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FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ MYSTERY

Winward Passage

Jim Nesbit
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While sailing in the Bahamas on what was to be his last drug run, Charley chains himself to the mast of his sinking ship and leaves behind an incomplete logbook, mysterious DNA embedded in a brick of cocaine, and pre-addressed envelopes directed to his one remaining relative, Tipsy, a sister he hasn't seen in twenty-five years. Set in the gritty corners of San Francisco and the balmy breezes of shifty Caribbean seaports, this unsettling novel combines mystery and action with in-your-face political verve to prick at the very center of modern existence.

Tipsy, a lively alcoholic obsessed with trashy novels, has kept every letter her brother sent during their separation. Soon, Tipsy finds herself sailing through the Bahamas on a yacht with Red Means, Charley's brusque and intimidating employer, in an attempt to solve the mystery of Charley's death—a mystery riddled with drug cartels and secret societies. Peppered with a cast of downtrodden characters, the novel weaves in and out of the lives of these seemingly unconnected figures, while bit by bit the mystery of Charley's tragic end is unraveled.

Nisbet pushes the boundaries of fiction with brave experimental forays, but does have a tendency to overwrite: "Quentin shook off the malaise of his statistical foray with remarkable aplomb," she writes. In epistolary sections of the book, however, he has a free and fluid style that showcases characters with distinct, enigmatic voices. It is these characters that make the book pulse with meaning. As the novel alternates between the perspectives of each character, the narrative regularly slips from heavy third-person prose into close third-person and first-person that allow the reader to experience the frantic drug-induced consciousness that the characters share. In these moments the novel becomes less about the mystery and more a portrait of a mish-mash society filled with people desperate to find their purpose.

Though characters do seem to drop into the text out of nowhere and their connections to the main protagonists remain somewhat muddled, they contribute to the patchwork style of the novel in which an interweaving of primary sources—real and imagined novels, letters, stories, and poems—create a true-to-life representation of modern society.

Nisbet is a multiple Pushcart Prize nominee and the author of eleven novels. Fans of Nisbet's previous work will find this a welcome addition to an already impressive collection of gritty and adventurous reads.
SHOILEE KHAN (May / June 2010)

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