

## “THE REPLACEMENT” (Book Review)

Written by Bob Stock

Saturday, 15 January 2011 09:08

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Have you felt like an outsider all your life? Have you ever felt you were adopted, even though your parents deny the allegation? Have you felt like you didn't fit in with other people? If so, maybe you are a replacement!

A replacement is a switched-at-birth baby doppelganger of nonhuman origin. You may ask, “What happens to the human baby?” Let's just say that the old baby joke—“How do you get 100 babies in a bucket? With a blender!”—is a bit more tame than what happens to these forever lost munchkins.



The underlying concept for the baby switch is one that is real and has been practiced by many cultures. Specifically, the community is sacrificing up one of their own to deities in exchange for prosperity. In the case explored in *THE REPLACEMENT* (Razorbill; now available) by Brenna Yovanoff (pictured above), the gods are an underground dwelling group of undead types, ruled by a diminutive tattooed princess.

Our hero is Malcolm Doyle, or Mackie for short. He has felt like an outsider all his life and been taught by his preacher father to blend into the background. Mackie is a replacement that has lived beyond the “normal expiration date” of most of the baby doppelgangers. At this point in his life, he questions his humanity and is very tired of being different. To make things worse, he has just found out that the human world is poisoning him, and he is going to die.

Tate, a girl who has known Mackie for many years, loses her baby sister to one of the replacements. Knowing that Mackie is “different,” she approaches him for help in understanding

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what has happened. Mackie must make a choice—does he continue to blend into the background? Or does he take action and risk exposure? Mackie begins to learn about the secrets kept by his parents, about his true nature, and about Mayhem, the underground home to the supernatural creatures.

There are many levels of horror in this first novel by Yovanoff. Upfront, we have the baby sacrifices. Innocents taken from their families in exchange for prosperity. The thought of a baby in his or her crib, stolen away by some dead thing and offered up as a blood sacrifice—quite horrific.

Next, we have the town of Gentry. The community has a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy on the replacements. The parents suffer in quiet horror, not doing everything in their power to discover the truth behind the switches. Beyond their own suffering, they lack the moral courage to step up and fight their town’s legacy. Very close to selling your soul.

Finally, the true horror lies in the replacements themselves. Mackie tries to come to terms with the fact that he is not human. Does he even have a soul? He has lived amongst the humans his entire life, but he doesn’t belong there. And, he no longer belongs below the slag heap in Mayhem. Why does he exist? Can he have any meaning beyond just being a discarded pile of flesh used as a doppelganger?

Yovanoff also does a fantastic job of coming up with very twisted characters and descriptive places. Incredibly unique, and infused with a horror not based on “they are going to kill you... Run!” types of monster thoughts, she weaves a story of characters with flawed morality and dark secrets.

All this being said, Yovanoff’s writing style needs to mature. Even though we are given the story via Mackie, thus having character traits infuse the words, the writing itself needs to be tightened up. Further, there are many tangential references that were unanswered and often left me scratching my head. A character might be making a very specific type of facial expression, and I was unable to determine what the expression had to do with the underlying emotion.

Another complaint, which is central to the story: What exactly is a replacement? They are described two ways: First as a sickly Mayhem infant, second as a created copy of the original

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child. In my mind, the true horror lies in Mackie not understanding his place in the world—he was just a replacement that was meant to die—what does that mean for his soul, as well as his humanity? But, without further clarity it was hard to get to the core of Mackie’s pain and suffering.

Yovanoff has created a truly unique vision. Her very first novel, I look forward to many more twisted and crazy worlds as she matures as a writer. THE REPLACEMENT is highly recommended if you are looking for something unique or like to read about baby sacrifice or just want to hear about a bunch of dead girls and their tattooed princess.



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