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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ THRILLER

Vette Head's Not Dead

Lee A. Sweetapple
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It's 1985 and Reagan hasn't won the Cold War. Stillwater and Joyner, operators in a shadowy Army undercover organization, are in Japan on a mission they think is beneath their talents.

Word has come down that Chukaka Ha, an environmental terrorist organization, is planning something big. A little spy craft, aided by resident agents Steve and Tanya, reveals there's a bus being loaded with something nasty. The unit's commanding officer tells them to nip it in the bud. Two Japanese terrorists are assassinated and their lair set aflame. The agents bribe their way out to sea and board a submarine tricked out in USSR markings.

Joyner and Stillwater show up on page as smooth operators, and they communicate via macho repartee, references to past exploits, and occasional cliches. In the incestuous intelligence world, there is much denigration of other units, references to weapons and hand-to-hand skills, and a little romance brought on by Tanya, who was once Stillwater's high school flame and is now not averse to savoring a Japanese bath while nude. Stillwater is true-blue, though. He's leaving deep cover and starting a family with his wife, Gwen.

Lee Sweetapple's narrative is scriptlike and moves quickly enough to excuse grammar stumbles. The author is light on character description and development, the most sympathetic of the cast being Tanya, a blonde bombshell who holds her own in the uber-masculine milieu of spy-versus-spy. Sweetapple also interestingly sketches another minor character, the colonel-in-charge Fistney, veteran of the Vietnam War's Operation Phoenix, "a skilled leader … a hero—once upon a time." However, Sweetapple also makes the colonel multi-dimensional rather than ramrod and spit-and-polish, noting the colonel has "a pompous attitude actually lightened up the atmosphere back in garrison."

Sweetapple, however, lets characters go AWOL—the winsome Tanya doesn't appear again after the action moves out of Japan. The author is also prone to creating plot holes as the action shifts temporarily to Korea and then is time warped into 2005. The short Korea expedition is employed to introduce another character into the buddy-drama. By 2005, however, Stillwater and friends are employees at Symphonic Technology Partners, a civilian intelligence company. Corvette fancier Stillwater (as referenced in the title) invites LP, the character introduced in Korea and a fellow STP employee (there are motorhead references to Andy Granatelli), to tag along on a New Hampshire hunting trip.

The good guys get their deer, but not before they stumble into an Aryan Nation rat's nest greedy for gold and guns secreted by a now-dead member. A New York police chief is the Aryan action man. His sister, a member of a lesbian biker gang, wants the gold for herself. Fast driving, gun play, and dead bodies result.

Sweetapple is a three-decade veteran of the intelligence community and has authored the novel *Key West Revenge* as well as several articles. This three-plot effort seems to be a stew made up of everything he's experienced, meaning some threads go unresolved. Nevertheless, there is copious action and the good guys win, which makes for an entertaining weekend read.

GARY PRESLEY (March 13, 2013)

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