

Five Hieroglyphs

Stephen T. Person

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Five Hieroglyphs is an entertaining mystery novel in which a sensitive teenager comes into his own during a fortuitous trip to Egypt.

In Stephen T. Person's engrossing mystery novel *Five Hieroglyphs*, a teenage blogger who is fascinated with archaeology and the wonders of the ancient world contends with a secret organization.

Dante, a Chicagoan who lives with his grandmother and younger sister, is prone to visions—including one about a glazed brick that's been dubbed the Hillwood Stone and whose uncertain provenance is even murderous. Enthralled by Egyptology and the stories that shaped civilization, Dante is bright but withdrawn. He's also stricken by his father's abandonment and by his mother's death, introducing intrigue surrounding his suppressed trauma. And though he's somewhat hinted at as being a prodigy, he faces enough emotional, everyday concerns to make him a compelling hero beyond that distinction.

When a teacher, Alison, invites Dante on a test cruise to visit the seven wonders of the world, Dante agrees. Alison is multitalented and warm; she's also forewarned about Dante's premonitions, in which details about the stone persist. Through her patient mentoring and Dante's gradual gains in self-confidence, the pair make fresh discoveries. Meanwhile, a colorful secondary cast made up of journalists, professors, an investor baroness and her testy assistant, and the agent of a storied group that's known for procuring rare items fleshes out the book's background. Still, these people's involvement in the larger story is only disclosed in stages, and few of them are developed with the same depth as Dante and Alison.

Suspense mounts as Dante takes initiative and faces outside forces, as when he uses his blog to bait his shadowy adversary and risks a cat-and-mouse pursuit that raises questions about how people connect to each other. At times, though, Dante's premonitions are a too-handy plot device: he receives just enough glimpses of clues to guide his next steps. And his sister's online research skills come into also-convenient play.

The tour itself is an appealing storyline, though. It includes observations of absurd commerce (one of the tour organizers is determined to create a kitschy spectacle that includes reenactments); reverence for antiquities, as evidenced by a guest speaker; and a subtle contemplation of the human quest to understand the present by means of the past. That most of the seven wonders no longer exist—thus obliging the cruise members to visit sites where there is little to see, but plenty to imagine—adds richness, drawing forth Alison's storytelling skills.

With thrilling, conclusive twists that entail kidnapping, a hunt, and restitution, *Five Hieroglyphs* is a satisfying mystery novel in which a sensitive teenager comes into his own during a fortuitous trip to Egypt.

KAREN RIGBY (October 11, 2023)

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