

SCRATCHPAD 'The Mountain Shadow' a disappointing sequel

By ERICK BENDEL
FOR COAST WEEKEND

I finally got around to reading "The Mountain Shadow," Gregory David Roberts' long-promised sequel to his gorgeous 2003 debut novel, "Shantaram."

And, I regret to report, the book is so bad it almost makes me question my judgment of its predecessor. Indeed, it's hard to accept that these books came from the same author.

My copy of "Shantaram" — a gift from a good friend with good taste — sat in a box for six years. I had my reasons: The book is big (933 pages), the type small, and the opening passages hint at

a preachy self-help exercise masquerading as literature — the sort of trendy twaddle that spiritual-but-not-religious readers use to add inches to their New Age collection.

Even knowing it was the semi-autobiographical story of a Melbourne man, Lin, who had committed a series of armed robberies to feed his heroin habit and, after escaping from prison, lives as a fugitive in Bombay didn't compel me to dig it out.

But I was wrong to wait. "Shantaram" is an elegant, full-bodied epic that has earned its cult status — a book you need to read if only to witness its audacity.

Set in the 1980s, the story

takes us from Indian slums and prisons, to the inner sanctum of Bombay's mafia, to the mountains of Afghanistan during the war with the Soviets. It is a gritty, glorious meditation on co-existing communities and cultures, of pure evil and self-transcending love. You savor it slowly and mindfully, the way you savor a long banquet, because it is so rich and fulfilling.

Now comes "The Mountain Shadow," released in 2015. It is exactly the book I feared the first one would be: a pretentious slog, bloated with shallow Eastern-sounding aphorisms and heavy-handed symbolism (not to mention a white man's well-meaning but

condescending views of women and the Third World).

The story centers on Lin's growing unease with his role in Bombay's crime syndicate. Because he's still running from the law, Lin can't make a clean escape.

With that dilemma unable to quickly resolve itself, Roberts allows the supporting characters' subplots to spin the wheels, giving us nearly 900 pages of relationship drama and repetitive street violence, while our hero fondles his knives, talks to his motorcycle, and utters gems of wisdom such as: "Women have a psychic witchy spooky talking-to-the-dead way of knowing everything

you think."

Worst of all, our favorite characters — including Didier, the fiercely loyal comrade and openly gay killer; and Karla, the hauntingly beautiful pragmatist who knows she's the smartest person in the room — have been reduced to shuffling on and offstage, like the cast of "Friends," to offer Lin overwritten wisecracks and pseudo-philosophical advice.

"The Mountain Shadow" is the second installment in a planned tetralogy (a prequel and finale are allegedly on the way). But devotees of Book 1 would be better off imagining their own "Shantaram" spin-offs. "The Mountain Shadow"

is a book begging to be overshadowed by fanfiction.

I was recently in a local bookstore and pulled a slick new edition of "Shantaram" from the shelf. The bookseller saw me thumbing through the pages. That's a good book, he said.

It is, I replied. Then I told him I was halfway through "The Mountain Shadow," and it's just awful. He concurred — and, in fact, had given up on the sequel.

He allowed "Shantaram" to stand alone. I wish Roberts had done the same.

Scratch Pad will occasionally serve as a platform for the editor's reflections on arts and culture. 

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Actors take the stage during a rehearsal of "She Loves Me" by the Peninsula Association of Performing Artists.

PHOTO BY COLIN MURPHEY

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