

## “RIP M.D.”: Monsters in Treatment

Written by Jack Bennett

Saturday, 20 November 2010 10:15

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Modern horror fans can be in a tough position when attempting to be responsible parents. While many of us got into the genre specifically because our elders forbade it, one of the joys of having children is introducing them to the cool stuff we love. So when your personal interests center around images of bodily dismemberment, you have to make decisions as to how high is too low to hang certain movie posters, or how far you'll allow a 3-year-old into your rec room.

If you catch your kid watching that DVD of RE-ANIMATOR you thought you hid so well, do you feel a twinge of self-loathing as you rush to turn off the TV? Even material that seems tame to the hardcore horror junkie has to get rerouted through a newly installed parental filter; it may be dated and in black and white, but is watching NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD with your youngster worth the potential nightmares, future therapy or the possibility that they'll rebel and start lecturing you about your values? Fortunately, there are those great segues into horror that you can lower your children into like the shallow end of the pool, knowing that one day they'll be ready for the high dive—namely, monster movies. What horror-buff progenitor doesn't giddily anticipate their child's first exposure to the original FRANKENSTEIN, CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON or KING KONG? That meeting place between responsible parenting and letting your kids love monsters is at the heart of the new graphic novel RIP M.D., a joint production of Fantagraphics Books and Lincoln Butterfield authored and illustrated by animation veteran Mitch Schauer (THE ANGRY BEAVERS, BOBBY'S WORLD). The parental dilemma (just how much horrific stuff should we let our kid get into?) is mined as a story point, while the book itself serves as a family-friendly gateway to gruesomeness.



The titular Rip is Ripley Plimpt, an open-hearted 11-year-old boy who does not possess a doctorate, but does find himself counseling a series of monsters with all-too-human neuroses. The premise begins as wish-fulfillment, as Ripley, a collector of vintage horror memorabilia, befriends Dead Guy the socially awkward zombie, a werewolf with an identity crisis named Lester and the obnoxious semi-corporeal spirit of deceased cat Limbo. Ripley eventually finds

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himself overwhelmed by his role as the go-to guy for lonely bogeymen, but rather than delivering a half-hearted moral about casting off childish things, the story focuses on Ripley's personal growth as he accepts responsibility for these monstrous misfits. It's a legitimately positive message delivered via a story about creatures, all of which sits close to Schauer's heart.

“I grew up an only child, predominantly surrounded by adults,” Schauer recalls. “I had to find something to entertain myself. It turned out to be monsters.” One of the first movies Schauer remembers seeing as a child was 1942's *THE GHOST OF FRANKENSTEIN*, with Lon Chaney Jr. taking over the role of the Monster from Boris Karloff. “There's a scene where the Monster comes into a village and sees a little girl whose ball has been kicked up on a roof,” Schauer says. “She sees the Monster and the first thing she says is, ‘Are you a giant?’ And he likes her immediately and she likes him, and he lifts her up to get her ball. Then the parents screw it up. I'm trying to pull from the emotion I felt when I first saw those classic monsters, not as something to fear but something that was misunderstood.”

Besides “All Creatures Great and Icky,” as they are referred to in the first story, *RIP M.D.* departs from other contemporary children's fare by portraying the protagonist's parents as understanding and perceptive. “My experience is in animation, and the trend in animation is that the parents are stupid and the kids are smart and in charge. And that's fine—the kids are empowered—but it has gone on that way for years now. Parents really aren't less intelligent than their children, by and large,” Schauer says with a chuckle. “Ever since I've been in the entertainment business, it may be a children's project, but it always seems to come back to parents and the family. I take the child's perspective, but when I was a kid my opinion was respected and I was always treated as part of the group, not a kid who had to be dealt with.”

