



Circus

Christopher Shavers

Rose Dog Books

(164pp)

978-1-64913-060-0

The chilling, thought-provoking stories in the novel Circus are a phantasmagorical fun house mirror of human behaviors.

Christopher Shavers's *Circus* is a terrifying, sometimes surreal tale of revenge, insanity, and dark magic.

The circus itself is a fiendish jigsaw puzzle—a macabre carnival of death that indulges the worst passions of its patrons. For example, when downtrodden Paul suspects his wife of adultery, the circus beckons to him. He gets his revenge, although things don't turn out quite as he expects. His story and others are rich in irony, with people getting much more than they bargained for after a visit to the circus's big top.

Told through interlocking short stories concerned by such revenge-, greed-, and lust-driven people, this is a story concerned with how dark passions are revealed in the spectral sideshow of the circus, which is set on the edge of town. Some of these patrons are brought in by radio advertisements, others by word of mouth; still other people learn about the circus via messages on balloons. Eventually, a detective is called in to seek out the fates of a growing number of missing persons, but he has his own encounter with the shadowy forces inside of the tent.

The characters are developed with varying depth. Many of the book's women, including Paul's wife and Shak's girlfriend, are reduced to stereotypes. In general, the freaks and monsters of the circus are more interesting than their victims from the outside world. Spidergirl, in particular, is the stuff of nightmares, though she also has a soulful melancholy that makes her more than just a horror decoration. Avery and the Hatter are also strong characters, whose psychological depths are hinted at, if hidden beneath their devilish grins.

Backed by dense, impressive world building, the infernal society inside the circus is depicted as complex and layered. Family bonds and the rules of reciprocity bind the inhabitants of the big tent; their social network has its own rules. In comparison, the nearby town is constructed in soapy terms. Still, striking descriptions and creepy prose flesh the world out (though there is some clunky exposition in the characters' exchanges, which sometimes run too long).

There is enough ambiguity in the stories to save them from being morality plays. While bad behavior is sometimes punished, it is also sometimes rewarded. There is a method to the madness, and the freakish family at the heart of the mayhem has a plan that isn't fully revealed until the cavalcade of cruelty at the climax.

The chilling, thought-provoking stories in the novel *Circus* are a phantasmagorical fun house mirror and a disturbing look inside of humanity's darkest desires.

MATT BENZING (November 2, 2021)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book and paid a small fee to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. Foreword Reviews and Clarion Reviews make no guarantee that the publisher will receive a positive review. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.