

## “CARRY THE FLAME” (Book Review)

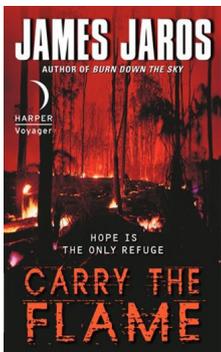
Written by Michael Gingold

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In this writer’s estimation, there are two distinct periods in the postapocalypse genre: that which came before Cormac McCarthy’s devastating novel *THE ROAD*, and that which came after. We don’t necessarily need to judge the genre against it, but when you title your book *CARRY THE FLAME*—a popular mantra in *THE ROAD*—you kind of invite that dangerous comparison.



Fortunately, title aside, the two books are entirely different, and this is usually a good thing. *THE ROAD* was a heavy story, and the setting served simply as a backdrop for its characters—the book wasn’t necessarily *about* the postapocalypse. James Jaros’ *CARRY THE FLAME* (Harper Voyager) very much is. We follow the continuing story of a ragtag group of survivors who are all bound by blood—be it family relations or the blood spilled during their many tribulations. Led by Jessie, a former scientist, and outlaw marauder Burned Fingers, the group has succeeded in dealing a severe blow to their enemies (religious zealots the Alliance) and is now fleeing with a tanker truck full of fuel in search of a temperate climate in the far north. Naturally, there are obstacles in the form of the shattered environment, a vengeful Alliance operative known as the Soul Hunter and new threats to be discovered on their trek across the Great American Desert.

Author Jaros (a pen name for thriller writer and reporter Mark Nykanen) is like many writers of speculative fiction: he has so much he wants to show us about the destroyed world he has created, so the characters in some respects serve as great tour guides on a trip through the hellscape. For the most part, the journey is engaging, but there are problems with the

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hamfisted presentation. It's clear from the environmental devastation portrayed in the book that neglecting to act on issues like global warming were catastrophically bad choices made by humanity. The fact that the author finds it necessary to point this out at length on several occasions doesn't sit well; it's as if he doesn't trust the reader to understand his point.

The religious cult that composes the Alliance is bothersome too, in the same fashion. Making them a cult of closeted pedophiles may come off as a sophisticated jab to 16-year-old readers, but to older eyes it just seems like the easy way out, a crude bludgeon inflicted on the hypocrisy of the church. In this kind of setting, there are more nuanced shots to be taken that, even with delicacy, could be far more effective at skewering the doublethink required for zealotry, and it's a shame these weren't explored.

CARRY THE FLAME is overall an enjoyable read—and probably the kind of book that many people who picked up THE ROAD thought they were getting. It delivers a lot of action, some interesting ideas about life in a nightmarish future of environmental collapse, well-imagined setpieces and a climax that puts the principals in place for the next in the series. Pick it up and enjoy if you want an intriguing story of the postapocalypse.

