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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ THRILLER

The Shade

Larry D. Gattis
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Happily married and expecting their first baby, Joe and Elaine Sanders of Twin Oak, Florida, assume that their lives are perfect. But then their baby is born with a rare genetic disorder, and they are faced with a tough decision: do they raise their child as a boy or a girl? Through expert consultations and instinct, they decide to paint the nursery blue and name him Jules. In their view, a boy seems like the most natural choice.

Baby Jules grows into a kind, sports-loving teenager. But the road is not a smooth one. The family has to deal with Jules' emotional and physical issues. He also seems to be haunted by a dangerous spirit, called a "shade," that makes use of Spanish moss to terrify its victims. Jules and his parents seek help from an elderly blind seer named Abe, and together they fight off the shade's persistent attacks. Only by learning what the shade really wants do they have any hope of defeating the evil spirit for good. With the help of Abe and his parents, Jules faces a challenge to his very survival.

Author and doctor Larry Gattis reveals a highly tuned, vivid imagination in his debut novel. His well-written scenes of mayhem and fatal destruction may be best read during daylight hours, when lines like this one won't result in insomnia: "Joe clawed at the moss surrounding their hands. It was like cable, and the shears would not get underneath the bonds. The thorny plant lacerated Joe's fingers as he pulled at the knots. There were so many tentacles coming through the window now that the origin was impossible to find."

However, the book suffers from a few narrative problems. For instance, there are frequent and distracting inconsistencies in the story. Jules breaks an ankle at soccer camp at age eight, and later, when he's sixteen, the father of his girlfriend asks about the break as if it happened within the past year. Similarly, Joe attempts to visit Joy, the mother of a long-dead relative, Mabel, who may have information about the shade; when he finds her in a nursing home, he refers to Mabel as the relative's sister. When Joe is arrested and wakes up in jail, he reflects on the fact that he neglected to call his wife the night before, leaving her to wonder where he was. But a few paragraphs later, Elaine greets him at the jail and describes how she decided to let him sleep last night, indicating she knew where he was.

Another problem is that the characters behave in ways that aren't credible or go unexplained. For example, Elaine is absent during several important moments, such as during expert consultations about her baby's condition. And frequent metaphors and tired imagery serve as stumbling blocks in the text: "The gender topic was like the elephant in the living room. It seemed always to be on the surface, like a shard of glass on a balloon, waiting to elicit an explosion if nicked." Between the thrilling moments of dramatic horror, the plot suffers from both disconcerting leaps in time and domestic scenes that feel manufactured instead of organic. Readers may find themselves wanting to skip pages to get to the exciting parts.

Gattis is at his best when describing horrific events. If he could direct as much energy toward the basics of the story as he does toward the supernatural elements, his novel would be more satisfying.

ANDI DIEHN (August 31, 2011)

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