

As for this book's place in the Cthulhu Mythos, Heck uses August Derleth's vision that degrades Lovecraft's dazzling cosmic vista into a mundane Christian fight of good and evil. The good, simple-minded Southern Christians are hoodwinked by the awful power of Nyarlathotep, who they unwittingly let out of his coffin, sealed with occult symbols. Heck adds nothing new to the mythos lore and is very vague about the details that mythos fans revel in. When they threaten to send him back to Hell, the Black Man even protests against their narrow Christian view of the world, saying, "Hell is not where I'm from and it's not a place I care to visit either." But ultimately, Nate, Paige, and Luke fight Nyarlathotep with wooden "religious symbols" they find in the chapel, but what those symbols are never gets revealed.

Perhaps most disappointing is that Nyarlathotep himself is reduced from the Lovecraftian Crawling Chaos from beyond to a blackened corpse in a box. The description of battle against the Black Man might look good on film with special effects, but in prose, describing bits of wood that emit slimy green rays is lame at best. This does not contribute to the credibility nor the atmosphere of the story.

Reading Heck reminded this reader of Stephen King's famous quote from *Danse Macabre*, where he says that if he fails to terrify or even horrify, he is not ashamed to go for "the total gross out." While he displays skills that show he can do better, Heck does go for the gross out very well, but over and over again. A good horror writer transcends the splatter of gross anatomy. Horror at its finest can rip holes in the comfortable universe around us; and writing good horror literature involves more than just describing revolting things done to human bodies, a lesson that many modern horror writers have yet to learn.

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

Heck alternates between scenes of Nate's horrible suffering and Paige's sexual degradation with great skill. This book could easily convert into a screenplay; it reads like an X-rated episode of the X-Files. More novelization than novel, this book is so cinematic that one scene even reminds the main character, Nate, of a movie he saw, *Devil's Rain*. This is a cheesy horror film, starring William Shatner, that appeared in the mid-1970's. As Nate looks down on the Satanic ritual happening below, he feels that the whole thing is unreal, like watching a movie, and so does the reader. The book is divided into short scenes that would neatly convert to a movie script.

The problem is that generally screenplay writers do not have to emphasize character development as much as novelists. It is up to the actors to inject life into their roles, but in a novel, much more is necessary to develop a convincing story. This is not to say that Heck is a hack. His strength as a writer is his ability to weave a complex plot that requires little effort to follow because of its tight structure, logical sequencing and efficient use of words. Though unconvincing, the plot of *A Darkness Inbred* is involving, as Heck builds tension in a systematic way. Nate and Paige face progressively worse situations, failing to outsmart their dimwitted, backward captors at every turn. However, though he shows skill with his plot, Heck's downfall as a writer is his weak characterization. The two main characters, Nate and Paige, are a colorless, one-dimensional young couple, devoted to each other but shallow as a Southern grave. The reader learns little of their pasts, their conflicts or their motivations. They are just a generic couple caught in extraordinary circumstances. In one scene, where Nate finds out his hopes for Paige's escape were unfounded, Heck gives a rare view of what Nate is thinking. "She didn't get away, he thought. What's going to happen to us now?" This kind of non-descriptive writing does not contribute to the story, nor does it give any insight into Nate's character. The only way he gets to express his internal rage is through violent action, and this short book has plenty of that.

Ezekiel and his family are a grotesque caricature of the blind ignorant Southern family, seldom so unkindly treated in either mainstream and genre fiction. Only Ezekiel's son Luke shows some sign of depth, for he has his doubts about his father and the purity of the intentions of the Man in the Woods. Jezebel is just a poor, suffering Southern wife, a victim who goes down without much protest. With the possible exception of Luke, none of Heck's characters change or develop significantly during the course of the book. The plot goes on its hideous way, and I'll leave the rest of the details to the reader's imagination.

Unfortunately, characterization is the very soul of good fiction, even horror. Stephen King, who often seems to have trouble with his plots, creates unforgettable characters in everything he writes. They give life to his most belabored story lines. For all his love of the grotesque, Heck has the skill to be a fine horror writer, but he needs to make characters that have backgrounds, internal conflicts and the possibility of growth and change. Evil characters without the possibility of redemption are just puppets of Nyarlathotep. Good characters without introspection or imagination are mere mannequins of horror. Unfortunately for the reader, Heck doesn't bother with the usual framing devices found in horror books. He does not reveal any flaw in Ezekiel's character that explains his mistaking the Black Man for an agent of good. He has Ezekiel utterly convinced that he has come to fulfill the Bible prophesy of the Second Coming. Heck does not explain Ezekiel's dictatorial rule over his unquestioning family, their acceptance of incest, and willingness to take his abuse. Perhaps the reader is to think that the Black Man clouded their simple minds. Perhaps the author writes for readers who do not worry about such things.

Gory But Not Good: A Review of Victor Heck's *A Darkness Inbred*

by Laurence Bush

Victor Heck. *A Darkness Inbred*. Dark Tales Publications, Kansas City: 2000.

The disgustometer goes way off the scale in Victor Heck's creepy thriller, *A Darkness Inbred*. Setting his novel in The Gothic South, Heck portrays a clutch of rustic Bible beltters under the spell of Nyarlathotep. Yes, I am speaking of the avatar of the Crawling Chaos of H.P. Lovecraft fame, but this is no ordinary mythos tale. Set far afield from Arkham, this is the story of a shining cult of a different color, one that would have made the Master shudder.

Auspiciously enough, *A Darkness Inbred* begins with a flood that swells the banks of the mighty Missouri River. It soaks the soft cemetery sod until the more buoyant coffins loft from their graves and travel downstream. One ends up on the banks of the Crooked River near the very real town of Hardin, Missouri, where the idiot spawn of Daddy Ezekiel find it and drag it to their father. Their actions have horrible unforeseen, and mercifully only vaguely described results. The story continues after an ellipsis of an unknown number of years. An average white couple, Paige and Nate, wreck their car near Ezekiel's s farm. His children capture them and drag them off to their father. They are now all part of a cult that unwittingly worships Nyarlathotep as the Second Coming of Christ, and in performing his will, they intend to restore his sacred dominion over the Earth. They call him the "Black Man" or the "Man in the Woods" because he appears to be utterly black, just as Walter Gilman described him in Lovecraft's "The Dreams in the Witch-House." His cult consists of Ezekiel, his oddly named wife, Jezebel, and their immediate family of children who range in age from infancy to late teens. They seem united in their devotion to the thing they found in the coffin those unnamed years ago.

This cult practices all degrees of sadism and sexual mischief, described in raw, wet detail in Heck's lean, strong prose. He pulls out all the stops with descriptions of incest, forced fellatio, rape, cavity intrusions, bondage, murder, exsanguination, genital mutilation, necrophilia and intrusive intestinal gas. The goal of the cult is to spawn and raise Nyarlathotep's children, affectionately called "piggies," in an underground containment area. To be born, these critters need a female human host to incubate inside, and then they need a regular diet of human blood to survive. Ezekiel and company provide them with both. Nate has the terrible fate of donating his blood, extracted with a strange array of hollow wooden needles. At the time of Nate's and Paige's capture, Jezebel has the dubious honor of being the receptacle of the Black Man's lust and consequently the mother of one of the "piggies." Paige is being prepared to be the next for that sacred honor. No doubt disgust is an important element of horror, and Heck lays it on with enthusiasm. Nonetheless, disgust alone does not a horror story make. The story needs to involve the reader, suspend disbelief, create an atmosphere and then travel in new directions.