

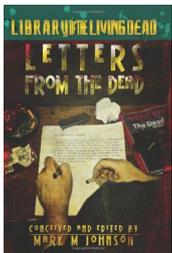
"LETTERS FROM THE DEAD" Edited by Mark M. Johnson (Book Review)

Written by Trevor Parker

Friday, 05 November 2010 09:56



Epistolary is the word used to describe a narrative as told through letters, documents, or journal entries. (Who says Fangoria ain't educational?) The epistolary work holds more than a little romance for fans of horror literature. Many of the classics (Stoker's DRACULA being the best example) have used this intimate format to grand, eerie effect. So it stands to reason that a new book collecting missives from scattered survivors of the zombie apocalypse should make for an interesting gnash, right?



LETTERS FROM THE DEAD is the result of editor Mark M. Johnson's admittedly intriguing idea of having seventy different authors each contribute a separate vignette of grim life under fang and fingernail. There is no cohesive plot that runs throughout the book, making each letter like a self-contained short story spanning no more than a page or two. The book's downfall comes from the fact that you've heard all of these stories many times before: Families cowering in boarded-up houses while food rations dwindle, military personnel formulating strategies against an inconceivable adversary, young kids struggling to understand the deadly shift in their circle of trust. Couple this overall stale feeling with the monotonous frame of a survivor writing to get something off their chest before they perish and LETTERS FROM THE DEAD gets tedious in a hurry, even at an anorexic page count of 135. By the time they reach the fortieth numbing iteration of "Dear so-and-so, I know you'll never read this, but I've been infected/lost all hope and I've decided to end my/a loved one's life. Goodbye..." readers will feel a bit like their own brains have just been munched upon.

The book does show some sparks whenever Johnson manages to include an atypical approach to the material, such as a note from a Home Depot customer praising the skull-cleaving effectiveness of a particular tool that the store stocks, or a humorous deed to a solitary rooftop kingdom that one survivor had built and was forced to abandon. Unfortunately, these imaginative twinkles are few, and while some of the very sincere contributors deserve credit for their ability to sketch a distinct character in such a brief dose of writing, the book, taken as a whole, is a repetitive bore.

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Like so many zombie flicks where the creators' ambition is let down by limited resources, this small-press offering suffers from a lack of investment in design or art direction as well. A book of this nature could have certainly benefited from trying to make the pages seem like actual documents. As it stands, the entire book is presented in one bland, uniform font.

Regardless, these days are shaping up to be banner ones for fans of scabby zombie action. With the WALKING DEAD marching across our TV screens and a film adaptation of Max Brooks' superlative WORLD WAR Z novel on the way, the bar for quality in zombie-themed projects is sitting awfully high up. Consider LETTERS FROM THE DEAD as just one of the many attempts that are doomed to land far, far beneath it.



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