



Monsterland

Michael Phillip Cash

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What if vampires, werewolves, and zombies aren't the monsters we've made them out to be? What if the human heart is more monstrous than anything with fur or fangs? So Michael Phillip Cash toys with our preconceptions of scary creatures in his delightfully entertaining novel, *Monsterland*. Part satire, part coming-of-age story, part genre gore-fest, *Monsterland* is smart, campy fun.

Wyatt Baldwin is the book's star. He's a high school senior with a new stepdad, an annoying little brother, and a huge crush on the most popular girl in school. He spends his days with two geeky friends working at Instaburger in the small desert town of Copper Valley, California. His life and those of his friends change dramatically when business mogul Vincent Conrad decides to open his new theme park in Copper Valley. The park is designed to provide a safe and protected habitat for the world's dwindling population of vampires, werewolves, and zombies. But when Wyatt and crew visit the much-heralded Monsterland, they find the reality of the park and its keepers disturbing, to say the least.

Unfortunately, the book relies on more than one cliché to push the plot along. There's the classic geek-gets-girl convention recycled from any number of teen movies: "Not mildly, not slightly—there was no denying it—she was in total overload of obsession for this peculiar boy." There's the park itself and its eccentric creator, like a Jurassic Park for Halloween enthusiasts. And, of course, there are cheesy one-liners at every opportune moment. "Where's Nolan?" one friend asks. "He lost his head over this place," Wyatt answers sardonically.

Although the plot becomes derivative, Cash is a talented and clever enough writer to imbue his characters with real emotion. That a passage about a half-turned zombie in a detention camp could be moving is a testament to the author's skill: "Tears smarted his eyes; at least they still functioned. His voice, his tool of the trade, was almost gone. ... Now he communicated with a one-note groan that no one understood, and it seemed only to gain him another portion of the bloody gruel they sent in through long pipelines."

As much fun as *Monsterland* is, Cash peppers the narrative with real-life significance. The park's gate reminds Wyatt of the entrance to Auschwitz. The vamps, as they're called, are treated like a forgotten minority until the park gives them a home. It is this deepening of the plot that elevates *Monsterland* above standard monster fare. The novel will prove an entertaining and thought-provoking read for both teenagers and adults.

SCOTT NEUFFER (November 13, 2015)

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