

Manuscripts of the Macabre

Maurice M. McKiernan

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This philosophical and phantasmagoric collection contains haunting tales more lasting than mere ghost stories.

In Maurice McKiernan's short story collection *Manuscripts of the Macabre*, memorable villains and dark connections abound. These well-written tales linger long after their pages have been abandoned, and the characters and scenes haunt in the way expertly rendered horror stories are supposed to. But, unlike many horror stories, the trials and tests facing the protagonists of each story are hard to shake because of their emotional resonance outside the bounds of the macabre.

"The Torment Within" begins the collection, and fans of Phil Collins's 1989 hit "Another Day in Paradise" will be hard-pressed to ever sing along again without recalling images of the last meal of death row inmate Walter Vinyan. In the six chapters of this story, each titled by a Collins chart topper, a pop-driven soundtrack is grafted onto a grim dance choreographed by McKiernan. The result is eerie and unforgettable.

This introductory story recasts the tragic and all-too-familiar werewolf character as the broken-down man of Officer Karl Quinn, who moves from drug-addled victim to sharp-toothed vigilante. The theme of retribution is instantly recognizable and, because it's such a common desire of the human experience, it's hard not to root for the "bad guy."

One of the text's underlying strengths is its ability to make terrifying circumstances recognizable by positioning popular references within foreign and often frightening terrain. These stories are dark, but perhaps the most macabre aspect animating each is that shred of recognition, vividly woven into each scene. Characters are fully realized, complex, a little frightening, and perhaps a little too familiar.

Each short story is written from a patient, first-person perspective. The six unique plots unfold evenly and are punctuated by natural, crisp dialogue. However, sometimes tension is cut too quickly with premature foreshadowing, as with lines like "in reality, something much darker was going on" and "his intuition would not be wrong."

Although some of McKiernan's short stories have a gruesome edge and might compromise sleep after bedtime reading, others resonate with appeals to human frailty and flawed natures. Addiction, crime, loss, unrequited love, suicide, and the haunting paranoia of perception versus reality all figure into these short stories, which are as philosophical as they are phantasmagoric.

No matter the subject, McKiernan writes with clarity and precision throughout this collection. These are haunting tales more lasting than mere ghost stories.

AMANDA SILVA (May 2, 2016)

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