

Brief Review

By Tony Fonseca

Ramos, Octavio Jr. *Smoke Signals*. North Webster, IN: Delirium Books, 2001. 72 p.

Relatively speaking, there are very few minority voices in horror literature. Most readers will find they are familiar with some of the names— Tananarive Due, Jemiah Jefferson, Richard J. Conley, Owl Goingback. With *Smoke Signals*, Octavio Ramos, Jr., a technical writer and editor with the Los Alamos National Laboratory, makes his first contribution towards adding his name to that esteemed list. Of course, this being his freshman collection, *Smoke Signals* is not without its weaknesses. The overall impression the work gives is that of a writer who has excellent original ideas, as well as very good writing and storytelling skills, but one nonetheless who intermittently has a little trouble carrying a tale through to its ending. These eight stories revolve around Native-American characters who are faced with the reality of the world, and who therefore face crises of faith.

The tales range from those of the traditional shaman coming of age story, to narratives set in prisons and on mean inner city streets. And to his credit, Ramos has little trouble creating believable characters who evoke sympathy and understanding. He is at his best in his modern tales, such as "Faith" and "Abigail's Hand Mirror," where he takes his time creating an eerie scene (Ramos is by no means a writer of atmosphere; rather he creates subtle, enigmatic characters who keep readers wondering exactly who or what they are) against the backdrop of ordinariness. What weakens the collection, at least for hardcore horror and dark fantasy fans, are the "fables" interspersed throughout. These, like the opening tale entitled "Chico's Hand," have more of an oral narrative quality about them. This makes them interesting pieces for their quaintness, but it does not lead to a fleshed-out story that can draw readers into the fictional world. In short, these types of stories fall flat. Still, horror fans will find that Ramos has some interesting things to say will challenge the way they view reality, and that is, after all, what horror is all about. But more than that, readers will find that Ramos, when he is at his best, can tell a heck of a story.