

More Skill, Less Kill

by Lawrence Bush

Truong, Chau Van. *For the Love of the Kill: Secrets Kept & A Killing Star*. Miami: Minerva Press, 2000. 97 p.

Horror literature has rude neighbors. Thrillers, detective stories, and tales of psychotic killers spill over into its borders. One such seepage could be called the William Nolan school of horror. Twist up a nice gumshoe plot, throw in a bit of gore or hint of the supernatural, and presto, you get a horror story, or what passes for one. Moreover, this process is really too easy for any competent fiction writer, and with so many of these varmints climbing over the fence, it's hard to tell where horror begins and ordinary mayhem ends.

Neophyte storyteller Chau Van Truong uses this superficial type of horror in his slasher-thriller book, *For the Love of the Kill*. It consists of two long short stories, with the supernatural intruding only in the first tale, "Secrets Kept." "Secrets Kept" is a melodrama about a cruelly murdered woman who is initially unaware that she is dead. Here, Truong writes like a hardened street person, with an angry intensity that is unmistakably real. His utter sincerity and clear prose carry the reader along for a pleasant ride, but his flaws as a young writer make it an uneven journey.

Unfortunately, one has to make two allowances to appreciate Truong's work. Since there is no "About the Author" section, one can only assume that English is not Truong's first language, for his grammar needs repair. Run-on sentences and unorthodox constructions abound throughout the text. Secondly, his diction needs pruning. He tends to use long words where short ones would do better. Unless they're Joseph Conrad, most writers working in their second language need a native speaker to advise them.

Quickly stepping away from such politically incorrect criticism, I must admit that readers can hear his stories as being tales told in an Asian-American voice: one that is loud, adamant, and lucid. Yes, he can tell a story with a gritty, street-wise realism seldom heard elsewhere. Yes, his characters live and breathe, and they speak to the reader in their own vernacular. The trouble is that like most people, his characters are not full of penetrating insight or self-analysis. Their thoughts are ordinary and tell us nothing new. There are no revelations about the mind of a serial killer or the complex motives behind murder, or "the love of the kill" as the author has it.

Between the murder in the first story and the serial killer in the second, there is little to interest the horror fan. The ghost in the first story is a generic, culturally neutral ghost. It adds nothing to ghostly lore and no insight into Asian supernatural culture. The ghost is never described; rather, it is a presence the living characters speak with, functioning in the plot as a comment on white racism. If she (the ghost) had been a living character, it would have changed nothing about the story. Like in the Victorian ghost story, the pivotal haunting spirit is simply a mouthpiece for

the author's moral platitudes. Revealing her name leads to another point about Truong's work: Her name is Cekret Kwai, or more plainly, "Secret Cry."

Truong uses allegorical names in both stories. The problem is that this sort of naming went out of fashion with *Pilgrim's Progress*. The young white girl of the "Secrets Kept" has the unlikely moniker Sweet Master. In the second story, "A Killing Star," a gay fashion photographer has the name Simone Task. Despite the female first name, he is a male, and is a bit of a gay stereotype. The main character--the serial murderer--of "A Killing Star" is simply named Chance. Truong is probably unaware that this is the name of the main character of Jerzy Kosinski's satire *Being There*. But the worst thing Truong does with names is insert himself into the story as a character. This sleight of hand, and I do emphasize slight, may impress some, but anyone who is well read will groan. This authorial aggrandizement is called "Mary Sueism" in the world of fan fiction, from a notorious fan writer who inserted herself into a *Star Trek* pot-boiler untold decades ago. Most guides to writing fan fiction beg future authors not to attempt this amateurish trick.

Be that as it may, Truong does have his ideas about the psychology of murder. In the first story, his insight into the murderer's mind is that the white murderer is jealous of the success of his Asian-American neighbors. Though plausible enough, the idea is left undeveloped. In the second story, the killer, Chance, accidentally kills his assailant with ease and gets a taste for killing, like a domestic animal with a taste for warm blood. Murder becomes increasingly easy with each victim, and he takes pains to cover all traces of his crimes. However, the author needs to read up on modern forensic technology, for his murderer's methods of sanitizing a crime scene are wholly inadequate. For example, Chance taunts the police by using the victim's blood to write "Could have been, would have been, if given the chance."

The same could be said for his stories. They could have been a fine contribution if the author had shown more originality in plot, more thoughtful insight into the mind of a killer, and a more professional approach to writing. Despite Truong's apology at the beginning of the book, it is neither shocking nor cutting-edge. *The Silence of the Lambs* and *American Psycho* contain far more shocking material in a single page, and they both more vividly portray the remorseless persistence of a cold-blooded killer in action.

Nonetheless, Truong's collection of two novellas will be of interest to fans of serial killers--or to those interested in the Asian-American voices in our culture. Unfortunately, it has little to offer the horror fan. The only genuine moments of horror are few catsup blurts that mark the serial murders in the second story.

After all, like humor and pornography, horror writing has the difficult aim of evoking a specific set of emotions from the reader. It is not a territory to wander into unschooled and unarmed.

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