Another departure from similar stories with a child protagonist is evident from the beginning, as Schauer makes it clear that the monsters are real and not the product of Rip's imagination. “I had to do that in order to get the monsters involved in the story. We were creating a family in the first book. That's what we do with neighbors and friends: We bring them in and create a larger family.” While Rip's family accept his new acquaintances, they exhibit an entirely plausible concern. “I think I may reference in the book that they trust Rip. They tried to raise him to have common sense. It begins as a fantasy, but as it becomes real, the parents' attitude is, ‘Well, let's see how this works. If you keep your grades up, we'll let you do this.’ A lot of it comes from my own childhood, having an understanding mother who was very supportive of my becoming an artist and a father who was firm but fair. When you read the book, there's an undercurrent of my childhood, though I draw more from my own life with my children.”

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Each monster in RIP M.D. is familiar, but none are derivative from any specific source, and the book avoids the MONSTER SQUAD effect of rounding up the usual suspects. They feel more inspired by the kinds of half-remembered mashups that kids routinely turn out themselves (one can imagine a child vaguely aware of THE BLOB creating Oozy the friendly protoplasm, and using up an entire purple crayon in the process). The designs are fantastic, with the rotting zombie and snarling werewolf unsoftened by their appearance in a family-friendly story.



“Lester had to be a credible werewolf to get across the idea of something that looks terrifying turning out to not be terrifying,” Schauer notes. “The original idea was that these monsters all have the same problems we have; it’s just that we never get close enough to know that. Rip is a kid who loves monsters and is willing to get that close to them, but they are really monsters. There’s a scene in the museum where Lester almost kills the security guards.” The visual take on a little vampire girl is uncommon and eerie; she appears ghostlike and translucent, with pupil-less white eyes and hair that perpetually floats in the air, as if underwater.

Tellingly, the scariest design is saved for the human villains of the piece, an idly rich family with a brood of pet-murdering miscreants, whose patriarch looks like a cross between Dracula and Meat Loaf. They’re so unremittingly cruel to the Plimpt family that their comeuppance, a protracted sequence that would seem shockingly nasty in a Pixar movie, feels here like our hero merely being resourceful. The book ends with the presumed massacre of the bad guys at the hands of a mob of monsters, but knowing the bloody details of the outcome would require your child to have an imagination (examining the splash page of rampaging monsters reveals the horde to include Frankenstein’s daughter, Tor Johnson, a pinhead from FREAKS and Schauer’s son-in-law).

The comic’s subtle mean streak is part of its charm. Everyone from the Brothers Grimm to Roald Dahl employed some ruthlessness in their children’s classics. “You watch classic Disney films, and there is real danger there,” Schauer explains. “I think the two most terrifying things ever put on film are Monstro the whale and the kid turning into a donkey in PINOCCHIO.” Following in the same vein, it’s refreshing to see RIP M.D. achieve family-friendliness without defanging the subject matter.

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Otherwise, RIP M.D. contains only a few mild hints at lewdness: Ripley’s Uncle Will comes across as a stoner, the reanimated cat is perpetually drunk and illustrated holding a martini and you may not know how to feel about a panel in which a security guard refers to “a very gay-looking werewolf,” but everything stays in the PG realm. There are subtle hints at more grown-up stuff throughout the story, with Rip’s mother introduced wearing hair so thin you can see her scalp through it, and references are made to the family pulling together around an unnamed illness. Schauer and co. may be making a larger point about dealing with imaginary horror as a training session for real-life troubles. When a kid has to face a serious threat like the possibility of losing their parent to leukemia, are we going to get uptight when he finds comfort in creepy creatures?

“The tweens, the TWILIGHT fans, the Harry Potter fans—that’s a smart group of kids who don’t like to be talked down to,” Schauer says. “They like to have something that treats them as if they know what they’re reading. I hope that’s what happens with RIP, that kids feel like it’s not written for them in a condescending way, but they’re welcome to enjoy it.”

Regardless of the deeper meanings, RIP M.D. fulfills Schauer’s desire to create a monster story for tots and young teens. While the book is a stand-alone story, there are seeds sewn for further adventures, and unlike other endlessly regurgitated child protagonists, Ripley seems like an ideal candidate for a continuing story. RIP M.D. doesn’t skimp on the macabre while reinforcing the ideal of an understanding family and the importance of not passing judgment on society’s outcasts...at least until you know them well enough to deliver an informed diagnosis.

{jcomments on}