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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ SCIENCE FICTION

PACT I: The Taste of Fear

Duncan Shelley
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“We are not an invasion fleet. We are a procurement team.” That is how the alien invaders, who arrive not as overt conquerors but as clandestine suppliers seeking human meat for a galactic restaurant chain, introduce themselves in Duncan Shelley’s clever science-fiction novel. Although the author expends too much energy on having the characters work at unraveling a mystery he has already explained to the reader in the opening chapters, *Pact I: The Taste of Fear* still makes for a good read.

The opening twenty-seven pages are nothing less than brilliant. The plot line of aliens coming to Earth to seek human flesh has not been so fully developed since the original *Twilight Zone* and its classic “To Serve Man” episode. Shelley takes this idea to new and humorous heights by marrying that theme with an Illuminati-type secret society which sells out the people of Earth in a business deal with an intergalactic fast-food business (the “Garb’hraz restaurant chain,” which “has been the market leader in the galaxy for six thousands years”). The old men who run this secret society trade the lives of nearly twelve million people a year in return for rejuvenation and immortality, which, when Shelley gets around to it, makes his book an even more entertaining diversion from the standard alien invasion novel.

Unfortunately, except for a snippet here and there over the next three hundred pages, Shelley does not stick with either the alien procurement team or the cabal of old men with whom they have made a devil’s bargain. Instead, he creates about a half dozen characters who seek to unravel a mystery about a remote village in Alaska whose entire population has suddenly gone missing without a trace. As the reader knows already, this village was harvested and its occupants butchered for meat to be used by the intergalactic chefs.

There are many times in the novel when the reader would like to reach out and shake these investigators just to get them and the story to move forward. These are odd characters to begin with. For example, there are Nina, the international detective and TV personality who lives in and conducts her affairs from a submarine and her former lover, Ghost, an ex-Russian special forces commando turned freelance mercenary, who has his own mission-within-a-mission. Add to the mix a psychotic female Green Beret sergeant, a preteen girl assassin who works for the CIA, and several others that the reader must keep track of. Sometimes their stories intersect, but most of the time, Shelley bounces back and forth in mini-chapters, as he tries to follow all of the characters’ paths simultaneously.

Shelley and the reader get lost in this labyrinthine maze of tangents, and it is only when the author brings the book back—sporadically and all too briefly—to the aliens and the Illuminati types that the reader can savor the true, unique flavor of *The Taste of Fear*.

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (June 19, 2013)

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