

Peripheral: Tales of Horror at a Glance

Sylvester Pilgrim

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Peripheral showcases an impressive range of human emotions and the unsparing dark imagination of its author.

A flash of something in the distance, real or imagined, catches the eyes of the characters in Sylvester Pilgrim's short story collection, *Peripheral: Tales of Horror at a Glance*. Even his most ruthless protagonists experience fear of the unknown, rashness, wrong decisions, then consequences meted out in blood. Pilgrim takes his characters to the darkened brink of existence, to the shadowy periphery where nightmare and reality become indistinguishable. The book is a bloody good read.

With nineteen stories, *Peripheral* is difficult to characterize. Classic horror conventions are at work in several pieces, including the title story, which, strung out over four installments, revolves around a demon trying to break into the earthly realm. Other pieces, such as "Til Death," resemble pulpy crime thrillers, replete with hardened hit men and drug-addled femmes fatales. Pilgrim mixes horror and crime elements in "Self-Portrait" and "Reflections." He also experiments with perspective and voice in the short, cleverly disturbing monologue "Inner Demon," and in "Dinner Date," which is relayed almost entirely in text messages.

On the whole, the author proves adept at characterization and pacing, carefully, often methodically, developing his characters and building suspense. When he doesn't do this, it shows. Such is the case in "The Mechanic," a generic tale about a grisly serial killer. Character and plot are thinly developed, and Pilgrim, a fan of twist endings, ties up the story in predictable fashion. Much the same could be said for "Dinner Date," if not for its novel use of text messages. Both stories feel like uninspired filler.

But Pilgrim dazzles with "Nemesis" and "Last Call." The former is perhaps the goriest story, but also the most imaginative, becoming a brilliant allegory on life and death. "Digging deep within, he searched," Pilgrim writes of his embattled protagonist Hero. "He looked for what he needed to fight. The conviction he needed in order to continue, why he should stand and not run. He found the answer in the end. He would fight because he did not want to cause her pain."

"Last Call" stands out as the collection's best story and perhaps the closest thing to literary fiction. It contains little, if any, supernatural elements. It is a blunt, raw human story of two lonely people trying to find answers in a cruel world. "And I would say that sometimes we all do foolish things because of love," a heartbroken man tells a complete stranger over the phone. In this piece, Pilgrim's twist ending is devastating.

Rooted in genre conventions, *Peripheral* showcases an impressive range of human emotions and the unsparing dark imagination of its author. It is a brutal and bloody ride, but one worth taking for those unafraid to explore the dark boundaries of human, and nonhuman, experience.

SCOTT NEUFFER (August 19, 2015)

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