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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ SHORT STORIES

Anthology of Horror in F-Sharp Major

Rene David Rivero
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Deft descriptions of darkness and action add dread to these daring sci-fi, horror novellas.

People wake up from their isolation, stupor, or loneliness only to see the world's real horrors in Rene David Rivero's wide-ranging short story collection. Though Rivero conveys the dread early on, the joy is watching the symphony of descriptions accompanying these action-packed novellas.

Five stories are spread across a diverse array of settings: a Colorado homestead, an Arctic Ocean expedition, and New York City. A couple leaves the safety of their home to hunt down the infamous Wendigo, a student is undone by his ambition and thoughts about consciousness, and half-men fight half-animals.

Though suspense and horror merge in this collection, with a slice of sci-fi on the side, the descriptions are not too graphic or over the top. Rivero shows restraint and understands how to tow the line. This makes the book frightening and effective. The reader can only imagine what the character is screaming about at the end of "Pawnee Buttes."

Rich descriptions bring the terrain to life. In "Transformed," the land shifts as much as the characters. Rivero writes how, "With a shot, the crack parted and spread like a mouth forming a grin round and round and round—the onyx of ocean burst through to clash against the ivory of ice." Darkness and the personification of the world comes into play again in "The Business in Apartment H." Rivero describes how, "At five the sun plunged and the sky grieved with the color of onyx."

These novellas average around fifty pages each. Though some pieces feel complete, like "The Business in Apartment H," others, like "A Curiosity of Time and Space," could be lengthened into full-fledged novels. Though they are rich in action, large chunks of summary can seem overwhelming, and adding missing commas after introductory clauses could have smoothed out some pacing issues and minor confusion.

Obsessions rule these characters. Some are trying to escape isolation or find creativity, whereas others feel compelled to seek out adventure or hunt down fabled monsters. In each story, the characters are not waiting for death but "a birth, a new and different kind of life" where "chaos [stands] as the only true constant." Scenes are well placed, though dialogue tends to explain the stories rather than add to characterizations.

The sheer range of genres is what makes this collection so rich. There is something for everyone here, and Rivero's restraint will keep readers guessing.

LISA BOWER (November 14, 2013)

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