

Lightland: A supernatural thriller

Kenny Kemp

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In 2029, scientists race against time to find a cure for a hemorrhagic fever named for the blue-black bruises it causes: Cobalt is fast and deadly—a pandemic killing millions.

Chris Tempest, an archaeologist, and Kate Seagram, a medical researcher for the CDC, have a long-distance relationship—Chris in New York, Kate in Washington—until Chris brings back a mummy from Tanzania. The tribesman was buried in a cave with his heart in a canopic jar. The discovery leads the pair in two entirely different directions: tests on blood from the ancient tribesman's heart show he was immune to Cobalt, and Kate's boss clones him to find a cure. However, cloning tears K'tanu's spirit from Lightland, the afterlife where he has been peacefully dwelling with his wife and children.

With an eye-catching cover and billed as a supernatural thriller, the book is filled with references to religion, faith, and life after death, but no real depth. The somewhat shallow characters have doubts, too casual to be called crises of faith, that resolve too easily—with visions or even convenient visits to Lightland—yet their doubts persist. There's no doctrine in this book to offend religious denominations, and there are supernatural elements, but they seem more tacked on to the story than flowing through its veins, more coincidence than miracle.

The story rockets along at a good clip, with fluid writing and lots of scientific detail—some of which the reader will wonder about, because of other inaccuracies in the text. In one example, Chris has been living in a deserted house for two years when one day he finds the skeleton of the former owner sitting against the garage wall, still fully clothed, with the butt of his last cigar on the ground near his left hand. However, the house is isolated; animals would have dragged off the body, and the butt would have rotted away to nothing. Also, none of the main characters contract Cobalt, although there are plenty of opportunities and none of them is immune.

The author's prose flows smoothly: "Mother Moon was rising majestically above the trees. Tonight, she would watch over both K'tanu and Father Sun as they died and awaited rebirth to-morrow." With more character development and more life in the supernatural elements, it would have been a superior book.

Still, there's plenty here to hold readers' interest.

MARLENE SATTER (February 13, 2009)

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