

Book Reviews by Rob Steiner

For a complete list of my book reviews, please see my web site (<http://robsteiner.quarkfolio.com>). Below are a few samples from my site:

Forged in Death by Jim Melvin

Forged in Death, the first of six books in Jim Melvin's Death Wizard Chronicles, starts out with a scene from a claustrophobic's nightmare - Torg, the Death-Knower and king of the Tugars, is imprisoned by the evil wizard Invictus at the bottom of a cold, dark pit bored hundreds of feet into a mountain. He can't stretch out because the pit is too small, and he can't lean against the walls, because they're enchanted with flesh-burning magic. He either has to stand or curl into an uncomfortably tight fetal position.

We're only in the prologue, and the book is already giving me the willies. And that's a good thing.

Torg eventually escapes the pit and embarks on an Odyssey-like journey back to his desert home to stop Invictus from enslaving the world of Triken.

Jim Melvin's world-building was at once fantastic and logical, from the unique human cultures to the strange twists on traditional monsters. It's obvious Melvin put a lot of thought into the ecosystems that support his world. For example, Torg discovers a race of monkeys that live deep underground. How do they sustain themselves? By carving meat off a gigantic tentacled monster that inhabits the caverns, like microscopic mites on human skin. How does the monster survive? By eating the monkeys. It's an elegant symbiosis, and Melvin portrays other unique creatures similarly throughout the book.

Forged in Death has a non-traditional magic system - Torg enters a state of temporary death, feeds off the power of the afterlife, and then returns to his body magically recharged (which is why he's called a "Death-Knower"). The evil wizard Invictus, however, gets his power from the sun. This is a switch from most fantasies, which usually have the good guys feeding off the sun and the villains using death for their evil schemes.

The book also felt like a primer for real-world Theravada Buddhism (something the author acknowledges). The characters, Torg in particular, describe the principles behind meditation, karma, the eternal quest for enlightenment, and reincarnation. As one who's ignorant of Buddhist scriptures, I now want to read up on the subject to learn more.

I do have some quibbles with an otherwise outstanding novel.

The hero Torg was a likable character and an all-powerful wizard. But at times he seemed too good and too all-powerful. He won every battle unless he chose to lose, like when he allowed his enemies to throw him into the pit. I wanted Torg to fail or make more mistakes, and then watch him overcome those failures to become a different man by the end of the book.

Also, *Forged in Death* was a cliff-hanger book. I'm not a fan of the style, but it's a personal nit-pick of mine and not anything Melvin did wrong. Readers who enjoy cliff-hanger endings, however, will see no problem with it.

Forged in Death was beautifully written and a worthy addition to the epic fantasy genre. I hope to see Torg challenged a bit more in future books. I also look forward to learning more about Invictus, whose brief appearances painted him as an "interesting" villain. And the final battle between Torg and Invictus -- Triken's two most powerful wizards -- promises to be truly world-shaking.

Hell House by Richard Matheson

You know you're reading a great horror novel when you have to keep your eyes open in the shower -- despite the shampoo stinging the hell out of them -- so you can be sure there's no rotting-corpse-ghost peeking in at you. *Hell House* by Richard Matheson is such a novel.

Billionaire Rudolph Deutsch is going to die, so he decides to pay a physicist and two spiritual mediums \$100,000 each to prove whether or not life exists after death. He tells the team to spend a week in the Belasco house in Maine, a colossal mansion in a mist-shrouded valley that was the site of depravity, murder, and drug addiction in the 1920s spurred on by its maniacal owner Emeric Belasco. Previous teams have tried investigating the house, but all ended up either dead or mad before completing their investigations.

Dr. Lionel Bennett (accompanied by his wife Edith) is a physicist who goes to the house to prove that ghostly phenomena is nothing more than naturally occurring electromagnetic energy that all living humans emit. Spiritual medium Florence Tanner believes she can help the tortured souls imprisoned in the house to move on. And physical medium Benjamin Fischer, the only man to survive an investigation at Belasco house, accepts the assignment because he needs the money. But he knows Bennett and Tanner underestimate the evil that lives in the house, and he's too afraid to "open" his psychic abilities to the house to aid the investigation.

