ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

Grendel
Ken Brosky
Ken Brosky, illustrator
Brew City Press
978-1-4276-2054-5
Two Stars (out of Five)

It is rare to find a book with a half-dead protagonist. Tyler Leto is a corrupt adulterous and drug-abusing businessman who has become caught between life and Hell in *Grendel* Ken Brosky's first novel. After a realistically depicted heart attack Tyler begins having vivid experiences that he first views as hallucinations but which turn out to be nightly visits to another planet Hell governed by divine fiat rather than physics. In terror Tyler visits the church he attended as a child to speak with its priest. The contrast between the horrors of Tyler's nightly journeys and Father Dean's rationalist argument that "the consensus now seems to be that Hell is really more of an absence from God" is a little discomfiting almost evangelical.

Although they're different from the horrors with which most preachers would threaten their flocks the proclivities of Hell's demented angels and the warped social dynamics of the damned are nonetheless flamboyantly disgusting although the language used to describe Hell's torments quickly becomes untroublesome and generic. Brosky seems to have been reading Dante with one eye and Clive Barker with the other: a dark wood caves ravenous beasts and pools of fire share a planet with perpetually healing victims impaled on spikes and one particular angel oddly named Aerial who takes sadistic pleasure in experimenting with creative ways to torment Tyler. The intimacy of their strange relationship is one of the most interesting things about the book—in one protracted scene our protagonist acts as his torturer's submissive:

"Can you feel it?" Aerial's voice whispered into Tyler's ears…"Feel what" Tyler called out…"The claustrophobic feeling of not knowing how big or how small the space around you is. The fear that at any second you could slam into the ground at terminal velocity and break apart like a piece of glass." "I can!" Tyler yelled breathless. "I can feel it." "Good" Aerial whispered.

Aerial spends more than ten pages variously maiming drowning and poisoning Tyler who suffers memory flashbacks when he isn't enduring physical torment. Brosky's Hell is particularly horrifying because of its nihilism and the mechanistic capricious deity it posits. The

damned souls Tyler befriends aren't bad people; some of them are young or suffered terribly during their lives. Several of them even say that they are there because they didn't become Christians and Aerial backs up their assertions when he maligns Buddhists and other groups in a lengthy (and racist) rant against humanity. Tyler himself attempts to achieve salvation by exploiting a bug in the universe the same bug Aerial used to become Beowulf's monster Grendel whereby a damned person can hitch a ride on the undertow of many other souls who die at the same time and are destined for heaven.

The novel is strongest when Tyler is interacting with his best friend his priest his comrades in Hell and his tormentor Aerial. Its weakest moments are when he is in the real world sitting in lengthy board meetings or suffering through interminable tortures. *Grendel* ultimately suffers most from overwrought and unnecessary descriptive language twisted syntax and logic and continuity errors but the originality of its concept of an embodied hell is intriguing.

Val Grimm