

The Really Good, the Somewhat Bad, and the Downright Ugly

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Crowther, Peter, ed. *PostScripts 10*. Hornsea, East Yorkshire: PS Publishing, 2007. 352 pp. HB (Occasional larger edition of quarterly journal, Spring 2007, number 10). \$12.00 unsigned.

Moorish, Robert, ed. *Thrillers Two (II, 2)*. Baltimore: Cemetery Dance, 2006. 229 pp. PB \$40.00.

The problem with anthologies and collections of short fiction is that for readers, they are more often than not either a boon or a bane. At their best, they contain some of the finest writings by both up-and-coming authors and some of the bigger names in the business. At worst they can become a showcase for those works which could not be placed in any zine, journal, or collection. All a reader need do is pick up *PostScripts 10*, edited by Peter Crowther, and *Thrillers Two (II, 2)*, edited by Robert Morrish, to see how anthologies can range from literally the sublime to the ridiculously bad.

PostScripts 10 is a special hard-bound issue of a quarterly issued by PS Publishing. Just a cursory glance at the table of contents page reveals that Crowther has managed a veritable who's who of greats in the genre. First, there is a special section devoted entirely to Michael Marshall Smith, a master of the subtle dark fantasy tale. His stories, while they do not go for the big scare, effectively use the tropes of horror to make readers rethink (or possibly "re-feel") reality. Crowther includes six Smith stories: "The Handover," "Night Falls, Again," "One One Three," "And a Place for Everything," "Old Flame," and "REMtemps," along with a wonderful nonfiction essay, "A London Story," as well as an excerpt from the novel *The Intruders*. Of these, the only weak Smith product is "One One Three," which seems entirely too clever, too contrived. The other representative pieces, however, are excellent. "REMtemps" and "Night Falls, Again" read like well-crafted Charlie Kaufman scripts—in the former Smith's narrator takes a job dreaming other people's frustration dreams and nightmares, with frightening results, while in the latter the narrator is destined to relive a negligent homicide, over and over. The shortest of Smith's tales, "Old Flame," is a brilliant pun based horror vignette about a stalker. And the excerpt from *The Intruders* is simply delightfully eerie.

The regular fiction section includes writers such as Nancy Kilpatrick, Rick Hautala, T. M. Wright, Thomas Tessier, Christopher Fowler, P. D. Cacek, Tim Lebbon, Graham Joyce, Ramsey Campbell, and Stephen King. Of course, I am usually a bit suspicious when I see such a line-up in any type of anthology, wondering if the stories included were those "also-rans" that writers

churn out during their youthful or more unproductive phases. But in this case, these suspicions turned out to be unfounded. Not only are these tales not rejects or experiments, they are in many cases quite masterful. My particular favorites include Lucius Shepard's "Dinner at Baldassar's," Stephen Volk's "Who Dies Best," and Cacek's "Call Waiting." Shepard's over-the-top vampire tale posits a universe where vampires control (and have always controlled) the actions of human beings, and by extension, governments and nations. Here readers will find a wonderful combination of all-too-human emotions, compelling characters, and extreme supernatural pyrotechnics. Volk's and Cacek's tales are both more psychological in nature, relying on the authors' abilities to create a sense of disruption in the way readers view life. Volk's "Who Dies Best," my personal favorite in the entire volume, relates the vision of a near future where the terminally ill, the suicidal, and the condemned can literally sell their deaths to Hollywood. Told from the point of view of a man who is obsessed with watching his mother's death scene (in a remake of a film about the Darrow gang), the tale is heart-breaking and thoughtful. It's one of those stories that no reader can come away from unchanged. Equally disturbing is Cacek's "Call Waiting," which is dedicated to the late Charles Grant. Also about death and grieving, it relies not on a futuristic premise, but simply on what some might see as a macabre act: a recent widower continually calls his wife's land line from his cell to leave messages about his day, simply to hear her voice once again. Of course, there are weak pieces in the issue, such as Kilpatrick's "The Age of Sorrow," Hautala's "Hearing Aid," Tessier's "If You See Me, Say Hello," and Fowler's "The Luxury of Harm." For the most part, however, these stories are not what most would consider terrible; rather, they rank as near misses—tales that have great potential but have predictable or contrived endings, or are simply too vague in concept and therefore lack a serious punch. But they do little to detract from what is overall a wonderful product.

