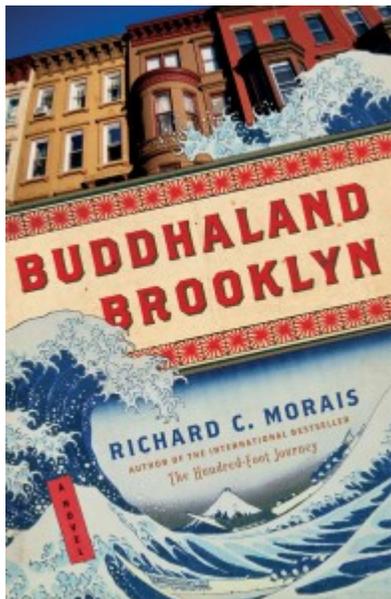


Book Review: *Buddhaland Brooklyn*



Soon, it will be winter. You'll look out over brown fields and at empty branches, and though you understand that life remains, this knowledge cannot ameliorate the scene's barrenness. A similar conclusion can be drawn about Robert Morais' new novel, *Buddhaland Brooklyn*.

Much of the responsibility for this lies with Morais' choice of narrator, the Reverend Seido Oda, a phlegmatic Buddhist who lived most of his life within the walls of his monastery in Japan. His supervisors choose him to go to New York to oversee the construction of a temple in Brooklyn and guide believers in the tenets and practices of the faith.

Reverend Oda, however, carries a tragic past that warped him into an emotionless, unsympathetic man. Chosen to be a monk at a very early age, he was taken somewhat unwillingly from his family. When the entire family is killed in a fire, Oda is left alone. A disappointing love affair with a worldly woman in his young adulthood only compounds Oda's well-developed tendency to shut out the world. He becomes an art teacher at his monastery, transforming into the kind of instructor he and his fellow students mocked when they were young.

All this changes with his transfer to Brooklyn. A more different world from the sheltered monastery where Oda drifted toward nothing but his eventual old age and peaceful death could not be imagined, and this is likely Morais' intention. We are introduced to a crew of apparently prototypical Brooklynites, but they come across less as colorful characters than rote caricatures.

All this might have worked had Oda been capable of expressing himself with anything other than unconvincing melancholy. Not even love can cut through Oda's tough emotional hide. His assistant, Jennifer Meli, is attracted to the aloof Reverend Oda, and gradually draws him out of his shell. She is uncertain about whether this is the right thing to do, and her desire for Reverend Oda is less a reflection of love for the man than of her own journey toward deeper understanding of their chosen religion. Meli is one of the few fully realized characters here, and she almost saves the novel.

The point of the story, I suspect, is to show Oda's slow restoration to life and to chronicle his transformation into a better spiritual leader and a better man. In Brooklyn, he experiences all the

frustrations of urban life, and there are some funny scenes where he must deal with the bureaucracy, pace, and pushiness of life in a large city. These, however, are immaterial compared to the unacknowledged pain caused by the loss of his family.

His tone, though, is so bloodless that even the most powerfully felt emotions come across as flat and two-dimensional. Reverend Oda isn't a cold fish, he's flash-frozen, but that doesn't mean the book had to be, too. Had there been another narrative point of view, the pulse of the text might have risen above the 45 beats per minute at which it lumbers along. Brooklyn can do that to you. But it never happens here, to the detriment of an otherwise promising story.