Clarion Review

Short Stories

The Apartment Building Next Door: A Collection of Dark Tales
Joseph R. Grych
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Three Stars (out of Five)

…gaze long into an abyss the abyss gazes also into thee. — Friedrich Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886)

In the older declining Midwestern community of Littlefall an apartment building performs the same end function as a hospice program without the gentle compassion. Tenants move in under their own power and end their residencies on sheet-covered stretchers. Neighbors with manicured lawns and settled lives are malicious or at least unconcerned. Neither they nor local EMTs expect anything less than a continuing string of sudden vacancies. They refrain from issuing warnings to those in peril instead treating them as objects of morbid curiosity. “She’ll read your mail spy on you and count the beer bottles in your trash. But when there is something truly wrong she won’t be there.”

Indeed carnage as a by-product of disappearing industry underlies much of what is symbolically presented as supernatural. Character foibles and failures travel between stories but the sources of doom are a jukebox of variety. The apartment building and the vicinity under its sway function as a clearinghouse for cruel human beings tormented spirits and maybe even Ol’ Scratch himself. Rotating antagonists eliminate the possibility of pinning down a common cause. The only solid conclusion available is that one should stay clear of the area. Poems between stories are similar in menacing tone but their content isn’t specific enough to serve as value-added bridges.

Social commentary and the irony of the O. Henry school flesh out the first of six stories *Bright Windows Dark Rooms* which features a painter who receives a draft notice in the mail during the first year of his independence. The most effectively disquieting tale *These Are Our Neighbors* has no macabre element. It is a portrait of a permanently traumatized young Vietnam war widow too scattered and drug-addled for formal employment. She draws income only by turning tricks out of a blue-collar bar. The state has taken her children the youngest of whom she

is allowed to see in the presence of a child welfare worker. “Kara wheeled the buggy with little what’s-her-name inside.” She doesn’t realize the infant is actually a boy.

Joseph Grych is a librarian in Illinois and the author of a fantasy novel *Sons of God Daughters of Man*. The bleak futures of his characters are fatal accidents shootings and insanity. Weeds are choking out their lives while those around them let fate play out uninterrupted. Horror as metaphor is the draw. *The Apartment Building Next Door* is a damning indictment in search of the responsible party.