The house slowly ratchets up the terror and physical assaults, culminating in grotesque visions and hauntings that challenge the sanity of each character.

Hell House is about as primal a novel as you can get. It's simple in that it only has four characters and one setting, which makes for a quick read. But a simple story structure does not mean a simple story. The characters are complex, each with his/her own noble reasons for staying in the house, even when the hauntings turn brutal and repulsive. Their theories regarding who is doing the hauntings, and why, shift with each new clue they uncover.

Some of the hauntings and visions are gruesome and sexually explicit, but in an R-rated sort of way. If that's not your cup of tea, then you might want to stay away from this book. But if that doesn't bother you, and you want a genre-defining example of a haunted house tale, then you won't be disappointed with the chilling *Hell House*.

In a Season of Dead Weather by Mark Fuller Dillon

Grab a comfy chair by the fire, a hot drink, and a book of good horror stories. Those rattling shutters outside? Just the blowing snow. Those shadows dancing in the corner? Fire light, nothing more. And the whispers behind your chair are your imagination.

Maybe.

That's the feeling Mark Fuller Dillon conveys throughout his short story collection *In a Season of Dead Weather*. In most of the stories, it was never quite clear whether the "horror" was in the narrator's mind or if it was real. The reader was left to interpret at the end.

And that worked for me. Each Lovecraftian tale was expertly crafted, with poetic and visceral language describing characters enduring the loneliness and isolation of a long winter in the country or the city. Dillon is a Quebec native, so he's no stranger to maddeningly endless winters (I'm a west Michigan native, so I can sympathize).

Most of the stories were quite literary and a little confusing to me, a genre reader. But their narrative styles, descriptions, and situations were so unique that I found myself eager to read on just to hear the language rather than find out what happens to the characters.

In the first story, "Lamia Dance," a medical student takes a break from his studies – and braves the snow – to attend a film festival where he sees a film that brings back haunting memories from his childhood. The film's images of violence and anatomy seemed quite erotic to the narrator. "Lamia Dance" was either a story about being pushed into a profession that the narrator did not choose for himself...or about a budding serial killer.

In "Never Noticed, Never There," Tom Lighden sees ghostly apparitions in terrible pain on the streets of Ottawa. He is the only one who sees them, as every one else simply walks past them without a second glance. Dillon implies that society has become good at ignoring the pain of others, as we are too busy with our own lives to notice.

If you've ever been stuck alone in the woods during winter, you'll understand the characters' bleak situations in "Shadows in the Sunrise," "The Vast Importance of the Night," and "Who Would Remain?" Blizzards keep the narrators from civilization, they lose time, and see clawing shadows. Is it madness, ghosts, alien abductions? The reader is left to wonder if it's all real or if winter has claimed the characters' sanity. While the three stories had similar themes, their unique characters and situations sufficiently differentiated them.

"The Weight of Its Awareness" had a middle-aged man revisiting a seemingly deserted, walled-off home that he originally tried to explore when he was eighteen. Grotesque sculptures now decorate the gardens, and a dark presence spies him from the home's blackened windows and infects his mind. The story seemed like an extreme version of "curiosity killed the cat." It was the weakest of the seven stories for me; although "weak" is a relative term since even this story kept me enthralled.

The strongest story for me was "When the Echo Hates the Voice." Paul Bertrand is a brilliant, handsome young man who's always the life of any social gathering and constantly seeks any excuse to be around people. The reason is that he cannot stand to be alone, for that is when the voices and faces visit him. Told by a narrator observing Paul, the story suggests a struggle between two personalities: one that seeks companionship and social reward, and one that seeks to keep us isolated from each other.

As I said at the beginning, I'm a genre reader and rarely read stories just for their styles and language. Dillon's *In a Season of Dead Weather* is one of those rare works that can make even a genre reader like me want to take a second look at the literary. Highly recommended.