Clarion Review

General

Millstone
L.E. Bennett
978-1-4389-1933-1
One Star (out of Five)

Alex Stone has just finished murdering his seventh victim a man who keeps children's teeth in his refrigerator when his escape is interrupted by the police. As he jumps from the balcony he is shot to death by the officers and plummets straight to Hell.

He arrives just as the gatekeepers of Hell are planning a millennial contest between players from each of their realms. After enduring a few years of gruesome torture Alex will fight for the eighth realm.

The story of Alex's life is slowly revealed through flashbacks as are the stories of other sufferers of Hell's tortures—and even the lives of the gatekeepers themselves. Alex and his sister were brutally abused by their parents until Alex murdered them at the age of nine with his talking knife Mr. Bane. With its confident and reassuring attitude the knife became Alex's best companion; his sister unable to move past the abuse was sent to an institution. Alex makes it his mission to rid the world of pedophiles and child-killers; he believes the murders of five of these sickos are the only good things he's done in his life and he is dismayed to find that these acts earned him a place in Hell.

Bennett introduces more than a dozen characters and tells each of their stories with unwarranted detail. Each killing setting and minor action is depicted with an excruciating amount of metaphor and adjectives. By the time the big battle comes more than 150 pages into the book readers will have nearly forgotten they were waiting for it.

Because Alex plays for the defending champion team his hometown will serve as the battleground. The players chase each other around Corvallis Oregon unseen by the living. They dispose of bodies with the help of demon's teeth which swallow up the injured players and take them back to Hell. Bennett seems to make up the rules of the game as he goes along; his authorial voice intrudes into the narrative to update readers on the rules.

Each player represents a different realm of Hell: the "hopelessly slothful" reside in the

first realm and the “incorrigibly greedy” suffer in the seventh realm for example. But everyone Alex encounters is a murderer or sexual predator leaving readers to wonder how thieves liars adulterers and other sinners are punished in this world. Although readers come to know the other players’ history they never see their humanity.

When depicting action scenes Bennett would do well to remember the adage “less is more.” Bennett shows potential with the murder of Alex’s parents. This is the book’s most dramatic scene and it is simply told: “The boy stared in a state of silent accomplishment as he watched his father’s eyelids and lower lip quiver a bit then stop. Wayne Blew Stone was dead.” Other deaths unfold over several pages. This minuteness of detail makes it hard for readers to follow the action.

The book is decidedly morbid with a bloody murder or act of torture occurring on nearly every page. Bennett’s convoluted method of storytelling detracts from an interesting concept. The story’s flow would be improved by making dramatic cuts eliminating many of Hell’s bosses who contribute nothing to the main storyline and editing for typos and grammatical errors. Alex’s adventures will probably be continued in a sequel in which he serves Hell as a “Grim” dispatching doomed souls from Earth.

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