

# Ghastlier than *Ghost Story*

By June Pulliam

Youers, Rio. *End Times*. New York: iUniverse, 2007. 180 p.

I couldn't agree more with what Rio Youers says about his latest novel in his press release: *End Times* refutes the notion that horror fiction is merely "spinning the same worn-out concepts." In fact, it is not even easily classifiable within the genre of horror itself.

Recovering heroin addict and hack writer Scott Hennessey is in fear for his life after some of his old friends end up dead, murdered in grisly ways. The most recent of these deaths he learns of in the offices of *The Post*, the tabloid newspaper for which he writes. For example, his friend George Lasky choked to death after his asthma inhaler became lodged in his throat. Worse yet, a sadistic colleague passes along to Scott the x-shots taken after George's body is found (X-shots are pictures of a death scene considered too graphic for publication). What makes the scene even more eerie is the detail that several days earlier, George had called Scott out of the blue, making what at the time seemed to be paranoid statements about a woman they once tried to kill when they were involved in a cult. According to George, she is returning for her bloody revenge.

But when George called, Scott's head was in a fog, as only days earlier he encountered (on the side of the road) the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Mia, soaking wet in a dress made transparent by the rain, approached and took him to her home in the woods, where they made love. While Mia looked familiar, Scott didn't initially recognize her—thanks to his experience at the drug rehabilitation center, which "corrupted his mind's hard drive" and erased some of its vital data. Later, Scott can't believe his luck when the impossibly beautiful Mia finds him again for another passionate encounter, since his appearance is sufficiently disturbing to put off potential lovers (during Scott's life before rehab, he deliberately cut off all of the fingers on both hands with a sushi knife). Eventually Scott's heroin-addled brain recognizes Mia as a woman from his past, the victim of unspeakable acts which he and his friends committed, and now she has come to claim him.

But *End Times* is no ordinary revenging revenant tale. For one thing, Mia is no revenant. She is a creature with far greater powers than any revenant can lay claim to. Mia, a Lakota Sioux, is White Buffalo Woman. According to Native American legend, White Buffalo Woman gave the gift of civilization to the tribe before disappearing in the form of that rarest of creatures, the white buffalo calf, but she swore eventually to return and continue her work. So what Mia wants is not revenge, not even justice really, but something loftier, and Scott will be part of her design. Before disappearing, she has ominously promised Scott that "he will burn brightest of all." Scott's instincts ultimately lead him to pursue Mia rather than run for his life, walking away from his reasonably

comfortable life in London to await her terrible coming on a South Dakota reservation. To readers who are familiar with Peter Straub's *Ghost Story*, this plot line may sound very familiar. But Youers is in many ways a better writer than Straub. While *Ghost Story* is overly experimental and idiosyncratic, *End Times* is powerful and disturbing, and my plot summary, while perhaps full of spoilers, cannot do justice to it. The plot is far more convoluted, and Youers' writing is thoughtful and imagistic. For example, when Scott lands in the United States, he describes the Statue of Liberty, seen in passing in a bus window, as "standing in the waters between [New York and New Jersey] like a girl at a party who can't decide which boy she wants to go home with." Or in another passage, when Scott is in fear that Mia is in his apartment again, and he tries to move without making a sound, he "was the ghost of a dandelion, trembling in the breeze." It is this writing style that ultimately won me over.

I was a bit skeptical when this book first crossed my desk for review, as I have not had consistently positive experience with works from publish on demand presses, which generally lack an editor to vet manuscripts and ensure that a minimum standard of quality will be met. However, in cases such as this, the lack of an editor can be a strength rather than a weakness. Many writers know all too well how an editor can, in the name of making something "more marketable," contort a manuscript into something nearly unrecognizable to the author, so that the end product can make his/her cheeks burn with shame. Also, nearly every issue of *Necropsy* has reviews of books put out by mainstream publishing houses where certain editors, who are allegedly supposed to assure a standard of quality, are either asleep at the switch or really underestimate the intelligence of the audience.

Youers seems to be fully in charge of the end product, which is a tightly woven story told in lyrical prose. In the letter accompanying the review copy of *End Times*, Youers requested that if I didn't like his novel, I should make it a Christmas gift for someone I hate, or leave it on the subway, or take it to the Salvation Army thrift store to languish with the dusty westerns and bodice rippers. I might take Youers' suggestion to re-gift *End Times*, though more from a desire to share it with others than to rid myself of toxically bad writing.

***Necropsy: The Review of Horror Fiction, Volume XXVII (Fall 2007)***