



The Hoard

Alan Ryker

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In *The Hoard*, horror novelist Alan Ryker advances the theory that piles of rotting man-made stuff can harbor worse things than cockroaches. Kansas farmer Peter Grish has a lot to worry about: his crops aren't doing well due to a severe rain shortage, the list of things he can't afford to have fixed or replaced is getting longer, and his mother, Anna, is acting strange. A fire in a nearby landfill starts a chain of events that brings a deadly visitor to Anna; she's become a hoarder, and the new visitor is right at home in her packed-to-the-rafters house. Other local residents have been acting strangely as well; this new threat to humans is advancing on more than one front. When one of her many stacks of stuff falls on Anna, requiring a hospital ER visit, the attending doctor reports Anna's living situation to Adult Protective Services, which in turn sends social worker Rebecca Shoemaker to investigate.

The premise of a hoarder's house harboring scary, crawling creatures and something else that is even worse is, if not unique, a seldom-seen idea from which to launch a work of fiction. Anyone who's watched an episode of "Hoarders" will likely agree with Ryker's premise. Hoarders do more than just save a lot of stuff. Psychiatry has yet to officially describe hoarding as a mental disorder, though the American Psychiatric Association's fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) is expected to include hoarding. The heart-wrenching element of hoarding is that most hoarders don't realize that they're hoarding and that it's dangerous for their health and for others who may enter their homes.

Ryker's well-developed writing style produces a smoothly paced, page-turning novel that ratchets up the tension in all the right places. His descriptive powers bring the Kansas summer to life, and even more intense are the passages detailing the interior of Anna's house. Inviting as many of the five senses as possible into a story not only establishes realism—yes, thinks the reader, this could really happen, given these conditions—it can also trigger sense memories, a powerful addition to the reading experience.

Readers will relate to Peter and his family and their financial problems, and to Anna's growing detachment from reality. Because the baby boomer generation is entering its senior years, the hoarding disorder could likely increase among them; how many children are prepared to handle their parents' physical and mental decline? That question will be in the minds of many readers, and *The Hoard* takes that question and runs with it to a stomach-churning conclusion. Highly recommended for horror fans as well as thriller aficionados.

J. G. STINSON (October 17, 2012)

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