

An End: Where We Stand Now: Book One

Brandon Pawlicki

AmazonKDP (Apr 23, 2022)

Softcover \$15.99 (338pp)

979-898605060-7

A Wiccan woman confronts the zombie apocalypse in the gruesome horror novel An End.

In Brandon Pawlicki's horror novel *An End*, a Wiccan woman with a traumatic past tries to survive the zombie apocalypse.

The night before their graduation, Vallerie and her boyfriend perform a protective Wiccan ritual. The next day, however, their ceremony is interrupted by a school shooter. Vallerie and her brother are the sole survivors. Vallerie has anxiety attacks and nightmares for years after, leading to a downward spiral. She loses her faith; her social circle shrinks; one day, she's beaten into a coma.

Five months later, Vallerie awakens in the midst of a spreading zombie outbreak. Her brother and her best friend stayed with her to ensure her safety, but danger is all around them. An apocalyptic military force has marked her brother for punishment too. The trio dodges zombies and soldiers in their attempts to leave the city; at the same time, Vallerie reconnects with her Wiccan faith and processes her traumas.

The prose is methodical when it comes to advancing the narrative, including in its treatment of the events leading up to the zombie outbreak. It is less so when it comes to its characterizations. Vallerie is the best fleshed out of the book's three leads; her brother and best friend are the only other people to be imbued with real depth. Most of those present in the book are built up in superficial terms—including the members of the military force that chases Vallerie and her companions, who are motivated by the simple desires to protect the US and punish traitors.

The text is dialogue-heavy, with the flavor of a script. Vallerie is an engaging and emotive speaker; her conversations are snappy and flowing. But with its keen focus on Vallerie's perspective, the book sacrifices other avenues for development. There's a noticeable lack of scene-setting and sensory details; exposition dominates. Only a few sequences prove detailed enough to be rich, as with those that reflect Vallerie's corroding innocence in a gruesome world. She tries to execute zombies despite her brother's protests, for example, leading to an uncomfortable and harrowing interaction. But Vallerie also forges some unexpected alliances and wrestles with her Wiccan beliefs; as her first adventures in the zombie-altered world conclude, there are intriguing hints at how her story will continue.

The zombie apocalypse arrives in the series opener *An End*, a horror novel in which a traumatized woman clarifies the role she has to play in the changing world.

JOHN M. MURRAY (October 11, 2022)

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