

The Human Alchemy

Michael Griffin

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The Human Alchemy artfully delivers creeping unease and heart-pounding scares camouflaged amid the familiar trappings of everyday life. These are stories that will haunt you more than any monster.

“Psychological horror” might be an overused term, but there’s no better one to describe Michael Griffin’s masterful collection of short stories. Some are notably rooted in tradition; several were published in H. P. Lovecraft-themed anthologies and magazines, and the title story is an interesting modern-day twist on *Frankenstein*. But Griffin is best when his work is untethered, creating his own horrific worlds, with just a slight tweak here or there to the one we inhabit.

There are hints of the supernatural, but the drivers of these tales are their mostly average central figures. These are people dealing with the messy consequences of addiction, insomnia, divorces, affairs—even simply preparing their homes for market. In the book’s centerpiece and highlight, the hundred-page “An Ideal Retreat,” a woman trapped by her marriage and the life she’s created finally finds an escape—sort of.

Griffin’s less-is-more approach works wonderfully, consistently ratcheting up suspense without overwrought descriptions. His language is rich and detailed enough to probe the deepest thoughts of his characters. One muses: “Something more must exist, somewhere out there ... in books, or in nature. Art, music. All these things hint at the sublime.”

Geography is another key element of *The Human Alchemy*; just as Stephen King’s stories often inhabit a close-to-real version of Maine, Griffin’s characters mostly reside in Oregon. The use of Griffin’s native area as a setting lends an easy realism to these stories, not to mention a certain, mostly sunless, mood.

Griffin is a confident and imaginative writer with a unique voice. Fans of horror, or just fiction in general, would be well advised to give *The Human Alchemy* a try.

PETER DABBENE (July/August 2018)

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