

Brief Review

By Tony Fonseca

Shirley, John. *Black Butterflies*. New York: Leisure, 2001. 350p.

Reading John Shirley is a love it or leave it proposition. It's hard to find a middle ground with a writer who sets out to shock readers with images of decadence and depravation, and absolutely impossible with a writer who does it so superbly. Shirley's *Black Butterflies* is a brilliant example of just what an author can accomplish when he allows his darkest fantasies and dreams to take literary form. The stories in this collection are guaranteed to shock even the most jaded and well-read horror fans, with characters ranging from sexual degenerates who experiment with head irons in order to achieve sexual gratification, to spurned lovers who inject their veins with semen in order to die a slow and agonizing death.

The collection gets off to a rousing start with "Barbara," a story whose main character can control the minds of others. The tale begins with a car jacking, but soon Shirley turns the tables when he has his victim use her mind control abilities to force her would-be killers to become accomplices in her plan to take torturous revenge upon her ex-boyfriend and his current lover. The torture and murder scene is one of the most graphic in all of literature, but it works because by the time it occurs, the reader too is Barbara's accomplice and is tired of seeing her get pushed around. Throughout the first section of the collection, which is called "This World" because it concentrates on the psychological as opposed to the supernatural, Shirley does not release the reader from his grasp. "War and Peace" begins with the lines, "Butch starts fucking around with the dead girl's body. "Butch," I tell him dryly, "I'm pretty sure that's not standard police procedure," and goes on to relate the story of a cop gone bad, and his partner's ultimate decision to take matters into his own hands after he is pushed to his limit of acceptance. "You Hear What Buddy and Ray Did?" the third tale of "This World," is filled with every type of sexual deviate imaginable, and ends with a body count to rival *Hamlet's*. Also interesting are "Rubber Smile," about a slasher film director drawn unwittingly into his own world of horror and mayhem, and "Footlite," a first person narration that chronicles the fate of "that girl who died from cum."

The second section of the collection, "That World," is filled with Shirley's more fantastical dark fiction, and begins with a gem of a story entitled "Delia and the Dinner Party." Delia is an eleven year old girl who, with the help of the supernatural figure Telling Boy, is capable of seeing through the politeness of the adult world around her—all the way down to the monstrosities that many human beings become when motivated by greed, lust, envy, and anger. Although the rest of the collection doesn't meet the same standards as the first ten tales, it is better than average fare for readers who are looking for new imagery and don't mind being shocked in every way possible.

In short, if you're looking for a gentle read, pass this one up. If you are capable of having your stomach turned by anything, this collection is not for you. But if you think you've seen it all, and you're ready for something a bit different, for a writer who pushes every envelope possible and in the process produces a finely crafted story and memorable characters, then let these black butterflies depart the darkest recesses of Shirley's imagination and flock around you. You may discover that even black butterflies possess a beauty all their own.

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