

Killer Within: An Allison McNeil Thriller

Jeff Gunhus

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An elusive serial killer meets a savvy FBI agent in this horrific story of derangement and madness. Jeff Gunhus delves into the inner motivations that drive a man to torture and dismember victims in a bizarre, self-imposed ritual—utilizing tools to inflict pain and sexual assault. *Killer Within* approaches the edge of paganism as a gruesome contemporary tale set along the Chesapeake Bay.

Allison McNeil is a detective with a past. Her judgment is clouded by abuse and sexist responses to her claims. Propelled to extraordinary lengths, she goes undercover as a photographer to trap a menace to society. This is an agent with an agenda, a woman who cannot shake a series of degrading experiences from her early years that haunt the deepest recesses of her psyche. The worst event, a rape, she cannot forget. As time passes, she continues to dwell on the trauma, seething with rage. Fully conscious that she has not been provided the justice she deserves in her own life, this knowledge fuels her actions as an agent seeking resolution in the cases she investigates.

Arnie Milhouse, a polished gentleman on the surface, is insane. He kills and kills again. Astute at masking evidence, he evades law enforcement. He finds that exceptionally beautiful women, like Allison, give him the greatest feeling of conquest. As some men use money to manipulate lovers into bed for the sake of control, he takes their lives instead.

A masterful storyteller with an eye for eccentric detail, Gunhus knows how to prolong the tension while gradually revealing his meticulously developed main characters. Exceptional pacing, alternating between slow buildup and fast action, makes this terrifying novel an outstanding example of old-school, bloody horror melded with sophisticated intrigue—not recommended for children or anyone sensitive to violence.

Gunhus makes his sole mistake in wielding a gratuitous descriptive hand. Maximum impact in shuddering moments such as this may have been better achieved through understatement: “Arnie felt warm liquid splash over him. On his face, his neck, in his eyes. He tasted it on his tongue, salty and hot...Blood spurted out of the wound in arcs almost a foot high. Wet gargles escaped his throat as he clutched at the wound. Then the man twitched, horrible spasms like there was electricity shooting through his body.”

A balanced blend of heart-pounding visuals and soul-searching introspection, *Killer Within*, Gunhus's second novel, reaches beyond ordinary expectations for the genre. Gunhus exhibits a distinctive style typically found in seasoned authors like Dean Koontz and Stephen King. His work clearly indicates a passion for delivering a book at the highest possible level to attract the jaded as well as the forgiving within his audience. An eye-catching cover depicting what appears to be the Chesapeake Bay at dusk—an urban backdrop illuminating the shoreline—foretells an after-dark danger lurking in the shadows.

Gunhus is a prolific author of fiction and nonfiction. Despite a tendency to strive too hard to trigger a nauseated or repulsed reaction that is characteristic of pulp fiction, this shock-worthy story remains ghoulishly mesmerizing and

among the best in mainstream thrillers.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (March 4, 2014)

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