Cover every orifice. Comet Press' new collection SICK THINGS: AN ANTHOLOGY OF EXTREME CREATURE HORROR is making a beeline for the soft contents of your body—and it doesn't care one bit where it makes its grand entrance, orbital sockets or otherwise. Rest assured this violation will be painful, given the tight confinements of our fallible frames of flesh—but anything less than a full-on ass-rape would probably seem insufficient in the eyes of editrix Cheryl Mullenax.

What's the best criterion by which to appraise an anthology such as SICK THINGS? With the gut, this reviewer is guessing—and within the first six stories, mine was properly knotted. That the anthology hits the ground slipping and sliding in its own viscera with Randy Chandler's sexually explicit "Devils" is no accident. There is something of a mission statement implicit in Chandler's sopping assault:

Read on at your own stomach's peril.

So is it scary? Not really. But frightening the reader seems secondary to this anthology's proposed primary goal: repulsion.

And in that respect: Mission accomplished.

Against all better judgment, M. Shaw's "Legacy of the Last Invader" should not be as compelling a read as it was. It is a testament to Shaw's literary prowess that his story about serial-raping aliens is as gripping as it is. Even as it stands as one of the more graphic attacks on the reader's sensibilities, the tale grounds itself with a sound first-person narrative that, oddly enough, makes a rather convincing argument for mankind stocking up on chastity belts.

In fact, the majority of stories included here are bolstered by their surprisingly sturdy writing. Mullenax has assembled a rogue's gallery of intelligent grotesqueries that will temper one's appetite hours after closing the book—particularly with the culinary violation of "This Is My Body" by Lawrence Conquest. Kurt Bachard's "Rotsworth" exploits our own post-9/11 xenophobia by dragging the reader into the very bowels of a dystopian tenement building. But it is Simon Wood's "Acceptable Losses" that proves to be the true standout of this anthology. Given its historical viewpoint, there is a certain aura of maturity to its splatter. As silly as that may sound for a collection replete with mad-cow zombies and semen-infused spider babies, Wood's military monstrosity is a cut above with its balance of gross-outs and sharp wordsmithing—so much so, in fact, that this slender piece of metaphorical meat had this reviewer craving to read even further.

There are a few fumbles along the way. Ralph Greco Jr.'s "Betty and the Cambion" comes off as a misplaced piece of demon-porn. "Hunger Pangs" by Matt Kurtz could have used some stomach-stapling, trimming down its own fat in order to keep from telegraphing its urban-legend ending from pages away.

A momentary digression: Short stories of this particular ilk tend to slow down time long enough for the reader to absorb as much gory detail as humanly possible. The narrative lens hones in on the explicit, infusing a literary version of THE MATRIX's "bullet time" into the text for the sole purpose of lavishing us with lengthy descriptions of viscera and all its requisite dribblings. The true authorial challenge here is to create a certain sense of fluidity within these contextual close-ups. No matter how much space is dedicated to a single tableau of violence, the story still needs to move. The biggest stumbling block inevitably ends up being simile—and unfortunately, a few pieces here fall victim to their own poetic approximations. Like flies hovering over a rotting corpse, the number of "likes" in Fed Venturini's "Threshold" eclipses its own narrative. Sentence after sentence, the reader is thrust from one simile to another—until his scribbled throat-slitting becomes nothing more than a tangle of figures of speech.

It may seem like a minor quibble—but with the likes of Clive Barker providing fluid narrative motion through his literary eviscerations, it's worth pointing out that what works within the best stories in SICK THINGS isn't their determination to leave no intestine unturned, but that the gore somehow serves to help propel the story forward—not impede it.

{jcomments on}