

"STRANGWAYS: THE THIRSTY/RED HANDS" (Comic Review)

Written by Trevor Parker

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The horror-Western hybrid is a fragile creature to try and usher onto the earth, a frail little tadpole with very little precedent for success or survival (BILLY THE KID MEETS DRACULA and FROM DUSK TILL DAWN 3: THE HANGMAN'S DAUGHTER are just two examples of the sticky stillborn). The great Joe R. Lansdale is maybe the only name to consistently pull this one off, boasting the classic novel DEAD IN THE WEST and his awesome run on JONAH HEX that regrettably inspired the woeful movie of the same name. Still, the concept of a very dark frontier continues to coax creators to its borders, and Matthew Maxwell's comic series STRANGWAYS returns with THE THIRSTY/RED HANDS to take on the always tricky business of merging ghouls with gunslingers.



The first section, "The Thirsty," introduces us to Collins, your standard-issue laconic ex-soldier who roams the sandy plains on horseback. Collins wanders into a ghost town infested with vampires, barely escaping with his fluids intact and flees to a neighboring village where he meets Joachim, a Spanish vampire hunter with all the answers and a festering grudge. Collins and Joachim must now rally the disbelieving townsfolk to repel a thirsty herd of vamps, led by their mysterious and powerful doyen Raphael, or be bled out as human cattle.

First and foremost, STRANGWAYS: THE THIRSTY/RED HANDS treats the conventions of the Western genre with respect, and the crackling cowboy dialogue comes across as authentic and off-the-dusty-cuff. It's the horror dimension that's lacking here, with typical and predictable vampire plotting driving the tale. The set-up is as routine as a knock-knock joke—Fanged, sun-shy freaks hiss and attack; trusty sidearms don't seem to work, but wooden weapons oddly do. A turned loved one taps on the windowpane, trying to dupe an oblivious family member into granting him entry. A motley group of stock characters like the sheriff, the drunken preacher and the saloon maid must sort out their differences before banding together and taking on a seemingly insurmountable threat. Granted, the narrative is heavy with action and never bores,

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but there's really nothing at all fresh or distinguishing to recommend.

The distinctive artwork by Gervasio and Jok, an interesting meld of Rick Geary's cartoon styling with the inky chiaroscuro of HELLBOY's Mike Mignola, works for the most part, but occasionally hinders the storytelling; some awkward transitions between panels and hazy demarcations between outside or inside and day or night are confusing. The second, shorter section, titled "Red Hands", features the origin of Raphael, the vampire cabal's leader from the preceding story, and how he arrived to the American west. It benefits from meatier content and a smoother and more fundamentally sound art style by Luis Guaragna.

STRANGWAYS is not in the league of Lansdale or even J.T. Petty's decent THE BURROWERS, but it's not a steaming trail of horse droppings like BLOODRAYNE 2: DELIVERANCE either. It falls rather blandly in the middle, a serviceable but uninspired vampire oater. Here's hoping STRANGWAYS can rustle up some stronger characterization and more creative plotting for any future rodeos.

