

“THE INFECTION” (Book Review)

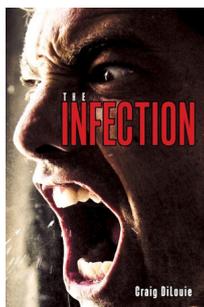
Written by Sheila Shedd

Saturday, 05 March 2011 12:35



Sadistic harbingers of unlimited degeneracy continually stab at our comfort and complacency with tales of impending apocalypse. Crazy hordes feasting on raw flesh and monsters that particularly enjoy maggot-infused eyeballs are popular ways to end the world. Permuted Press, publisher and connoisseur of cataclysmic scenarios, even encourages us to relax and enjoy it. Certainly you can't throw a librarian without hitting a book on the annihilation of humanity. Although momentarily unsettling, after reading the epilogue we always emerge, shaken but safe, in our well-governed, relatively clean, monster-free world.

THE INFECTION (Permuted Press), Craig DiLouie's (pictured) prediction for our planetary devastation, is gripping, but still fits the category, at least on the surface. A virus hits. Worldwide, people suddenly cry out in agony across the desert, through the cities, at the office, in the mall and in the classrooms. It's terrifying. Comrades, janitors, mothers, bankers, and students scream bloody murder, then fall down, comatose. The unaffected watch, stunned, frightened, then remove their fallen to hospitals and sick-beds.



A few days later, there is a collective sigh of relief as loved ones regain consciousness. The celebration lasts about three minutes, then Hell breaks loose. The initial affliction, referred to as “the screaming,” becomes, presumably, a pandemic viral infection. The virus produces uncontrollable rage, which incites the obligatory mayhem and cannibalism. Fortunately, the infected berserkers can be brought down with conventional weapons—for the time being.

Fans of horror aren't easily intimidated by the undead, the re-animated, the psychotic, or the enraged. They would like to be terrified; that's definitely the goal. But even the meekest readers eventually desensitize and become jaded. There's got to be a jagged edge somewhere in the work that can still slash that thickened skin. So what makes THE INFECTION worth reading?

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Why is it just a bit more disturbing than other horrific tales of the end of days? The book's closed. How come I can't shake it?

DiLouie's story has a few tricks up its sleeve, making it a stand out book in an otherwise glutted genre. First, the author's style is perfectly suited to the urgency of his tale. He uses an active voice that reads smoothly and naturally, making the prose swift and straightforward; pages fly by. Omniscient present tense places the reader intimately within the story, and creates tension and suspense. The reader is crammed into a claustrophobic and heavily armored Bradley, sweating, stinking and suffering alongside the crew.

DiLouie alternates his real-time with flashbacks of each individual's story, effectively writing realistic people who escape stereotype and act precisely within their unique parameters. Fine character crafting allows DiLouie to briefly explore several intriguing metaphysical angles from realistic human perspectives without preaching. These moments add a little food for thought and an interesting sophistication to the novel. The personality development is so successful, in fact, that any story about these people would be entertaining, even without the frequent decapitations. This authorial technique invests the reader; it's refreshing in a book where everyone probably dies anyway, so why bother to flesh out a character?

Another step above for DiLouie is the advanced language and detail he uses to describe military equipment and engagement. The hero and some of his crew are recalled from infected Afghanistan to help deal with the anarchy at home. Weapons, strategies and lingo are understandably and effectively interwoven to produce an intense war-zone atmosphere that avoids losing readers to overtly specialized jargon or alien experience. The military aspect of the story manages to engage the reader primarily because DiLouie keeps his scenarios reasonable and understated.

Lots of horror stories fail here, because too many questions are raised that go unanswered, frustrating the reader and breeding contempt for the author. The most famous is, "What'd she go to the basement for, anyway?" But DiLouie keeps his characters' misjudgments, blunders and breakdowns fairly within reason. They watch each other's backs effectively and deal sensibly with the devastation, freaking out when nothing else would make sense.

Like most of its contemporaries, THE INFECTION doesn't assert any definitive scientific or philosophic answers, and this is probably wise. If we're actually faced with an apocalyptic epidemic that shuts civilization down in a couple of days, it's likely we'll never know what hit us.

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DiLouie does, however, make some wildly imaginative speculation, again setting his novel apart and marking his plot with some demented twists. These variations from your run-of-the-mill Armageddon are arguably the weakest points for fans of realism, but are also its coolest aspects.

First, the enraged infected, whose driving goal is to contaminate others, don't bother to spread the virus to children. They have a much better use for them. And what we're conveniently calling a “virus” also has a plan, a gruesome, aggressive and horrifying campaign. So while some elements edge the book toward the sci-fi realm, the sheer volume of blood and gore keep it securely horror-bound.

Best of all, DiLouie writes in an entire cast of hideous monsters and does a fabulous job describing them in gruesome detail. Some are gargantuan destroyers, nearly impossible to vanquish, others are nasty conglomerate mutants that are tough, but doable. My personal favorites are an assortment of spindly pathetic creepers that whine and screech and stab and claw and just keep lurching forward or drop down on your head from above. Very scary in the way only a small, insidious thing can be.

We know the end is near; the shelves are full of crazy speculation on humanity meeting its maker. We need writers to create supernatural terror that keeps us distracted and delusional, because plain old nuclear radiation melting our flesh and burning everything in hellfire is too real and depressing to deal with. But without some credibility, the book's too easily dismissed. DiLouie carefully recreates our society and our military, populates it with people we want to know, then proceeds to bring the horror, devastation, and heroes we require to sustain our illusion of sanity and security.

Other horror and apocalyptic works by Craig DiLouie include TOOTH AND NAIL (Schmidt Haus, 2010), 2002's PARANOIA and THE GREAT PLANET ROBBERY, both from Salvo Press.



{comments on}

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