

# Brief Review

By Tony Fonseca

**Houarner, Gerard. *The Beast That Was Max*. New York: Leisure, 2001. 392p.**

There's an old saying that one can have even too much of a good thing. In Gerard Houarner's lengthy dark fantasy tome which combines the philosophy of professional assassination with that of Eastern Transcendentalism, readers are forced to muddle through what can only be described as too much of a bad thing. *The Beast That Was Max* is a combination adventure tale and B horror flick, and at times it entertains when it winks at itself in this regard. Unfortunately, those times are few and far between.

For the most part, the novel is a painstaking exploration of the *Beast* that resides inside of the main character, a government assassin (actually, Max is more of a "loose cannon" torturer / murderer who is so good at what he does that he is used as an assassin). Max is a human who is in touch with his id, his inner animalistic instincts, and the exchanges in the novel often lead to an exchange between Max's id and his superego. At first, this method of storytelling isn't that distracting, but when almost every single exchange with Mani Kalliyon Chea, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge who Max is assigned to protect, results in a diatribe between the Beast and Max, it gets old fast. Very fast.

And Max himself is not a very interesting character. Take a rabid dog, give him a bad attitude about everyone and everything, make him human—and you have Max. If Max ever has a soft spot, it's when he is torn between killing and fucking one of the few females who appears in the novel. Compounding the basic boredom produced by having no interesting characters with whom readers can identify, Houarner uses the idiosyncratic practice of supplying readers with no chapter breaks in *The Beast That Was Max*. One would think that he had never picked up a book at bedtime and read 'till the end of the chapter' before safely book marking his spot and internalizing the nice bit of compartmentalized information that makes up a chapter.

If there is a saving grace to this novel, it is in its interesting bits of religious and spiritual philosophy. Interspersed with the typical macho partner exchanges of 'fuck you, buddy' are quotable musings on the human condition and the relationship between body, mind, and spirit, as well as the relationship of one human being to another. However, readers must wade through a quagmire of Beast / Max interludes and various magical battles against zombies, angels, and shape shifters (and these battles tend to last for what seems an eternity) to get to the better passages in the novel. Despite its tedium, I couldn't help but feel that *The Beast That Was Max* could have told at least a decent story. But in order for it to do so, Houarner would have needed an editor to pare down the novel to some 200-230 pages. To put it bluntly, Max's story is simply not worthy of 400 pages of text.

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