

A Brief but Pleasant Encounter with the Undead

By June Pulliam

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Stone, Del, Jr. *Black Tide*. Tolworth, England: Telos Publishing, 2007. 112 p.

Del Stone's latest novella is part of two recent trends in horror: horror unleashed by ecological forces when humans are not respectful of nature, and zombie narratives in written form (prior to the last decade, the zombie narrative was overwhelming represented in film and other visual media rather than in prose). It can be read as being influenced by both the god-awful blockbuster film *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), which offered silly speculation about the effects of global warming, and the groundbreaking *28 Days Later* (2002), which envisioned the destruction of the world when the highly lethal rage virus is loosed on the world by well-meaning animal rights activists. *Black Tide* envisions a similar catastrophe, brought about when developers dredge the depths of the Escambia Bay off the coast of Florida and cut through a channel island to spur the local sport fishing industry. Instead, the dredging brings from the depths of the bay toxic black microbes which become airborne, and within a matter of minutes transform into blood-thirsty zombies all who breathe them.

Witness to this ecological disaster is Professor Miller, his graduate student Heather, and her sullen boyfriend Scotty. On the day that the black microbes lay waste to much of southwestern Florida, the three set off on an overnight trip to study the effects of pollution in the bay before the dredging once and for all changes the character of the waterway. The captain of the small boat that brings them to the channel island where they will collect their samples is particularly careful to move slowly through the water he traverses daily, since he has first-hand knowledge of what is being churned up from the deep—a substance whose effects are worse than tear gas, causing the mucus membranes to burn, killing dolphins, birds, and even channel catfish.

Once the professor, Heather, and Scotty have all set up camp on the tiny channel island, they observe a black cloud moving towards them in the distance and hear screaming in its wake. The three are spared the cloud's effects when they quickly bury themselves in the sand as it passes, and from their vantage point they can see the shore, which looks like London after the Blitz—fires are burning out of control in the city, but there is no accompanying sound of sirens or fire engines coming to put them out. Instead, everything is silent; the sounds of car engines or planes in the sky, or even boats on the water, are not heard. Then, a wave of people who are on fire begin to run for the shore and put themselves under the water as quickly as possible, not to emerge again during daylight. Only under cover of darkness do the afflicted come out of the water, to drink the blood of the living.

Black Tide is neither predictable nor boring. Stone works with the rules of the genre, Romero's Rules, to create an interesting character study of a man having a midlife crisis in the middle of a zombie crisis. Professor Miller is an unlikely hero, at least by American standards. He more closely resembles the potato-shaped Simon Pegg in *Shaun of the Dead* than he does Simon Baker in *Land of the Dead*, and he has an unfortunate propinquity to tear up at inappropriate moments, so that it is difficult for him to appear macho when he wants to impress Heather. But of course, in reality, it is not the action hero who is most likely to survive in such moments. Rather, the individual who possesses tenacity and the rather prosaic ability to not take needless risks (combined with dumb luck, or divine providence, if you read Kim *Pathenroth's Dying to Live*) is the one who is likely to survive.

And *Black Tide* is also short. This is not a knock at Stone's writing ability, by the way. But I am coming to appreciate writers who can do much with little, and let's be honest—there is only so much that can be done with the zombie narrative, unless the zombie is to be endowed with some sort of intelligence as is the case with David Wellington's Monster Nation series. When people are trapped by a creature lacking the intelligence to be anything more than a flat character, then there are only so many possibilities. Only the action adventure story lends itself to these circumstances, and I am not partial to that genre. In that regard, the novella format seems to be an excellent vehicle for the zombie prose narrative.