

A Hollow Effort

By Tony Fonseca

SanGiovanni, Mary. *The Hollower*. New York: Leisure, 2007. 308 p.

In his introduction to Mary SanGiovanni's *The Hollower*, Brian Keene should have used the word *derivative*, and used it often. Readers who pick up this novel will without a doubt find themselves making comparisons to Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street*, or Stephen King's *It*, or Peter Straub's *Floating Dragon* (or *Ghost Story* for that matter), or Nancy Holder's *Dead in the Water*, and that is because there is very little original storyline conception going on here. In fact, most online reviewers express disappointment with the novel, especially given Keene's introduction, which promises a work that is truly horrifying. I had trouble finding the novel to be even slightly disturbing.

The gist of *The Hollower* is the nature of fear, or I should say, the nature of each of our individual fears. The main characters in this novel are at times driven to the point of despair as each comes face-to-face, or each believes that he/she has come face-to-face, with what amounts to Freudian negative wish fulfillment. The problem I have with the book is that the Hollower itself is drawn too broadly, almost to the point where it is unintentionally comic. This mysterious presence is simply presented to readers, early on in the book, as a supernatural entity which likes to mimic the voices and physical appearances of its victims' closest friends and relations, using these to trick victims into sinking into the depths of utter despair.

In the opening chapter, *The Hollower* has already worked its magic on a character named Max, driving him to suicide. We then meet the novel's protagonist, a recovering alcoholic named Dave Kohlar, whose clinically insane sister Sally has been visited by the mysterious, faceless figure, which always shows up in a black trench coat, brim hat, black suit and shoes. Because Dave truly cares about his sister, he is dragged into the same nightmare world, as are a handful of Lakehaven, New Jersey townspeople. Dave and Sally, along with a detective, a bartender, a recovering coke addict, and an eleven-year-old boy, eventually, *It*-like, bond together to march off and fight the supernatural creature—which turns out to come from some mysterious race of supernatural creatures—on its own turf, that being the site of Max's suicide.

Throughout the novel the six main characters battle against the hallucinations created by the Hollower, facing their inner demons. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to care about any of these characters. To begin with, readers are never given a clear sense of the reason(s) behind their being singled out for persecution, other than the fact that each character has some emotional trauma in his or her life—one is a recovering coke-addict; one was molested as a child; one is a young boy whose father died. Other than that, the characters are drawn rather flatly by the author; even Dave, who is supposed to be the hero, suffers from this limitation. Rather than create interesting characters with a back story that sufficiently explains why each has been suddenly dragged into the abyss of horror,

SanGiovanni simply gives us six people who in no way stand out from any six other people in Lakehaven, or any town for that matter.

If you're a horror novelist, and you want to create flat, rather everyday, decidedly uninteresting human characters, your monster had better be truly terrifying, cold-blooded, remorseless, and tenacious—or at least thought provoking. Sadly the novel's "creature" only scratches the surface. At points I found myself wishing that the Hollower would actually turn up the terror a notch, and maybe try something that I haven't seen before in a book or a film. But all readers get is a creature who can make people go through the same door and end up in a different location. While I am no fan of body count fiction, I cannot help but think that there is something amiss when a supernatural entity manages to kill only one person in an entire novel. And of course, the Hollower is fairly easily terminated by the troupe of humans when they bond together and communicate. Finally, we are never given a clear sense of exactly what this creature was, where it came from, or why it enjoys screwing around with human beings. It is not a trickster god, not really a demon, not even a product of our own collective nightmares, á la Freddy Krueger.

In short, *The Hollower* reads too much like a storyboard or screenplay, and not enough like a novel. Plot lines are more often than not predictable, and the climax, if you can call it that, is trite and cliché. The novel's best defenders find themselves having to rely on the lame assumption that the book is a good "light read," and therefore not one that we should hold to the same standards as we would other, more serious horror texts. Granted, the book is the first by SanGiovanni, and therefore it is likely to have severe limitations. However, I have seen more than my share of suspenseful, well thought out, well-written novels from even rookie writers, so I find it difficult to recommend *The Hollower*.

Necropsy: The Review of Horror Fiction, Volume XXVIII (Winter 2008)