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CLARION REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥

Voice of Conscience

Behcet Kaya
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In rural Turkey in the 1960s, during the week-long marriage celebration of a young couple, the bride and her parents become the victims of revenge killings. With the help of his aunt and uncle, the girl's teenage brother escapes, making his way to the home of relatives in the city, then on to England, and eventually to America with his new wife. Voice of Conscience, the tragic story of a man dealing with an unimaginable secret, takes Ramzi Ozcomert through a series of transformations.

Author Behcet Kaya uses his protagonist's innocent childhood in Atamkoy to illuminate aspects of life in a rural Turkish village. Grudges are held for generations, and rituals must be observed when receiving visitors, even those who are despised. Where it is an exception from the norm to allow a daughter to marry for love, rejecting an offer of marriage is seen as a dishonor to the family, and revenge in the form of kidnapping or murder must be guarded against. Kaya successfully shows the stark differences between this conservative village and Istanbul, London, and California. As Ramzi grows into a handsome and shy foreigner, he becomes irresistible to women, and as a hard-headed California businessman, Ramzi is able to earn the respect of the stereotypical wealthy father-in-law character.

As Ramzi develops into a conventional American family man, he largely pushes the events from his childhood to the back of his mind, never telling his wife or his children the truth about how his family died. Nightmares and visions occasionally plague him, but only after thirty years does Ramzi listen to the primitive voices in him that call for retribution. "Nagging discontentment filled the depths of his soul," Kaya writes. "He accepted the reality it was time to do something about it. It was now or never."

The expected revenge sequence comes in the last quarter of the book. The ensuing events are unsatisfying for Ramzi, but also for readers, who will find his transformation to a cold-blooded killer unbelievable. After only one month of rigorous training, Ramzi undergoes a personality change, has an affair, and learns to navigate the underworld of Greece and Turkey. Even the author seems to find this change unbelievable, breaking in with a bit of distracting authorial intrusion: "This once good-natured, wise man had slowly metamorphosed into a devious, malicious, vengeful one," he writes. When Ramzi comes to realize he has made a terrible mistake, readers are unfortunately taken outside of his head and forced to guess at the motivation behind his actions.

This is Kaya's first novel. Like his protagonist, he has lived in rural Turkey, Istanbul, London, and finally America, which he now calls home.

Apart from some unnatural dialogue and events in the last part of the book that could have been handled with more eloquence, the story proceeds swiftly and believably, with vivid scene setting and exciting action. The final tragedy is Ramzi's inescapable fate: though he has absorbed Western culture, he still cannot fully leave behind the convictions of his father or the pride of his traditional culture.

WHITNEY HALLBERG (May 18, 2010)

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