

Only The Shadow Coast Knows....

By Tony Fonseca

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(<http://www.hippocampuspress.com/journals/dead-reckonings.html>)

Haldeman, Philip. *Shadow Coast*. New York: Hippocampus Press. 2007. 255 pp. \$15.00 tp.

Philip Haldeman's *Shadow Coast* begins with a truly horrifying scene of maritime terror. Three men, amateur sailing enthusiast Mark Sayres, Captain John Horn, and Horn's nephew Craig Olson, find themselves in quite the maritime predicament: Horn, a heavy drinker, had mistakenly placed the ship's compass too close to the wiring system for the lights. Because Horn has not taken the boat out at night since, he has yet realized his mistake. Mark discovers this unfortunately on their night voyage, and realizes that the magnetic field from the wiring has been throwing the crew off course by some ten degrees—and leading the ship towards a massive rock wall off the Olympic Peninsula of Washington. The ensuing crash, complete with icy water, booming cracks, howling winds, and scenes of carnage and tremendous pain, makes the first thirty pages of the novel read as well as anything I've ever picked up.

From that point on, the novel's pace does slow considerably, as Haldeman begins relying on characterization and atmosphere. The plot can be succinctly summarized as follows: After receiving a couple of troubling letters and phone calls from his wife Maggie, an anthropologist, Mark has traveled to a remote area near Neah Bay in order to visit the site of the dig. He ends up washed along a beach some twenty miles away, where he is saved by Reverend Garman Hanley, Native American scout Jim Kallabush, and Sandra Torrel. These five characters figure prominently in the action, for they inform Mark that his wife has gone missing, and that no one from the camp knows how. Later in the novel, we find out that Sandra's husband Gregory has suffered a similar fate. From that point on the story becomes part atmospheric horror tale and part mystery novel, as slowly Mark and Sandra begin to realize that their spouses may have been the victims of a Native American god, Sisiutl, who hides in ocean mists and steals the souls of the untimely dead. Mark is soon to have quite a few run ins with the walking dead, as Maggie, Olson, and Horn visit him at some point. It slowly becomes apparent to him that their spouses may have been killed by Siusutl, lured towards their deaths by the trickster. Meanwhile, Reverend Hanley begins to hear voices telling him to sacrifice his son to God, and he is placed in a hospital for observation. At the root of all the mayhem is the archaeological discovery which Mark begins to realize had created his wife's unease: She is part of a team that has uncovered Makah skulls which indicate that Sandra's ancestors had massacred thirty-six men, women, and children in the local tribe back in the 1920s. Now the entire town finds itself under the spell of Siusutl.

However, the story is a bit more complex than just that. *Shadow Coast* is also at heart a possession narrative, as the ghosts of Sandra's ancestors continually attempt to return to the human realm, possessing the bodies of the susceptible. It turns out that Maggie and Gregory are among those who are possessed, perhaps at the tale's onset. However, these are tenacious spirits: As they are cast from one host, they quickly possess another. Eventually Mark ends up fighting a battle against an unseen enemy and malevolent ghosts which can take on the form of even his closest friends and loved ones. But what makes this novel work is Haldeman's storytelling technique. He is capable of allowing his characters to slowly develop into fully rounded human beings by introducing them piecemeal. In fact, *Shadow Coast* is informed by clever and believable dialogue throughout.

The only problem some readers may find here is that Haldeman has a strong tendency towards subtlety. So in scenes where other writers would be sorely tempted to give a realistic sexual and/or gory image, readers will find here a complete lack of visceral appeal. This may or may not make the horror less effective, depending upon the tastes and expectations of the individual reader. I personally am no big fan of gratuitous sex and gore. I prefer Ramsey Campbell to Richard Laymon, any day of the week, but I have seen over-the-top violence and graphic sex used effectively by other authors who concentrate on character, such as Gary A. Braunbeck (*In Silent Graves, Prodigal Blues*) or Charlee Jacob (*This Symbiotic Fascination, Haunter*). The bottom line is that Haldeman's style may turn off some genre readers, but on the positive side, it should make the novel have a more mainstream, a broader appeal. Unfortunately, a by-product of the author's penchant for subtlety is perhaps the main detractor of the novel for me: the failure of the monster to take center stage at any point, horrifying the reader in its awesome glory. Since horror is supposed to evoke fear, or at least a true feeling of disquiet, it behooves authors to at some point let their monsters do the talking through the threatening nature of their very physical presence. That is completely missing here, to the point where one cannot help but feel let down after so much build-up. Readers come to expect Siusutl to be terrifying, even awe inspiring, and the trickster hardly makes an entrance—or an impression—at all. Ultimately, vague images of walking ghosts can go only so far.

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