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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ GENERAL FICTION

The Butcher's Boy

Michael Robb
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Michael Robb, the author of numerous fantasy stories published under the pen name M. R. Mathias, makes a successful foray into supernatural horror with his chilling new novel *The Butcher's Boy.* Thirty-one years ago, William "Buxly the Butcher" Buxly, Sr., was put to death for killing his wife, daughters, and son, Billy, in their house. Around the time of the sentencing, young Billy's best friend and next door neighbor, Tommy McMurphy, disappears. Fast forward to the present day: Divorcee Janet, her eleven-year-old son Michael, and his protective Rottweiler Lucy move into the Buxley's old house, initially unaware of the mansion's grisly past. Soon, however, they start seeing and hearing strange things. At the same time, Janet, Michael, and Lucy quickly befriend handsome handyman/father-figure Steve, struggling meth addict/painter Oliver, and chubby, sweet babysitter Maggie. Michael quickly realizes apparitions haunt his house. As the boy researches the Buxly deaths, the members of the group have eerie experiences with the ghosts, spirits who may wish them good or ill. Meanwhile, murders begin occurring that bear a spooky resemblance to Buxly the Butcher's familial decapitations of yore. Michael and his compatriots must solve the killings, past and present, confront the spirits, and escape with their lives.

The novel is a suspenseful page-turner with well-developed characters. The creepy events start off with a bang at the beginning of the novel and ramp up further as the ghosts begin to materialize. The dead become as well-developed as the living as the plot weaves through unexpected twists, new layers, and false starts. Michael is a multivalent boy, brave enough to seek out a ghost story, yet still needful of supportive adults such as Janet, Steve, Oliver, and Maggie. Janet is a level-headed compassionate mom, keeping her wits about her in life and love. Steve is a charmer who quickly becomes a dedicated family man. Maggie evinces grit that makes her more than the stereotypical lonely fat girl. In Oliver, Robb creates an empathetic portrait of an addict caught between meth and sobriety. Even Lucy the Rottweiler is a round character, menacing and loving, yet fiercely protective of Michael. The specters, too, have solid personalities, and the strength with which they assert themselves renders them even scarier.

The terror and plot revelations mount until the book's final third, in which everything spins somewhat out of control. After establishing that Lucy is Michael's constant companion, she sustains an injury and disappears from the text, only to reappear in the epilogue. Its sad because the rapport between Lucy and Michael will touch readers. The fates of several of the living characters are somewhat over-the-top, yet simultaneously anti-climactic. The supernatural element becomes ridiculous; pendants whisper, ghosts change their temperaments, and the story devolves into an undoing of everything the author worked so hard to create. However, most of the novel progresses well, from unnerving to shuddersome.

Robb's book is recommended for fans of horror who can handle graphic, sexualized violence.

JILL ALLEN (March 17, 2011)

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