

"DEADMAN'S ROAD" (Book Review)

Written by Trevor Parker

Saturday, 11 December 2010 11:04



Quick, name a good horror/Western. It's a tough ask; from BILLY THE KID VS. DRACULA to SUNDOWN: THE VAMPIRE IN RETREAT to this year's JONAH HEX debacle—too many blanks and too few bullets. As such, few would argue that author Joe R. Lansdale's straightforward 1986 novella DEAD IN THE WEST has retained this particular mashup's championship belt for a 25-year reign, although it must be conceded that the quality of the intervening challengers has been wobblier than a three-legged horse.

DEAD IN THE WEST, which was a small-publisher offering in its initial run and has been maddeningly out of print for years, is now being disinterred and dusted off by Subterranean Press to serve as centerpiece for its new Lansdale collection titled DEADMAN'S ROAD (out now). For those unacquainted with the written work of Lansdale, he's the inflamed brain behind both BUBBA-HO-TEP and the excellent "Incident On and Off a Mountain Road" episode of MASTERS OF HORROR. He's currently soaking up acclaim for his "Hap and Leonard" series of popular but impolite mystery novels. Dealing in seedy cowpokes spouting piquant dialogue amid the crooked shacks and spooky swamplands of East Texas, Lansdale comes over like Cormac McCarthy wearing plastic Dracula fangs.



DEAD IN THE WEST begins with Reverend Jebediah Mercer riding alone into the town of Mud Creek, Texas. The Reverend is wracked with guilt and suffering from a crisis of faith (neither affliction seems to interfere with his pinpoint pistol aim, of course). It turns out that Mud Creek is in need of a savior, as a Native-American medicine man has cursed the town and sent a passel of nasty beasts to exact revenge from its residents. It's up to the good Reverend to channel the Lord's righteous vengeance before the dusty streets of Mud Creek are overrun by scuttling abominations.

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The strength of DEAD IN THE WEST lies in the simple, entertaining conventions lovingly lifted from both the horror and Western genres. The story features an iron-jawed, laconic hero, a wisecracking kid sidekick and a climactic zombie assault on a makeshift fortress in a scene straight out of NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD. Lansdale provides readers with exactly what they would expect upon hearing the words "horror-Western," something other genre-blending attempts have fumbled simply by overcomplicating things (again, JONAH HEX). Strangely enough, these familiar archetypes are also DEAD's main weakness, as almost all the story beats can be seen galloping in from miles away. The delirious, dizzy unpredictability of Lansdale's DRIVE-IN novels are very much missed. There is hope, because this is the point where DEADMAN'S ROAD as a collection seriously improves on DEAD IN THE WEST as a solitary work, with four additional Reverend Mercer short stories adding some necessary flavor.

In this sense, DEADMAN'S ROAD is more comic strip than dime novel; DEAD IN THE WEST acts as the origin tale and the short stories are subsequent issues featuring more imaginative extrapolations. Now that the lines of Reverend Mercer's world have been established, Lansdale is free to color outside them with abandon (and does). We follow Mercer as he escorts a condemned prisoner to jail and faces off against some sort of bumblebee creature. We ride along as he's trapped in a haunted bordello while battling a group of werewolf conquistadores, and on his investigation of a gremlin-plagued mining camp while partnered by a spectacularly vulgar and mountainously obese sweetheart named Flower. The new stories deliver a thrilling wallop of Lansdale's gonzo weirdness, and the sharp banter in these more recently-penned tales begs to be read out loud. Add in a number of fine, detailed illustrations by artist Glenn Chadbourne seeded throughout, and DEADMAN'S ROAD should be an instant buy for Lansdale vets and virgins alike. Saddle up and strap in tight.



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