

The Burning Z

Clive Riddle

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Zombies have taken over the country. There are books, TV shows, and movies everywhere featuring the popular antagonists in virtually every scenario possible. One might think the potential for new zombie stories would be exhausted. But that would be incorrect, as Clive Riddle has shown in his very enjoyable novel, *The Burning Z*.

Riddle previously authored *Dorris Bridge* (2010), a supernatural thriller. For *The Burning Z*, Riddle strikes upon an ingenious idea—an outbreak of zombies at the annual Burning Man music and art festival in the Nevada desert.

The main protagonist, Conner, along with his friend Bruce and ladylove, Cassie, are the glue that hold the story together. But Riddle is adept at developing other characters throughout the book, even when they last only a few pages before succumbing to a zombie tide. There's also plenty of backstory provided for Conner and the others. Riddle's heroes are no cardboard cutouts.

The isolated setting and anything-is-possible craziness of Burning Man provides a built-in explanation for how an outbreak might go relatively unnoticed, with many people dismissing the attacking zombies as normal, costumed attendees. It also creates a perfect setup for moments of humor, which Riddle uses to keep the book fun: zombies locked in Porta Potties in search of *anything* of human origin, and many ridiculously garbed zombies and victims.

The local color—Riddle's detailed descriptions of Burning Man campsites and the terrain—provides vivid backdrops for the story's events. The book's pacing is another of its strengths; short sections, each separately titled with plenty of natural cliffhangers, make *The Burning Z* a compelling read that's tough to put down. There are a few missteps along the way—some grammatical errors and an occasional clunky sentence—but prove to be only a minor distraction.

In an interesting twist, Riddle makes an otherworldly sphere the root cause of the fast-spreading zombie sickness, a form of alien attack whose true purpose is never completely revealed. But *The Burning Z* offers a satisfying ending, with just the right number of unanswered questions: one character's fate is left in doubt, and as Alan Gorman, an ex-military doctor caught up in the chaos, says, "What makes you think they didn't send another somewhere? Or there isn't another one coming? Or a hundred?"

Readers will be eager to find out what happens next and hopeful that Riddle is already at work on a sequel.

PETER DABBENE (March 28, 2013)

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