

# Don't Worry, Those Little Club Wielding Dolls Can't Hurt You...

By Robert Butterfield

Watt, D.P. *Pieces for Puppets and Other Cadavers*. Ashby-de-la-Zouch, England: InkerMen Press. 2006. 89 p.

This collection of short fiction from Dr. D. P. Watt, a lecturer in English and Theatre at Loughborough University, will invariably be compared to the work of Thomas Ligotti, who is, himself, often compared to Edgar Allen Poe and H.P. Lovecraft. Watt's work also echoes the tales of Arthur Machen and Robert W. Chambers, among others. More to the point, the fact that his work invites these comparisons, while the author retains his own voice, is impressive indeed.

The first section of this book (which is only 89 pages in length altogether) is entitled "Past Puppets," and the stories are set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. "Dr. Dappertutto's Saturnalia" the first story in the collection, is a classic evil-puppet tale which takes place in the Soviet Union. The struggle against repression is an underlying theme, but there is nothing truly groundbreaking here, in terms of plot, as is the case with the other two tales in this section. Also, the horror (as is the case with Ligotti's work, in general) does not primarily take place within the confines of the story; rather, the story insinuates what has occurred and leaves it to the reader to play out the missing scenarios in his or her mind. This is quite a satisfying change of pace from what occurs in most short horror fiction these days.

What makes the tales worth reading is Watt's command of a variety of literary styles, and the way he manages to build a sense of dread (à la Ramsey Campbell), giving each tale its own subtle flavor. Of the other two tales in this section, "Room 89," and the short but deliciously creepy "The Hobby," the former is the less successful of the two, for while it comments on social and political mores of the time, it is basically a classic haunted mirror story with a twist. Conversely, "The Hobby" deals with loss, obsession, and the supernatural, with dolls again being a featured component.

The second section of the book, "Modern Marionettes," starts out with two selections that, while set in a more contemporary time frame, would not be out of place conceptually in Robert W. Chambers 1895 tome, *The King in Yellow*. Chambers, a major influence on Lovecraft, juxtaposed tales of supernatural and psychological horror with non-horror tales which were just as unsettling. Here, Watt first gives the reader a tale of obsession, "Glorious White Marble Lady," which utilizes a production of *Pygmalion* as a backdrop. This tale is evocative of some of Chambers' more unsettling romantic stories, or perhaps something by de Maupassant. The next tale, "Of Those Who Follow Emile Bilonche," seems an even more linear descendant of Chambers' "The Repairer of Reputations," replete with an unsettlingly unreliable narrator and a series of books which

take the place of Chambers' damning fictional play (which causes anyone to read it to lose his or her sanity, and has thus been condemned and censored by the government). This is not to say it is overtly evocative of Chambers' story. Although the tale may subtly echo Chamber's work (intentionally or not), it has its own unique flavor—due to Watts' considerable skill and imagination. The final story, "The Comrade," is an all-out supernatural horror tale in the tradition of Machen and Lovecraft, and it perhaps the most unsettling piece of the lot.

I can say without equivocation that this is one of the better collections I have read of late. While Dr. Watt has chosen to write in a style that begs comparison to many of the greats, his evocation of the work of past masters is no mere impersonation parlor trick. He has managed to find his own niche in the horror field.

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