving McBride's love interests and his aging hippie mother, are less successful. Ultimately, the book doesn't quite manage the challenges of dramatic pacing and surprise that a successful thriller requires. However, the disturbing premise of a dog-free dystopia may haunt the reader well beyond the novel's conclusion.

Laurie Sullivan