

## “SLAY BELLS RINGING” (e-Book Review)

Written by Mark L. Miller

Tuesday, 21 December 2010 11:56

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With the holidays upon us, one may get the urge to read a few stories around the old Yule log. If you're like me, the urge may be to read something a tad bit sinister. And if you're like me, you're going to enjoy SLAY BELLS RINGING, a new anthology of holiday horror edited by Jeff Chitty (pictured).

Though many of these tales have been told in one variation or another through the ages, this collection (downloadable as an e-book from [Macabro Xtreme Publishing](#)) unifies the focus by attending to horror of more of a splatterpunk nature. The thing with splatterpunk fiction is, there's often too much reliance on fluids in lieu of story. In most of the stories, every bodily emission is referenced almost as if going down a checklist. Blood? Check. Vomit? Check. Semen? Check. It gets to be a bit tedious reading this shopping list of semi-solids over and over in each of SLAY BELLS RINGING's 11 entries, but like most anthologies, there is a good mix of strong stories among the weaker offenders. And though Robert Devereaux did a lot of this before in SANTA STEPS OUT (I'm sure there are others, but that's the one that has been etched into by brain, for better or worse), there's still room for more stories of gory Christmas cheer.

My favorites among these offerings are the more cerebral ones. Ken Goldman tells a tale of a taxi with a murderous past that can be read through the various stains on the interior and the upholstery in "A Little Time in Cab 9." This story focuses more on the hint of killing, rather than the obvious description of it. Another goodie is "The Confession," as Santa confides in the reader about his growing urges to kill. With this inventive manner of presenting the tale, author David M. Simon makes it all the more interesting. Though it's a bit more on the graphic side, I also enjoyed "Satan Claus" by Tom Hamilton due to the imagery of a dying old lady and a department-store Santa's final moments. Though this is a typical zombie story, Hamilton's gift for wordplay and tension construction makes it most atypical.

One of the most chilling of the bunch is Lynn Caldwell's "Snow & Feathers," which mixes witchcraft, sex and gore in magical ways. Out of all of the tales, this is the one that's going to stick with me. It crescendos with intense impact and leaves you exhausted in the end. Though some of the dialogue is a bit stilted, "Snow" leaves you with a punch in the gut that will bruise and scar. Another of my faves is the anonymously credited "Fervor: The Diary of Jeremiah

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Jones,” which deals with a deluded reverend, a stolen Nativity scene and a new woman in town. It’s told in the form of a diary, a tried-and-true storytelling gambit that gripped me tighter with each entry.

Other works here may be more straightforward, but are no less effective. Clint Finnell’s “From Santa” will leave you asking more questions than you find answers to as a man opens a gift full of flesheating gremlins, though the description of the monster attack is packed with intensity and energy. The shooting spree in “Black Friday” is a scenario I’m sure has crossed the minds of anyone who actually waits in line in front of department stores the day after Thanksgiving at least once. It’s a winning idea, to be sure, though author Chitty seems to be the worst offender of the bunch in terms of going down the aforementioned checklist of fluids, the biggest hindrance to an otherwise engrossing concept. Shirley Keene’s “What You’ve Always Wanted” may be a bit predictable, but it’s definitely a powerful piece of erotic fiction about man’s most common fantasy and what happens when one gets it.

The reverse of Simon’s “Confession” is “The Night the Elves Killed Santa” by Crowder Robinson. This story is most like SANTA STEPS OUT, in that there’s an elf uprising and much attention given to the power of Santa’s phallus. Robinson’s mixture of the elves’ sweetness and the dastardly deeds they perform makes for a fun read, though. Thomas Scopel is unlucky in that his “All the Creatures Were Stirring...Even the Mouse” is the third killer-elf/Santa story in the bunch. Though it may not be totally fair to the story itself, by the time I got to Scopel’s well-trod tale, I was growing a bit weary of this concept and wished the editor had gotten a bit more adventurous in the anthology’s construction.

The last tale is probably the most fun by far. “St. Nick vs. the Home Invaders” is as wonky as the title sounds—an ode to EVIL DEAD-esque slapstick violence and ’80s action movies. Ed Frankenlauer mixes just the right amount of cheese, snark and balls into this concoction to end the book with a bang.

Though not altogether original and somewhat repetitious, SLAY BELLS RINGING has a good mix of gore, comedy, eroticism and violence. I’ve read better anthologies, but if you’re looking for something wicked to leaf through while everyone else is caroling this holiday season, SLAY BELLS RINGING hits a lot of the right notes.



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