

“VACATION” (Book Review)

Written by Walter Bonner

Monday, 03 October 2011 15:36



With WORLD WAR Z soon to become a Brad Pitt movie, THE WALKING DEAD a hit on prime-time cable and Jane Austen mashups flying off shelves, are the undead beginning to get a bit stale? Maybe not. Although technically not a zombie novel—monster bites don't infect victims, they just hurt really bad—Matthew Costello's VACATION (Thomas Dunne Books) adds a new twist to the genre.

Based on an earlier short story by the author, the story begins a year after a worldwide drought has killed off most of the planet's crops and species. Governments have crumbled, replaced by heavily guarded and fenced-in communities. A strange plague, perhaps created by chemicals in a secret government-designed superfood, is turning folks into subhuman cannibals. Given the rising number of “Can Head” zombies—the name grows on you, I promise—no one is truly safe.



Enter NYPD officer Jack Murphy (good cop name). After a Can Head attack leaves him with a permanent limp and a dead partner, he's convinced by his wife to take the family on vacation. The brochure for Paterville Family Camp, located deep in the Adirondacks, promises swimming, hiking and real honest-to-God food, not that artificially flavored synthetic crap Uncle Sam's been pushing. Guards on duty 24/7 and electrified fences promise a Can Head-free holiday.

After making the treacherous drive across the no man's land of rural upstate New York, Murphy pulls his zombie-proofed Griswold family truckster through the heavily fortified gates of Paterville. At first, everything's great; even hard-assed Jack begins to relax as his wife and two children enjoy camp life. But as anyone who's seen five minutes of an action film from the last 30 years knows, you can take the cop out of the city, but you just can't take the city out of the cop. Jack starts to get suspicious: Why are security cameras pointed at the cabins and not the outside perimeter? Where does the restricted service road lead? And sure, the food's great, but what's with the funny aftertaste? (On the plus side, there's a busy, wood-splitting maintenance

“VACATION” (Book Review)

Written by Walter Bonner

Monday, 03 October 2011 15:36

lady eyeing Jack like he’s the daily special. But still.)

Having penned a number of novels and video-game scripts—most notably the DOOM series—Costello’s no stranger to horror-fiction writing. He knows how to keep a story moving, and his sparse, punchy style gives the writing urgency. However, Murphy’s supercop antics can dive into lazy cliché. After blowing away a horde of Can Heads, he quips, “Yea. *That’s* what you get for ruining my f**king vacation.” Yeesh. An ominously abandoned rest stop somehow doesn’t fail to yield...(SPOILER ALERT)...Can Heads! And toward the end, the book’s big twist sneaks up on the reader with all the stealth of a one-legged zombie.

Still, these faults don’t make the story any less enjoyable. Quickly paced and tightly written, VACATION maintains suspense. The characters are (excuse the pun) well-fleshed-out and the creatures frightening, as far as flesheating mutants go. Costello might even be making a metaphorical jab at our processed/canned-food-eating monoculture, his Can Head prognosis making Mad Cow Disease resemble a mild cold. (On a side note, when did it become uncool to just call a zombie by its name? Between the Can Heads and WALKING DEAD’s “Walkers,” one yearns for the straightforward Romero-esque days of yore.)

In VACATION, Costello manages to wring life from an already overworked undead. While the novel won’t set off any upcoming miniseries, perhaps, in the end, that isn’t such a bad thing after all. “A vacation, hm?” Jack muses after another Can Head attack. “That really would be something.”

