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Clarion Review ★★★☆☆ FANTASY

The Devil Pulls the Strings

J. W. Zarek
J. W. Zarek (Sep 15, 2021)
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The Devil Pulls the Strings *is an engaging urban fantasy novel whose broken hero stumbles through Earth-shattering events.*

In J. W. Zarek's fantasy novel *The Devil Pulls the Strings*, a rock star stands against the forces of evil and his own inner demons.

Boone has endured much, and he battles claustrophobia and guilt over his parents' death when he was six years old. He carves out some happiness working as a knight at a renaissance fair, but during a jousting performance, his lance pierces his best friend. A bedside request drags him into the conspiracy to summon the devil using classical music; he works to prevent the summoning, and is placed in the midst of unusual events, moving through space and time, in the process. He battles steampunk vampires, malevolent Baba Yaga, and a herd of impish, candy-obsessed monkeys as the novel progresses.

Boone is a complicated hero. He received powers following an accident when he was young, and he's haunted by a cannibalistic shapeshifting spirit who appears whenever he is enveloped in darkness. In spite of the traumas of his past, he views the surreal and unreal events he endures with humor and heart. He tends to react, though, rather than to make decisions for himself. It's not until the book's climactic conclusion that he's able to make a fateful decision on his own, but even this makes the preceding events feel less impactful.

The cast includes a staggering number of figures, including mythological beings and human allies. Among them, Pip, a monkey who doesn't fit in with his fellows, stands out after he develops a connection to Boone and eschews his instinct to devour all that crosses his path. Elsewhere, the group behind the arcane summoning ritual is developed most in terms of entertaining foreshadowing.

But the book's pace is frenetic, and its world building is muddled because of this. Intriguing elements are presented in asides, and important details are referenced, but without addressing their particulars. Several mythologies, conspiracy theories, and urban legends are blended into the narrative, and because of this, just which iteration of the devil Boone is supposed to prevent from being summoned is sometimes unclear. Still, the book thunders toward its inevitable showdown, though the more powerful aspects of the conclusion do not relate to the summoning: they come after Boone and his allies deal with the entity, when Boone confronts his past traumas.

With the glimmer of a potential series in the making, *The Devil Pulls the Strings* is an urban fantasy novel whose broken hero stumbles through Earth-shattering events, carried by the music and humor in his heart.

JOHN M. MURRAY (July 7, 2021)

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