

Shadow Men

Dan Westerlin

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A disillusioned military man faces an enemy whom he helped to create in Shadow Men, a gripping thriller that acknowledges the mental and physical tolls of war.

In Dan Westerlin's military thriller *Shadow Men*, a botched mission abroad pits a cell of international terrorists against a tight-knit SEAL squad.

Jake led SEAL Team 3 on a dangerous mission into Syria to assassinate a presumed terrorist. But Jake developed doubts about the target, and the mission went awry, leading to numerous civilian deaths. The soldiers returned home failures, were kicked out of the military, and were targeted by the vitriolic press. Jake developed PTSD, reliving the horrors of his last mission.

As Jake and his team adjust to their new life, the escaped suspected terrorist, Jabbar, amasses power and allies, having been radicalized by SEAL Team 3's failed mission. He wants to destroy the men responsible for the assassination attempt. When Jabbar's men infiltrate the US, a taut chase ensues.

Jake is the best developed member of the vast cast. Cocksure but capable, he is most focused on protecting his team and the lives of innocents. Though broken in the wake of the disastrous mission, he remains determined throughout the book and strives to do what's right. However, others pale in comparison to him: most are developed in terms of single distinguishing traits alone. In their volume, they overwhelm the story (despite the helpful summary list that's provided to keep track of them). Even the members of Jake's SEAL team blur together to the extent that, whenever the story veers away from Jake's perspective, its tension drops.

The book's progression is too reliant on chains of explosive set pieces, though there's little true connective thread between these scenes. SEAL Team 3's mission in Syria is the most polished section; it features a back-and-forth between the men on the ground and those in command in the US. Once its events have passed, though, the rest of the book flits between locations and people without enough context to sustain interest. Conversations between the SEAL Team 3 members lead to memorable moments, though: their banter is amusing, and they are precise and cohesive when it comes to tactical work. And elsewhere, lyrical flourishes in the prose exist in interesting contrast to the grittiness and violence that otherwise dominate the book: the lashing rain in Syria is described as "smoky apparitions ... purling and twisting down alleys." But these moments dissipate as the book progresses and begins to ricochet between perspectives and locations.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (December 20, 2022)

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