



The Tokelosh Man

Alan Reid

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In Zulu folklore, the Tokelosh Man is an evil spirit that wreaks havoc on the lives of those it possesses. Surely the Tokelosh Man has cursed Spencer, the novel's protagonist. A well-regarded physical education teacher, Spencer loses his wife, son, and his home through a series of unfortunate circumstances that include troubles with alcohol and drugs. To the point of boorishness, the educator rants against the gang culture that he claims has taken control of the education system away from teachers and administrators and that is supported by politically correct liberals.

Spencer and his allies vow to create Draconia, a school in South Africa governed by rules and discipline. But in order to accomplish this, they must defeat their longtime nemesis, the Snake Gang, a group of motorcycle thugs led by the brilliant but twisted Xanthye and his ruthless half-brother, Skeleton. The Snake Gang grows from a few high school punks to an international drug ring that hounds Spencer throughout his life.

Reid provides an interesting plot filled with fascinating, fully developed characters. In addition to Spencer, these include mother-daughter pair Vicki and Venus—two beautiful women who are proficient in martial arts and are desired by the power-crazed Xanthye—as well as Spencer's allies and lifelong acquaintances, Draco, Becker, and Nkosi—the latter an impressively formidable Zulu chief. The dialogue is often gripping and draws readers into the story, and the descriptions of the South African landscape are rendered beautifully. The author provides helpful translations of South African colloquial terms unfamiliar to most American readers.

Much of Spencer's life is modeled on that of author Alan Reid. Reid taught in South Africa and England and attended the Natal Training College, a highly regarded South African teacher's institution, and his real-life experiences give the novel authenticity. However, many of Reid's descriptions are wordy and mixed with dialogue, flaws that tend to break the reader's concentration. Equally exasperating is Spencer's tendency to continually restate his views on education and social decay. Reid might employ this tactic to portray Spencer as fanatical about his beliefs, but it is clumsy nonetheless. Despite these flaws, *The Tokelosh Man* is an enjoyable novel written by a promising author.

KARL HELICHER (November 28, 2012)

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