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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ FANTASY

Ethics of the Undead

Loren Schechter
Merrimack Media (Nov 20, 2013)
Softcover $17.95 (250pp)
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Urban fantasy meets eccentric comedy in this unique and caustically witty conflict between vampire and human ethics.

Envision a sequestered academy in the Sawtooth Wilderness of Idaho where the faculty and students bare their fangs … literally. Written by Loren Schechter with a sarcastic punch intended to poke fun at America's ethics debate, especially when it comes to issues of religion and diversity, this rollicking novel elicits a laugh or two and slyly masks its message behind the narrative.

A group of unsuspecting human teenagers are held hostage by vampires to serve on a jury. Trapped and terrified, they conspire to escape, though all odds are against them. This sinister school is a carefully guarded fortress in an area that even the experienced survivalist may hesitate to traverse—a strong setup conducive to conflict and tension.

Despite the creation of an ideal situation for story line development, an overwhelming cast smothers the clarity of the plot, making it difficult to get to know anyone in this fantastical tale. Peppered with countless characters who are propelled by excessive dialogue, this story may be best suited to a screenplay. Rather than flowing naturally, information is conveyed through discussions that have an artificial ring, even though many are filled with humorous remarks.

Schechter's gift for crazy one-liners and off-the-wall comedy enhances his novel, making his villain villa in the Idaho boondocks a fun escape for an evening of light entertainment: "It was being turned into a vampire at age 42 that had put a crimp in Bart's relationships with his golf buddies, his ex-wife, and even his fiancé. The newfound necessity of always wearing a surgical mask to conceal his fangs led everyone to inquire as to whether he had a contagious disease or was paranoid about air quality."

The criticism of social maladies and behavioral disorders is obscure, and this book's slant is toward a commercial, not literary, market, as is evident in lines like this one: "Hope had never seen an overweight person get to her feet and out on the floor as quickly as Edna LittleHawk. She wondered if Edna had been a gymnast a hundred pounds ago."

A gaudy cover depicting a sexy vampire with evil red eyes and purple skin tone, sporting a school instructor's demeanor, appears suited to young adult fiction. Indeed, much of this playful story contains simple passages that will appeal to a youthful audience.

This is Schechter's second novel. His experience as a psychiatrist has informed the unique approach to questions of ethics in this book.

Ethics of the Undead will amuse teenagers and adults alike, primarily those seeking an unusual backwoods trail to a charter school from hell. Double entendres and caustic wit abound in this weird psychological fantasy loaded with heady messages written between the lines.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (January 10, 2014)

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