

“FULL DARK, NO STARS” (Book Review)

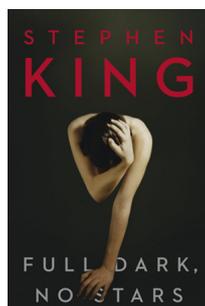
Written by Trevor Parker

Thursday, 18 November 2010 12:13



Despite Stephen King’s notoriety for producing elephantine novels with the physical heft and dimensions of cinder blocks, most fans would agree that the breezier format of the novella has framed some of King’s finest writing. “Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption” and “The Mist” are two of the more celebrated examples on King’s shorter-form résumé, and with the release of his new collection FULL DARK, NO STARS, Fango was anxiously hoping this fresh batch of stories might recall some of the greatness that marked those earlier works.

Now, a quick primer for those who either tumbled or jumped off the King bandwagon in the past couple of years: It seemed as though King, recipient of an honorary National Book Award in 2003, had begun to write with some consciously literary aspirations; The leaden tales (with a few exceptions) in JUST PAST SUNSET struggled under the weight of this new “important” style, and LISEY’S STORY was utterly sunk by it. Let’s not even mention the frustrating coitus interruptus that was THE COLORADO KID. It turns out fans needn’t have worried, as last year’s UNDER THE DOME marked King’s welcome return as an unpretentious, entertaining storyteller. There was a determination to DOME that had been disappointingly absent in much of his most recent work, and even though DOME was one of the aforementioned doorstoppers, the tight plot burned through the 1,000-plus pages like a grassfire, and the author’s loyal legion of Constant Readers expelled a unified sigh of relief. So could this new collection maintain the comeback momentum?



If not quite the quality of classic King, the lineup in FULL DARK, NO STARS at least chews over his familiar themes: The dark, rural domestic drama of “1922” recalls DOLORES CLAIBORNE, “Big Driver” has another of King’s travelling scribes up against a horrifying situation on the road, “Fair Extension” is King flexing his warped sense of humor and “A Good Marriage” deals with how a cancerous secret can unravel the strongest bond. Before even cracking the spine, a word on the jacket art: FULL DARK, NO STARS continues the trend of bland, neutral hardback King covers, a shame especially considering that Centipede Press just released an art volume

“FULL DARK, NO STARS” (Book Review)

Written by Trevor Parker

Thursday, 18 November 2010 12:13

(KNOWING DARKNESS) showcasing some of the fantastic visuals that have graced various printings of King’s work. This one, an overhead photo of a lady clutching her head, looks like an ad for a headache remedy. Unacceptable.

Now on to the stories: “1922” is less the confession to a murder, as revealed in the first paragraph, and more a parable about the rot that seeps into the family’s woodwork after the deed is done. “It’s like a tragedy out of Shakespeare,” one character remarks, and while the ghosts of guilt, recrimination and soiled conscience found in “1922” are more consistent with Poe, the story spirals down to the same bitter end. The story is sad, compelling and manages to work in a gross-out scene featuring a cow’s udder that is guaranteed to curdle your milk.

The territory of the next novella, “Big Driver,” will be familiar to Fangorians reared on rape-revenge movies of the I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE and MS. 45 ilk. King, whose strong female characters remain credible and sympathetic, softens the exploitative aspect found in these prior titles by examining the issues a rational modern woman would face in reporting such a dehumanizing assault to the authorities. King has gone on record to state his admiration for the LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT remake, and this story likely sprouted from there, even referencing the movie within the text. “Big Driver” serves as decent filler, but some of the plot twists swerve outside the yellow lines of believability, making this the weakest of FULL DARK’s entries.

“Fair Extension”...wow. This is simply the cruelest coal-black joke that King has ever laid on his audience, and the punchline is that there is no punchline. Dave Streeter is dying, and has pretty much surrendered his dwindling lifespan to an aggressive disease. He chances upon a road vendor with the awkwardly anagrammed name of Elvid, who offers Dave a way out. The price Elvid cites is steep, but Dave cheerfully pays it. Pity the poor characters of “Fair Extension,” as here we find a spiteful side that King hasn’t been fully unleashed since the “Milkmen” stories in SKELETON CREW.

“A Good Marriage” closes the collection with the sudden death of a sturdy longterm relationship. When a wife uncovers a punishing secret that her husband has kept from her for years, the subsequent question is, can we ever really know our partners? King states that hearing about the home life of Wichita’s BTK Killer got him to thinking, and this was the result. “A Good Marriage” is a plausible and affecting sketch of the people who stand not behind murderers, but beside them. This is FULL DARK’s finest moment.

“FULL DARK, NO STARS” (Book Review)

Written by Trevor Parker

Thursday, 18 November 2010 12:13

The writing in FULL DARK, NO STARS is King’s usual effortless and eminently readable prose, and the plots are concise and streamlined. His comeback continues full-speed, but be advised that this bad-tempered book sees him out to distress—to demonstrate that the cuddly old institution still has some sharp edges left to maim unsuspecting readers. “The stories in this book are harsh,” King sums up in his afterword, and Fango has no qualms about applauding that assessment. After all, this is King the way we like him best: focused, lean and very, very mean.



{jcomments on}