



The Saudi Oil Gambit

Reginald Nelson

URLink Print and Media

(302pp)

978-1-64753-851-4

A once ordinary dentist courts intrigue with his inventive spying technique in the amiable thriller The Saudi Oil Gambit.

In Reginald Nelson's thriller *The Saudi Oil Gambit*, unlikely heroes concoct an unusual plan to thwart terrorist threats to the United States.

Reggie, a successful dentist whose wife encourages him to chase his ambitions, befriends Ashonte', the charismatic owner of a local karate dojo, who has ties to the CIA. Through Ashonte', Reggie presents his inventive idea to capture intelligence from suspected terrorists: "I want to place a transmitter under a crowned tooth!" Thus Reggie becomes a pivotal player in a global operation, working from a dental clinic in Dubai.

When Reggie's transmitters pick up chatter about a terrorist plot to manipulate oil prices and cripple the US economy, Reggie, Ashonte', and their handler traverse the globe to gather more information. Their work to prevent the terrorist plot is complicated when they discover a hidden nuclear bomb in the Alaskan wilderness.

This wild thriller thrives on underexplained intrigue, from the practicality of the implants themselves to the logistics of Reggie's clinic becoming a hot spot for terrorists. Further, Reggie's intelligence gathering becomes irrelevant early in the novel, when the chase to find the terrorists takes over. In addition, most of the novel's excitement is treated in passing, with events shared with Reggie after the fact. Reggie is reduced to an inactive participant in his own story: he narrates, but he is removed from too much of what happens, including an explosion at a terrorist's house. With the story's tension depleted, interest wanes.

Further impeding the story is Reggie's tendency toward distraction: he often stops midstory to provide superfluous background information, as about his first marriage and his time at the dojo. While Reggie waits to hear the outcome of a military operation, for example, pages are devoted to irrelevant minutiae, as with a list of the famous people who live in Manhattan Beach. Reggie asks for, but does not earn, the audience's patience: "Hang in there, there is a little more background to understand why I am here." As a result, the spy work seems to proceed at a snail's pace.

While he's rendered secondary by Reggie's narration, Ashonte' commands more attention. He was trained by spy agencies and the military, and his dojo is funded by the government with the understanding that he will be willing to take on missions as needed. However, his intriguing backstory is shared in a condensed space, further compromising audience engagement. Other characters aren't fleshed out, including the US president; they are bland sans descriptions or a sense of their motivations.

The book's climax is both delayed and rushed through, robbing it of suspense despite the looming threat of a nuclear detonation. In the place of a payoff for the extended mission is a setup for potential future adventures for the men's "civilian" agency, whose true ties and allegiances are too tangled to make sense.

In the inventive thriller *The Saudi Oil Gambit*, a dentist helps to combat a terrorist plot against the US.

JOHN M. MURRAY (August 29, 2024)

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