

Brief Review

By Tony Fonseca

Braunbeck, Gary A. and Alan M. Clark. *Escaping Purgatory: Fables in Words and Pictures*. Eugene, OR: IFD Publishing, 2001. 304 p.

Escaping Purgatory is destined to be a classic. The title page of this collection proclaims that writer Gary Braunbeck, collaborating with illustrator Alan Clark, is attempting to produce "thematically linked stories, novellas and art . about personal hells. We all create them." The two admirably do just that, producing seven tales of people who find themselves trapped by forces of their own creation, even if those forces were originally put into motion by others. The collection begins with the imagistic "The Road Goes Ever On," which the reader soon figures out is a prologue of sorts, reminiscent of the meeting between the tattooed stranger and the narrator in Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man*. The images that the unnamed traveler sees as he makes his way on the winding road prefigure the tales to come. And is the reader ever in for a treat with the first three stories, beginning with "Mr. Hands." In it, a distraught mother avenges her daughter's death at the hands of a child molester by evoking a giant demon which rips his body and eventually the bodies of other child molesters and mistreaters to shreds. Of course, the reader cannot help but sympathize with her, but as in all horror, something goes terribly wrong.

The second tale is the poignant and brilliant "A Host of Shadows," which tells of the final days of 80 year old Jack the Ripper, now a world renown doctor who has spent his entire post-serial killer existence doing good for his fellow man, only to find that his fame and respect have alienated him from his son. This is followed by an absolute masterpiece in "The Big Hollow," which is a darker version of *Our Town*'s third act. It follows the day to day "life" in purgatory of the newly dead in a small country graveyard. In each of these tales, as in the next three (which are good in their own rights), horror results solely because of limitations people place on themselves.

Poetic, descriptive, masterfully developed, and psychologically accurate, *Escaping Purgatory* is nothing short of brilliant; it is a must read for any fan of modern horror short stories.