



## The Augury Assignment

**Mark Christopher Mathis**

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*Both suspenseful and grotesque, The Augury Assignment fully embraces the horror genre.*

*The Augury Assignment* by Mark Christopher Mathis is a gripping and unsettling novel that delivers the best of the horror genre. It offers not only gore but also unyielding suspense, thrills, and a chilling exploration of human character.

Toby Ferguson is not the average fifteen year old boy, which is readily apparent from the beginning of the novel. His mother was murdered, his father is on death row for killing her, and he is forced to move in with his aunt's family.

As part of an assignment for his English teacher, Ms. Augury, Toby is required to write journal entries to his "future self." These entries, although sporadic, are where Toby expresses himself best throughout the novel, articulating his confusion, panic, and fears about his life, choices, and actions. The entries offer a glimpse beyond all of the masks that Toby wears. They are where he is at his most honest and his most reliable.

Toby's otherness is also defined in the way that he hides his rage so well, in the way that he charms people, and in the way that he calculates how to act around different people and then executes it perfectly. Most of the story is given to following Toby in his day to day life, and reads like following a predator without knowing what the next prey will be. The sense of dread surrounding Toby doesn't so much rise as it does swell and then ebb, only to inevitably swell again.

While the dread never disappears entirely, there are lulls, often when Toby believes things in his life have been set right. When he chooses to be, Toby is kind and even thoughtful, which makes the reemergence of his predator side all the more surprising. That he has such layers makes the horror of the novel more palpable.

Other characters are not as well fleshed out. While Danny, his best friend, and Pamela, his girlfriend, have some depth, other secondary characters, including Toby's aunt Beverly and stepbrother Dima, are often one-note. Sometimes this serves to emphasize Toby's detachment, but more often it leads to flat, empty dialogue between others.

At times, the novel's shock factor takes over the plot. Grotesque actions and grisly descriptions, while definitely unsettling, tend to overwhelm the emotional impact of certain scenes. By the climax, gory descriptions have become almost rote, and there isn't much shock value left.

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CLARISSA GOLDSMITH (July 15, 2016)

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