

Novel about Individuality Fails to Stand Out

By June Pulliam

Clark, Simon. *This Rage of Echoes*. New York: Leisure, 2007. 342 p.

Clark's latest novel plays with the theme of the replicants as established in Jack Finney's 1954 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, where an organism from outer space invades earth by taking the shape of existing humans and dispensing with the original. The result in Finney's novel is an impending homogeneity of the human race which is supposedly an improvement on the current model, who are entirely too ruled by their emotions and who permit their differences to spawn wars. But of course, the central horror of this famous Cold War text is that the invaders, much like the Communists were purported to do, eliminate individuality in the name of progress and control by a central entity. This seems to be the case with Clark's *Echomen* as well, with one notable exception. The virus invades the bodies of humans of all ages, races and sexes, making them all into copies of Mason Konrad, a twenty-something man of above average intelligence, but otherwise, no one special. And only Mason and a band of rag tag individuals are aware of the *Echomen* threat, and work to eradicate them before they take over the planet. The *Echomen* don't plan on doing away with Mason per se upon achieving hegemony, but instead, look to him as their reluctant god. Still, Mason's predicament is similar to that of Dr. Miles Bennell, Finney's protagonist: "when he becomes you, then who are you?" If Mason is not unique, then he loses his identity which can only be based upon individuality.

Clark had an interesting premise for a novel, where he could have possibly taken Finney's story into the 21st century by using his particular version of the doppelganger as a meditation on what it means to be human in a world where we are beginning to realize to what degree we are not individuals constructed by the conscious choices we have made, but instead preprogrammed on various levels by that largest of ideological state apparatuses, the Corporation, to make those choices. Certainly this idea infuses a good deal of modern zombie fiction as well as scholarship about the figure of the zombie. Alternately, Clark could have incorporated the concept of monothematic delusion into his story. Monothematic delusion differs from what is sometimes called multi-thematic or polythematic delusions where the person has a range of delusions (schizophrenia and dementia are examples of this type of delusion). Instead, the types of delusions that fall under the category of multi-thematic or polythematic delusions include Capgras delusion, where the sufferer believes that a close relative has been replaced by an identical-looking impostor; Fregoli delusion, where the sufferer believes that various people s/he meets are the same person in disguise; or even subjective doubles, where the sufferer believes that an identical doppelganger is carrying out independent actions. Midway through the novel, it occurred to me that Clark was setting me up to believe that Mason actually suffered from one of these delusions, and that what he was observing was not a phenomena dependent on supernatural agency. Sadly, Mason was not mentally ill, and the actual

explanation of the Echomen made for a convoluted, improbable, and very annoying denouement. I fear that the author was suffering from “I need to finish this novel so my publisher will pay me” syndrome.

At his best, Clark is a deft storyteller whose works are original and compelling. Some of his best to date include *Blood Crazy*, about an unknown force that suddenly causes everyone over 21 to become a bunch of homicidal zombies bent on destroying the young and working towards some inexplicable collective goal, and *Vamphyrric*, his original spin on the vampire. I give Clark high marks for having an interesting idea for a novel, but sadly, he fails to adequately develop it.

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