

importantly, the comic relief provided by Kirsten, Warnick's housekeeper, seems totally contrived. Perhaps Ralph and the Malandanti, like Milton's Satan, just talk a more convincing talk. Perhaps Hand didn't really buy that the Benandanti are all that beneficent and the contrived nature of this scene is evidence of that doubt.

Despite these concerns, I found *Black Light* well worth reading. Hand is a brilliant stylist. Her prose is a pleasure to read. She also can create a subtle atmosphere of fear. Ivy, poppies, and deer are all basically benign; however, in this book they are certainly creepy and absolutely dangerous. Her characters are interesting and well-developed. In fact, I was so taken with Hillary and Ali that I was disappointed that they played little part in the last third of the novel. I would also have liked to have known more about Axel Kern. But when all is said and done, this is a novel that I will come back to, one that has given me something to think about, and one of the few horror novels I have enjoyed reading a second time.

Necropsy: The Review of Horror Fiction, Volume III (Fall 2001)

The last two hundred pages of the novel are set at a party at Bolerium, a party attended by all the residents of Kamensic and at which, although she doesn't know it, Lit is the guest of honor. The atmosphere of the party is suitably psychedelic—mazelike rooms, strange and stoned guests, visions—all seen in the color heightening, perception altering glow of a black light. At the end of this very long night, Lit must decide whether to enable the cycle to continue and thus let loose the forces of chaos on the world or side with the Benandanti, those who "walk with good" and who have stood guard over otherworldly portals for millennia, ensuring that order is maintained. Those who have read *Waking the Moon* will be familiar with the Benandanti and with Professor Balthazar Warnick. Warnick, who has been alive and ageless for many centuries, recognizes Lit as the reincarnation of his beloved Giulietta. She was a member of the Malandanti—the enemies of the Benandanti—and was burned at the stake as a *strega* or witch. Warnick was unable to save her, but he hopes he can save Lit. Ralph, Warnick's former student and Malandante wannabe, tries to convince Lit to act her part in the continuation of the cycle. Ultimately, however, the decision is Lit's alone to make.

Hand does a brilliant job of creating realistic seventies teenagers. The seventies weren't all polyester, Brady Bunch, and disco. Being only slightly younger than Lit, I could recognize these characters. Hand gets right the clothes, the casual attitude towards sex and drugs, the taste in music, and with only one or two mistakes, the language. All in all, her depiction of intelligent, artistic, confused, and slightly depraved seventies teenagers hits the mark far closer than anything else I've read.

Hand has also done her homework on mythology and the occult. She is well versed in the works of Carlo Ginzburg—who researched the Benandanti—and mythologists, especially early 20th century ones such as Frazer. Hand tries to tie together many cultures and pantheons. Obviously she is trying to stress the universality of the myths. One big, bad god, even if he is known by many names in many places, is certainly more threatening than a minor god known only to a small group of people. Unfortunately the result seems a bit sketchy. Even readers familiar with mythology may get a bit dizzy switching from Greek to Cornish to Lapland to Native American to Italian mythos. However, overall the ride is a fun one.

In an [online chat](#), Hand comments that her characters are often based on people she knew. The character of Angelica in *Waking the Moon* was based on an old friend. Hand later discovered that, like Angelica, her friend was a pagan priestess. She said that her friend "gently chided" her about the malevolent depiction of pagan deities in the book. I suspect that many neo-pagans may have the same reaction to *Black Light*. However, it is not the dark depiction of pagan deities that troubles me. Rather it is the mostly positive representation of the Benandanti, the supposed protectors of all that is good, that bothers me. These are the same folks who sponsored the Inquisition and the Burning Times. Although I can certainly understand why chaos probably shouldn't be loosed on the earth, I have a hard time accepting that the Benandanti supply a better alternative. Perhaps Hand agrees. The section of the novel where Ralph is explaining to Lit the cycle of Dionysus is the most exciting and dynamic part of the novel. It was certainly the part I connected most with.

In contrast, I found the scene where Balthazar is trying to convince Lit to break the cycle to be the only badly written part of the novel. The dialogue is stilted. The argument is weak. Most

Creepy Ivy, Horny Gods: Review Elizabeth Hand's *Black Light*

by Leah Larson

Hand, Elizabeth. *Black Light*. New York: Harper Prism, 2000. 380 p.

In *Black Light* (1999), Elizabeth Hand returns to the territory she explored in *Waking the Moon* (1996). Once again Hand returns to a 1970s peopled by artistic and troubled teenagers and to a darkly mythopoetic world. In *Waking the Moon*, a very angry Great Goddess returned to claim Her world. In *Black Light*, the Horned God—known by many names including Dionysus and Cerrunos—is trying to be reborn in the continuation of an ancient cycle. The fundamental details of this myth cross cultures and eons of time. The incarnate god must be sacrificed to ensure the fertility of the land. Before he is killed, he must impregnate a chosen woman who will give birth to the next incarnation of the God. In some versions of the myth, the woman also causes the man's death. Hand's treatment of this ritual of sacrifice and rebirth as a vehicle for horror is reminiscent of Robin Hardy' and Anthony Shaffer's *The Wicker Man*. However, unlike *The Wicker Man*, which is set on a quintessentially pagan Scottish island, Hand's book is set in the United States, causing her to have to work harder to create a believable pagan milieu.

Black Light is set in Kamensic, a village within commuting distance of New York City. On the surface, Kamensic is an idyllic, Christmas card village nestled in the hills of upstate New York. Founded by Dutch settlers in 1627, it is a town with a troubled and mysterious past, marked by bloody confrontations between Native Americans and European settlers, as well as sightings of a huge European elk-like creature thought to be extinct. The town is difficult to get to if one isn't supposed to be there—train stops aren't marked, and the town often disappears, Brigadoon-like, from a distance. The residents of Kamensic all have some connection to the theater, including actors and actor has-beens (from Shakespearean to soap operas), directors, writers, designers, and their families. Foremost among the residents is Axel Kern, a mysterious Andy Warhol meets Roman Polanski figure around whom the whole town seems to revolve, despite his prolonged absence from the community. Axel is the most recent incarnation of Dionysus. His mansion, Bolerium, is made of ancient Cornish stones. Kamensic, like the tip of Cornwall, is a portal to the Other World. Bolerium protects the portal and the residents of the town. But all is not well in Kamensic. Teenagers commit suicide—and there is no concern among the adults about these deaths—and adults practice strange rituals, often involving bizarre masks.

It is time for the cycle to begin again. Kern's god-daughter, Charlotte, aka "Lit," is the Chosen One, the one who is supposed to kill the old incarnation of the god and, although it is implied rather than directly stated, give birth to the new one. Lit and her two friends, Hillary and Ali, realize that there is something different about their town, about their families, but they have no clue what it is. Neither Hillary nor Ali is particularly interested in solving the town's mystery. Hillary counts the days until his escape to Yale, and Ali's only concern is getting high. Only Lit researches the town's mysterious past. Likewise, only Lit is visited by visions of the other world, of horned creatures, of sacrifices bound with ivy and flowers.