



The Sixth Session

Joe Hefferon

Xlibris (Jun 29, 2009)

\$19.99 (244pp)

978-1-4415-4157-4

The most hardened investigators are disturbed when they come across the corpse of a child; they're even more disturbed when they find out it's a baby who is partially dismembered. This gruesome specter starts off Joe Hefferon's *Sixth Session*, a mystery with supernatural inflections, and continues to haunt it till the last page.

Hefferon currently works as a lieutenant in the Essex County Sheriff's office in New Jersey. *The Sixth Session* is his first novel; he is currently working on a second, due out in 2010. Having been a police officer for over two decades, Hefferon states that his experience in law enforcement informs his fiction.

One hopes, though, that the author has never had an experience like that of his protagonist, reporter Carter Jackson, who comes across the aforementioned tiny body near a Chinese restaurant. Because he is still deep in mourning for his dead wife (who visits him occasionally with amusingly foul-mouthed greetings), Carter feels a personal drive to involve himself in the murder case headed up by his brother, police officer Dalton Jackson. Carter's quest for justice becomes downright weird, however, when a psychic tells him what's really going on: a recapitulation of Herod's killing of firstborns in an effort to erase the Messiah.

The mythological elements seep slowly into *The Sixth Session*, however. At first the novel grounds itself in the shadowy world of *noir* detective stories. The weather's always grey; the nights are always seamy; Carter's grief hangs ponderously over him; and even such innocuous things as tropical scents are described in a macabre fashion: "The light rode along a vapor of incense. It smelled acrid and fruity, like a piña colada with a burnt finger in it." Walking a fine line between grittiness and overdone-ness, *The Sixth Session*, for the most part, pulls off a richly detailed, slightly hallucinatory atmosphere.

Besides strong writing, *The Sixth Session* also boasts affecting characters and masterful pacing. As a main character, Carter is drowning in sadness enough to be sympathetic, but not so much as to be a pathetic stick-in-the-mud. His thoughts of his dead wife flesh out both his personality and hers, while moving quickly enough that they don't bog down the story.

The book's pace is neat and quick, with scenes only as long as they need to be, and the dialogue is snarky and to-the-point. Hefferon, who seems familiar with classic detective stories, synthesizes the *noir* genre's rapid timing with a penchant for earthiness pushed to the point of nastiness. The result is a mystery that, in its best moments has shades of supernatural horror. The book is an exceptional first effort.

(December 22, 2009)

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