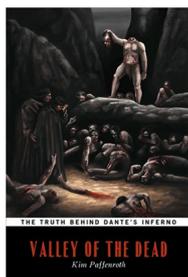


“VALLEY OF THE DEAD” (Book Review)

Written by Bram Eisenthal
Sunday, 23 May 2010 10:03



American author Kim Paffenroth (pictured) and the zombie subculture appear to make unlikely bedfellows, but there is a reason for the associate professor of religion’s obsession with the shambling, gut-ripping undead: His works generally focus on the timeless battle between good and evil. In 2006’s *GOSPEL OF THE LIVING DEAD*, he tore into George A. Romero’s films to show how they utilize Christian imagery, via well-researched, in-depth synopses and analyses. It made for a great read and garnered Paffenroth a coveted Bram Stoker Award.



Now, several zombie-related novels later, Paffenroth has breathed new life into a classic tale, the legendary *THE INFERNO* by Italy’s Dante Alighieri, the banished Florence-born bard who died in Ravenna in 1321. In *VALLEY OF THE DEAD* (Permuted Press), Paffenroth surmises that during the years following Alighieri’s exile from Florence in 1302 (under threat of being burned alive), his subsequent 17-year disappearance was beset by misadventures too horrible to have been revealed till now. During these years when Alighieri was researching and subsequently writing the most famous part of *THE INFERNO*—the world-renowned and celebrated poem *THE DIVINE COMEDY*, which examines the Christian afterworld—there is only one thing that can explain the bizarre occurrences he documents: the walking dead.

Yup, there are a lot of zombies in Paffenroth’s novel, and he surmises that they are responsible for much of the disturbing imagery in *THE DIVINE COMEDY* that Alighieri chose to cloak in allegory. The story picks up as Dante, several years past the age of 37, is wandering the dark European woods after his banishment from his home town. He happens upon a pregnant young Romani woman being pursued by a moaning, slow-moving, injured man whom the woman eventually dispatches by bashing his head in. Dante and Bogdana, setting off together in search

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of the living, find a village that has turned vigilante and is in the midst of burning an elderly woman accused of being a witch at the stake. There, they pick up an AWOL soldier named Radovan, followed later by a monk named Adam, and together the party traverses the accursed landscape.

In the original prose, Dante wanders through the various Circles of Hell, and Paffenroth vividly reimagines these tests of faith. The author’s genius and acumen enable him to put an exciting, horrific spin on traditional Christian viewpoints without blaspheming so much that the Church will brand him a heretic and burn his books at the stake.



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