

The Just Maybe? Definitely Not

By June Pulliam

Scott, James. *The Just Maybe . . . Stories (the First Book of Briar)*. Ill. Hannah Taggert. Ashby-de-la-Zouch, England: InkerMen Press, 2006. 72 p.

The stories in James Scott's *The Just Maybe* collection share as a setting the area in and near an unidentified small village. The overall plot structure is simple: a character named Swoon disappears under mysterious circumstances—and reappears under circumstances just as baffling.

In this village, other young adults experience the world as a magical but real place where a slant of light or the presence of a certain creature is animistic, or at least symbolic—pregnant with meaning about the powerful forces that control everyone's lives. However, this world is not the typical horror or fantasy universe where the emergence of the supernatural is always a horrifying disruption of everyday reality. Rather, like in Latin American magical realism, here the supernatural is as commonplace as the laws of physics.

I liked the concept of *The Just Maybe* collection, but didn't think much of the actual execution. Scott's prose is a bit too experimental for my tastes. It has a sparse, stream of consciousness feel to it that I have never had much patience with, and try as I might, I could not get into these stories. Simply stated, they were unable to cast their spell over me, to draw me away from myself and into their fictional universe.

The other problem I had with this collection is that *The Just Maybe* is not horror. To use the words of *Necropsy* reviewer Tony Fonseca in his review (in this issue) of Yasuyuki Kasai's *Dragon of the Mangroves*, the tropes of horror include inflated language; graphic treatment of violence; shock so as to inspire fear, hatred, and disgust; and incomplete, fragmented, and chronologically confused narratives. While *The Just Maybe* certainly has inflated language and the author employs chronologically confused narratives, the stories in the collection lack that most important of elements, shock so as to inspire fear.

I did, however, enjoy Hannah Taggert's ink and gouache illustrations, which are a sort of surreal folk art. Taggert's illustrations add depth to Scott's stories. Novels used to be illustrated, and one of my greatest pleasures is reading old editions of novels such as Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* or Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, and looking at woodcuts, pen and ink drawings, or even full color illustrations that publishers once provided. It is sad that these are no longer included in the bulk of contemporary works, perhaps because it is too expensive to do so.

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