

Dark Neighbors

Mark Clement Rodgers

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Tales of the occult are enjoying a renaissance in popular culture; from the “Walking Dead” TV series to the bestselling Twilight Saga series, readers all over the world are drawn like moths to a flame to stories about creatures of the night.

Mark Clement Rodgers, a retired maritime captain and real estate investor, offers a spooky story set in suburban San Diego, where it doesn't seem like anything could go wrong beyond an overgrown lawn. David Filer and his neighbor, Jennifer, are thriving on their sun-kissed street as their respective tragedies fade into the past. David is enjoying his retirement as his grief over his wife's death lessens its grip. Jennifer is recovering from her divorce and appreciates a new closeness with her daughter. Their own relationship blooms into something more than merely neighborly as they share cups of coffee, rides to work, meals and eventually their beds. The only shadow looming over their sunny yards is a growing fear that not all is well with the world.

Their fear stems from a series of unusual events: doors found unlocked, lamps found unlit, cars moving in and out of garages on their own. What's more, David and Jennifer are assaulted several times by a putrid smell emitting from parts of their own homes. Then the delivery boy dies in his car after delivering dinner to David's house. The boy's body disappears, more bodies are found than lost, and neither David, Jennifer, nor the local police have any idea what's going on. But it all started when new neighbors arrived in the house across the street.

Rodgers knows just how to make readers too frightened to turn out the bedside light. In this debut novel he displays an acute ability to turn up the suspense and sense of danger just enough so one can't help but keep reading, even while every bump in the night takes on a suspicious aura.

Though the plot bubbles along like a steaming cauldron, a few drawbacks persist throughout the text. The book is told from David's first person point of view, but several times David describes long sequences of events that he isn't present for, such as Jennifer's trip to David's house to fetch supplies for his hospital stay. The result is distracting and confusing.

Another problem is the book's frequent lapses into verbosity: “As Jennifer turned into the driveway, she tapped the garage door opener. Expecting it to transmit its command, which would result in the white, hinged panels lifting to allow her entrance, she had to stop abruptly when she realized it wasn't happening.” Too often, more words appear on the page than necessary. Such prolix sometimes slogs down an otherwise quick cadence of a story that occasionally feels like the author is poking fun at the genre in which he chooses to write.

Despite a few textual issues, readers who like to be scared will find *Dark Neighbors* enjoyable.

ANDI DIEHN (June 27, 2011)

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