On the other end of the spectrum is *Thrillers Two (I, 2)*. In his introduction, editor Robert Morrish chronicles the story of perhaps the most irregular series ever to grace a bookshelf. The Thrillers series was begun in 1993 by Joe R. Lansdale, who came up with the idea of an anthology featuring tales by only four authors, in his case Rex Miller, Chet Williamson, Nancy A. Collins, and Ardath Mayhar. After Lansdale's offering, Cemetery Dance Publications had trouble committing to the series, and it wasn't until 2003 that Morrish managed to convince the icon of horror publishing to resurrect the series with a sequel. According to Morrish, he then had a string of bad luck, as one writer, and then another, signed on to contribute to the anthology, only to have to bow out due to illness or other commitments. By 2006, Morrish finally managed to put together a line-up of Gemma Files, Tim Waggoner, R. Patrick Gates, and Caitlin R. Kiernan.

Given this stellar collection of authors, I fully expected an amazing reading experience. After all, I was familiar with three of the four, Files being the only writer with whose work I had no previous experience—and once I began Files' "Pen Umbra" and was hooked after just two pages—I was prepared to write an extremely positive review. Files' "Pen Umbra" is the standout work in this anthology. Janice Mol, an artist/scholar writing a thesis on the art of Max Ernst, is advised by her friend Vivia to make some extra money by volunteering to be a part of a parapsychological study involving the sending and receiving of images using Extrasensory Perception. Jan ultimately agrees, and finds herself working as one of the "transmitters" because of her skill with the charcoal on paper medium, but then violent imagery begins inexplicably to flow from Jan's canvas. Then I got to the end of "Pen Umbra" and could not help but think that I

had just read another example of a horror author who began with a wonderful premise, created a well-crafted (stylistically speaking) piece of writing, but had no idea how events should play themselves out. I still had to admit that I had enjoyed reading Files, even though I felt let down by the ending to "Pen Umbra." Also adding to my optimism was the fact that three stories by Waggoner, who is quite a good read, were next.

Then I quickly realized that Waggoner's stories have very little to recommend them. After the story about the monstrous dildo with razor hooks and twelve-year-olds engaging in sado-masochistic sex, and again after the story about beetle-like aliens falling out of the sky in a rain of blood, and yet again after the story about the revenge of a snowman on an artist who stages a "snowman murder scene" (no, I could not make this stuff up), I could not help but suspect that I was reading yet another collection of those-works-that-couldn't-be-placed-elsewhere. The deal breaker was with the third author of the collection, Gates. His "Midnight Popeye" is perhaps the dumbest comic horror story ever penned. All I can say is that readers know they are in trouble when an entire story boils down to a bad getting-fucked-in-an-eye-socket joke (after removing a glass eye): a hooker with the aforementioned affliction tells the main character she'll "keep an eye out" for him. In fact, all three of Gates's supposedly comic stories can be condensed into a poorly thought out one liner: Did you hear the one about the guy who had an "eye job fetish"? Did you hear the one about the mentally retarded young lady who wished everyone was "normal," like her? Did you hear the one about the "Tell-Tale Nose"?

Combine Waggoner's also-ran contributions, Gates's bad extended jokes, and completely unreadable (and uninteresting) prose by Kiernan, and you have a sense of what is in store for the poor soul who needs to, for whatever reason, muddle through this collection. Suffice it to say that with the exception of Files' offering, *Thrillers Two (II, 2)* will rival any truly bad anthology ever published.

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