

Old Scores

A. J. Harrison

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Old Scores is a sanguineous vampfest of a novel—supple with fantastic, horrific, and amorous elements.

Moody, bloody, and set against the frigid background of modern, wintry Chicago, A. J. Harrison's fantasy novel *Old Scores* follows a young vampire as he's confronted with the forces of love—and evil.

While Simon (a vampire) literally runs into Anita (a human) during exam week at the University of Illinois, the ancient and indomitable Shafax, King of Vampires, is on the hunt for Salem, Simon's former mentor. Along with his human prisoner and henchman Hans, Shafax leaves behind a grisly trail of corpses as he comes closer to fulfilling his thirst for absolute power. After a brutal encounter with Shafax, Salem enlists Simon's help. Meanwhile, Simon realizes that Anita means more to him than he would like to admit.

The audience's immersion into this cold, dark, and dangerous vampiric reality begins with the introduction of Hans, one of three characters who receives concerted focus in the book. Unlike Simon and Anita, though, Hans's story concludes with a quietness that doesn't match the attention given to his characterization early on and throughout the story. However, Shafax is a classic villain: malevolent without apology, he has no tragic backstory to humanize him. His ruthless desire for power provokes Simon, Anita, and Salem to act.

The dialogue is realistic in its shortness, respecting the natural flow of conversation while also revealing people's personalities through their use of specific words, exclamations, and mannerisms. Simon's speech patterns are the best example: he is cool and curt, and he establishes the general behavioral indicators of the vampires of his world. Details as of the "rules" of native soil and invitations into human homes, as well as the inclusion of killer sunlight, garlic, and crosses, merge tried-and-true tropes with the advancements of contemporary life, creating a compelling dynamic that stresses the difference between those who hypnotize and those who are hypnotized.

Quite a few subplots are involved, but they're all connected to either Simon or Shafax, pitting the vampires against each other in both the literal and the figurative sense. One particular subplot concerning Anita's childhood friend Christine speaks to the sensual nature of the vampires' tale while also fleshing out the drama of competition between friends, especially in the case of romantic interests.

Simon and Anita's romance develops slowly and organically, contrasting with moments of immediate, intimate tension that occur between vampires and their victims. Along with these moments, scenes of anticipation, fear, and gore are plentiful, contributing to an overall tone of comfortable dread. Scenes are fleshed out with descriptions that coax the pace toward a gradual, creeping buildup that culminates into a final, ferocious battle.

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CIERRA TAYLOR (December 14, 2023)

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