

Sheol Has Opened

Judith Virta

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“You know, they don’t eat chicken in Iceland,” one scientist tells another in Judith Virta’s *Sheol Has Opened*, a sci-fi mashup of Mayan, biblical, and other end-of-the-world prophecies. The paucity of poultry in Iceland has nothing to do with the story, yet it is just one of the many little quips and factoids that Virta’s readers are likely to tuck away and hold in reserve for use in those awkward moments when languishing dinner table conversations need a jump start.

Despite the tease on the back cover, most of *Sheol Has Opened* is less about prophecies of doom and gloom than it is about academic infighting. The “contemptuous ass” that is Dr. Anton Bentov, who oversees a research group, is not so much an evil villain as a petty, selfish martinet and bully who insists that only he receive credit for the work of his underlings. His is a marvelously rich, slimy, and unlikable character, “more like a strutting peacock than an academic. A dangerous peacock if pushed.” Bentov is the universal bad boss, and one that many have likely had the misfortune to run across.

It is Bentov, perhaps even more than Dr. Dan Archer, who drives the book. Archer is one of the many scientists and researchers who discover the galactic shift that, in fulfillment of Mayan predictions, will align Earth with an emerging black hole. This group of scientists spend three hundred pages in the book discovering and corroborating bits and pieces of scientific evidence that point to some big upcoming event, but it is Bentov who labors to steal the credit for their work—and to find a way to clandestinely profit from it.

Virta is to be congratulated for Bentov’s character, as he greatly livens up what could otherwise be a rather slow-burning, academic yawn: there is an awful lot of buildup here that would make for a sleep-inducing read were it not for the loathsomely lascivious peacock of a professor.

Around page two hundred, Virta shifts gears rather jarringly to bring first biblical and then Mayan prophecies into the story. It is here readers learn that “Sheol” is the Hebrew name for what could be Hades, Hell, Purgatory, or a well of souls—a holding tank, a repository, or simply a terminal where the dead wait in endless anticipation for a bus to the other side. The black hole that Archer has discovered, the reader is told, may be the biblical Sheol, the Mayan “door to the cosmic center,” or just some spatial anomaly that could swallow Earth or bathe it in energy-giving gamma rays.

Virta sparks this debate by having her characters cite from the books of Job, Psalms, Isaiah, and Revelation as to what the burgeoning black hole and Earth’s sudden spate of seismic anomalies may portend. This is where Virta also brings in a literally “screeching” and “bird-like” Catholic priest of the type rarely seen since the Inquisition—or a Dan Brown novel. The whole tone of the book changes, as an anti-science Church hierarchy tries to discredit or at least delay the release of studies by Archer and others of the impending astronomical alignment.

Fortunately, the reader will find solace and relief from this familiar theological debate in the antics of Bentov, yet even that is eventually eclipsed by the discussion of what the happenings have to do with God, the Mayans, and the end or alteration of life on Earth. Virta does throw a preachy curve ball at the end of the book, one that seems to come out of left field. Otherwise, *Sheol Has Opened* is an engaging read.

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (June 18, 2012)

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