MEG: HELL’S AQUARIUM by Steve Alten (Tor, pb, 512 pp, $9.99)

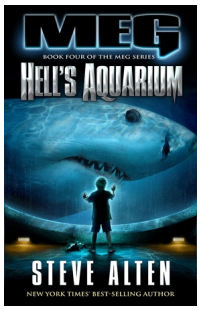
For this fourth novel in his blood-drenched MEG saga, Alten brings us not just one live *Carchar odon megalodon*
, the giant, prehistoric antecedent of today’s Great White Shark, but
seven
of them: Angel, her ex-mate Scarface, their five daughters (Belle, Lizzy, Mary Kate, Ashley, Angelica). That’s one hungry horde. Alten also serves up a large cast of lunchable humans—many named after die-hard fans of his books who nabbed this honor in website contests by promising to promote Alten’s work. That’s marketing genius! However, a slight silliness does set in whenever Alten introduces a “character” and we get a graph recounting their (presumably true) background—and then they die two pages later or we otherwise never hear of them again.

HELL’S AQUARIUM has three intertwined storylines. James & Terry Taylor (heroes of previous books) are coping with their Megs outgrowing the tank facilities at the Tanaka Oceanographic Institute, a combination Sea World and MIT in picturesque Monterey, CA. At the same time, a fanatic organization dubbed R.A.W. (Return Animals to the Wild) is using protests and media ops to force the freeing of the Taylors’ younger Megs from aquarium captivity—not the smartest of notions when the killer supersharks in question are apex predators all too ready to bite the hand (or the head off) that feeds them. Meanwhile, 21-year-old family heir David Taylor heads to Dubai to train submersible pilots for that country’s JURASSIC PARK take on Marineland. The pilots’ deep, deep water mission is to search a Pellucidar-like ocean for more living, prehistoric sea monsters and help bring ’em back alive (to stock the Dubai park’s giant aquariums).

It may all sound pretty preposterous—even for an SF-flavored smash-up of JAWS 3-D, THE LOST WORLD: JURASSIC PARK, DEEP BLUE SEA, GRAY LADY DOWN and HATARI!—but it works like gangbusters, almost non-stop excitement. Whenever there’s a lull in the action (or a cliff to hang from), Alten simply switches to another setting and its dire dangers. His narrative is in *present* tense (not past), which initially is a bit disconcerting, but does make it seem like all this is happening RIGHT NOW! This VERY minute! Or this NEXT one!

With lotsa characters and seven Megs, there are plenty of people to comprise the sharks’ Happy Meals as well as a few Megs leftover to be potential sushi treats for other toothy critters swimming out of the sea that time forgot. Pleiosaurs, call your agents! After all, in these JAWS-inspired books and flicks, the appeal has always been who eats who. Food chain! It’s also a struggle of man against the wild—and a challenge for the writer to find new ways for creatures to chomp down on scenery and extras. The wildlife isn’t actually evil, that’s just their nature.

This Alten epic includes an unlikely, extended cameo by actress Lana Wood (Plenty O’Toole in DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER), who gets signed up to be R.A.W.’s spokescelebrity. There’s other barbed satire hidden among the scientific mumbo-jumbo and dazzling action sequences. Kudos to Alten for at least two unexpected plot twists, shocking developments which remain unrevealed here. Overall, HELL’S AQUARIUM is supremely entertaining. Readers will be happy to know Alten is already at work on NIGHT STALKERS, his *fifth* novel of MEG mayhem. Don’t worry. Carnage is no doubt included.



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