



The Meaning of Blood

Chuck Caruso

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Chuck Caruso's *The Meaning of Blood* promises a descent into a netherworld of blood and perversity, and it delivers on this as well as something even more heinous: the idea that ordinary people crave blood and perversity just as much as violent perverts.

Tales gallop through time and space on the backs of genres ranging from historical fiction and fantasy to erotica and science fiction. Be it hot, cold, consumed, or splattered, blood surges through the stories. Suspense is heightened through humor, and comedy is fueled by horror. Outwardly mundane lulls are employed to amplify anxiety about what might happen next. Long after the unexpected has been established as the only possible outcome, stories continue to surprise.

Prose mimics the camera, microphone, and soundtrack of a movie set, without sacrificing the written word's unique ability to express characters' thoughts and feelings. Dialogue and brawls lay down a background rhythm against which the sound of a man's spine cracking is "like a log being split with an ax." Caruso avoids capturing details that could slacken the pace, meticulously transporting his complex characters and maneuvers off the page and into the mind's eye. Even when death might ordinarily be expected to bring an "obscene heap" of corpses to a screaming halt, they commence twitching "in a morbid parody of the carnal act" instead.

Suspense easily prompts page turns, but what provides the forward thrust that is essential to getting from one story to the next? A character says it best: "Even when the knife is plunged into your guts, you can't help but lean into the blade."

LINDA THORLAKSON (November/December 2018)

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