



SOULTAKER (Book Review)

Ghastly Reviews - Books

Written by Vince Darcangelo

Tuesday, February 10, 2009 11:46 AM

In order for a horror novel to work, the author must strike a balance between realistic and fantastic elements. Bryan Smith skews heavily toward the latter in his new release, SOULTAKER, which has moments of great imagination but too often emphasizes shock over substance.



Jake McAllister, a mildly successful horror author and recovering alcoholic, returns to his hometown of Rockville to keep his younger brother, Trey, from going down the wrong path. More specifically, to protect him from his new girlfriend, Myra, who is the head of a demonic cult that is taking over the town by seducing its men and recruiting its women.

If Russ Meyer were to pen a modern-day horror novel, it would probably be a lot like SOULTAKER. Rockville is apparently overrun with hot, sadistic, sex-obsessed females, and this includes the women that aren't part of Myra's cult. Nearly every chapter includes one over-the-top sex scene, to the point that it feels more like watching Cinemax than FEARnet.

There is also a lack of a strong protagonist. Jake McAllister is certainly SOULTAKER's most compelling character, and rightly billed as the lead, but he shares the stage with a troupe of characters so large that he becomes part of an ensemble cast. The book would benefit from streamlining its shifts in perspective and focusing more on Jake's story.

That said, there is a lot to enjoy in SOULTAKER. Smith is adept at bringing together the forces of good and evil for a final battle in the high school. Though the shifting storylines can disengage the reader early on, Smith ties them together brilliantly at the climax.

He gives us some excellent scenes along the way, such as when the adulterous principal gets his comeuppance from his fed-up wife—complete with a startling twist and a gruesomely enjoyable beheading. Then there's a sadistic torture sequence that will make you shudder next time you face down a beer bong.

And the ending is fantastic, a combination of gore and revelation that puts the finishing touch on SOULTAKER and has me eager to read the sequel.

What came before, however, was too concerned with shock and less concerned with character. I would have loved more Jack McAllister and fewer sex scenes. But once you get past the hyperbolic horrors, this is a classic tale of a small-town haunting.


