

Messenger of Death

Alex Markman

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Sometimes a novel reaches out and grabs readers by the throat, riveting them to the action, despite the discomfort caused by the subject matter. Alex Markman almost pulls this off with his third novel. Set in Canada during the mid 1990s, *Messenger of Death* is about the violent rivalry between two motorcycle gangs (or clubs), the well-established and widely feared Devil's Knights, and the young upstarts, the Iron Ghosts.

Prostitution, gun-running, drug trade, stolen cars and parts, loan-sharking—all the crime that takes place in the seamy underworld is monitored and controlled by the Devil's Knights. The Iron Ghosts form and muscle in on the action without permission from the Devil's Knights, causing a full-scale war to erupt. Marcel, the leader of the Knights is looking for a killer and hires Claude, who, Markman writes, is “fancying the biker's life, with its unrestricted freedoms and cruel, dangerous adventures on the edge of survival. He would use his favored weapon, a piece of metal rod to beat the shit out of those who stood in his way.”

Meanwhile, Detective Serge Gorte is appointed the “new head of the anti-biker squad” and gathers information and evidence to try to destroy both gangs. He attempts to put together a case and prays that the Canadian government will pass legislation that would make it illegal to belong to a motorcycle club.

Unfortunately, there are no characters in the novel which the reader can sympathize. Markman's male characters are vicious men with names like Techie, Trasher, Stash, and Machete, but they seem more like caricatures than actual people. The portrayal of the female characters is disappointing and adolescent. Beautiful and alluring, they seem to be no more than eye candy or a fount for men to cool their ardor. The author is given a chance to create strong and independent women that add nuances and depth to the male characters like the female characters of Cormac McCarthy, but instead he takes the road of the clichéd hooker and stripper with the heart of gold, or the abused girl looking for her next abuser.

Although it has flaws and contains spelling and grammatical errors, *Messenger of Death* contains well-written dialogue and a fast-paced narrative. The story pulls readers in, and the sadism perpetrated by rival biker gangs and their instruments of violence, especially the sociopathic Claude, will simultaneously fascinate and repulse readers.

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