

... To Make a Short Story too Long...

By Tony Fonseca

Braunbeck, Gary A. *Mr. Hands*. New York: Leisure, 2007. 269 p.

Before I picked up *Mr. Hands*, Braunbeck's 2007 novel length update of his story originally collected in *Escaping Purgatory: Fables in Words and Pictures* (IFD, 2001), I could honestly say that I had never picked up a Braunbeck tale which I didn't really like. Unfortunately I can no longer make this unequivocal statement, not so much because *Mr. Hands* is a badly conceived or badly written text, but because the novelization of what was a very simple and extremely powerful story does nothing more than add what can only be called downtime. Had the short story not existed, I would be tempted to give a much more favorable nod to this novel, with the caveat being that it has moments of brilliance, but too often simply drags. However, it makes no sense to make such an observation, given the fact that a superior form of the tale exists. In other words, the shorter version of the story had all the power, and none of the unnecessary exposition, which should make readers wonder why the author ever attempted to flesh out the tale.

Or perhaps the issue is the mechanism(s) by which Braunbeck decides to turn a 30 page story into a 270 page novel. First, he adds a frame tale in which (beware of upcoming spoiler) the young boy who survives Mr. Hands' final attack travels the countryside, a la Coleridge's ancient mariner, cursed to tell his tale. Braunbeck is always at his best when he is writing shock, not schlock, and to the chagrin of readers, most will find that the frame tale falls into the latter category. The bar scene between bartender Grant McCullers, Sheriff Ted Jackson, and the tale's narrator is interminably overlong and to some degree pretentious. There are way too many meaningful glances, pregnant pauses, and moments of gratuitous narrative build up. To put it simply, one cannot get through the prologue to this novel without wondering what it is doing there in the first place.

The second method by which Braunbeck fleshes out the tale is by writing a creation myth for the monster. He achieves some partial success in this regard, as the story of serial killer Ronald James Williamson has all the earmarks of Braunbeck's usual excellence: sympathetic characters, gradations of evil, a sense of fatalism or predestination which makes character plights more believable, and an abundance of compassion. Like many Braunbeck characters, Williamson, and the fleshed-out mother from the original story, Lucy Thompson, both swim against tides which give them little to no control of their own lives, without becoming pathetic, because both possess an inner strength and resolve. And both try to do what most would envision as being "the right thing," even if that means committing mercy killings or invoking a hideous demon to protect small children everywhere from molesters and violent parents.

What does not work in the Williamson/Thompson/Mr. Hands creation myth portion of the novel is the logic behind how a serial killer—even a gifted one who uses clairvoyance to foresee the pain of children and mercifully end their lives before their terrifying futures

come to fruition—can simply morph, in death, into the monstrous manifestation of the anger and mercilessness that parents of molested children feel. To make a long, drawn out group of scenes short, Williamson commits suicide in a pit that sits on the top of a monument to slain youngsters, thinking himself a monster and wishing he could stop the real monsters; Thompson arrives drunk and inconsolable because of the murder of her daughter by an unnamed molester (not Williamson, who would have terminated her life mercifully had he been able to reach her before the molester); Thompson curses the loss of her daughter, curses God, and (for some unknown reason) curses the small, grotesquely misshapen statue she has, which her daughter had named Mr. Hands; Thompson, in a rain storm, drops the statue into the pit where Williamson's bones have been decaying; AND SOMEHOW this all comes together to create the monster which is Mr. Hands. While this is extremely creative and in some sense poetic, it makes no sense, not even in the world of skewed logic which horror tales typically inhabit.

Braunbeck also fleshes out the tale in the most obvious way possible: by simply making the attack scenes longer and more developed. To his credit, he gives the attack victims, molesters and child beaters all, their own stories to tell. Some of them are riddled with guilt and actually welcome their violent deliverance out of this world. While drunk or high they committed acts of gross negligence, or even acts of second degree murder, but they did not lose their humanity or their sense of compassion. These scenes would have served to make a wonderful narrative into a brilliant one, had they not been sandwiched in the weak frame tale and had they not rested on the success of the poorly conceived Mr. Hands creation myth.

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