

to retain her individuality, and is intrigued and repelled by the daemon's contending yearning to dissipate all sense of self within the safe, brainless conformity of the greater daemon community's hive mind.

However, Wooding disassociates himself from Jez long before the half-demon's internal conflict has manifested properly in the text. The attempt to substitute Jez, the only female lead, with the unlovable urchin Ashua Vode is also painfully transparent. Wooding's handling of this situation makes for a jarring moment in an otherwise harmonious text.

This is the only clumsiness within an otherwise outstanding novel. The crew of the *Ketty Jay* are delightfully flawed, and instead of puritanically trying to turn them into upstanding citizens, Wooding wittily celebrates their vices, even as they rise courageously to overcome challenges. Wooding stays true to his characters' quirks to the end, and successfully rounds up the series.

The crew of the *Ketty Jay* tread perilously close to destruction, but when the tale is delivered with such panache, you almost don't mind that it's the luck of the draw.

The Ace of Skulls by Wooding, Chris. London: Gollancz, 2013. ISBN 978-0575098114. RRP \$12.99. pp. 496.



DOOMED

REVIEWED BY MOLLY HOEY

Doomed (2013) is the second instalment of Chuck Palahniuk's trilogy on Madison Spencer, who is 13, chubby and dead. With *Doomed* Palahniuk has maintained his dedication to both the romantic and Menippean folk traditions, offering a tender yet glib look at our fear and fascination with morality, death and consequence. *Damned* (2011), the first instalment in this trilogy, saw Madison come to terms with her damnation, conquering Satan and his demonic hordes. *Doomed* is the inevitable revelation that defeating Lucifer was never going to be that straightforward.

In a previous review of *Damned* I criticised three areas of Palahniuk's first instalment: it didn't really explore any of the ideas it dealt with, the narrative voice was "irksome," and it lacked character development. Well I am happy to bow to the fact that perhaps Chuck knows best, and perhaps all creators have a grand scheme in mind.

Whilst the metafictional nature of the story is still undeveloped (though perhaps criticism should be held until the last instalment?), Madison seems to have grown in confidence, leaving aside her accusatory quips in exchange for more reflection and backstory. Upon reading this second instalment, those narrative frustrations are revealed to be defensive character traits and the loopholes are finally addressed, because now is the right time to address them.

I suspect that Madison would point out that when you're dead, everything is given in retrospect, but it is in the succession of analepsis and gesturing between the old fabula and syuzhet split that will reinvest those readers who balked at the adolescent hissing and spitting of *Damned*. Our interest in Madison increases with her exposures and disclosures, and our awareness of the impending apocalypse is heightened by our new investment.

Whilst these are important elements in a reader's potential experience of this text, there is another, underlying element to the novel that is only hinted at, and is all the more poignant for its quietness.

Palahniuk nursed his mother on her deathbed whilst constructing the plot for this trilogy. This information was public before *Damned* was released, but it is here in *Doomed* that its weight is felt. In a 2011 interview for *The Guardian*, Palahniuk explained:

I needed to express somehow my grief at having then lost both of my parents

... and I knew that would not make a very entertaining or particularly funny book, so I inverted the situation and made it this very plucky dead child, who could mourn her parents while they were still on Earth—but still she could miss them. (Ferguson)

That is not to say, and this must be emphasised, that the opinions expressed by Madison about her parents are those of Palahniuk; few would be that naïve.

Authorial intention is dead, long live the text. But coming into this book, knowing the environment in which it was written gives it a weighty quality that is worth considering.

This book throws light on the often-unacknowledged fact that even though we have known them, quite literally, all our lives, we do not really know our parents. In our youths and teenage years we were oblivious of them; in our adult lives we spend more time trying to scale those walls. But we must always be confronted with the fact that, even though we love them, and they us, our unassuming and bemusing parents have lived experiences that are impenetrable to us.

This exploration of parental duties manifests itself, quite naturally, by turning to examine the ultimate unknowable parental figure—one who allows rampant hysterics and forays into secular spiritualism and spirituality and pseudo-religions. In the world of *Doomed* it is humanism and common sense that are really on the edge of extinction, with entire populations fleeing willingly into

the arms of any man who claims to hold "the answer," and Satan cruising unnoticed through the lives of frightened everyday people.

So where is *He*?

Is *He* really the xenophobic, anti-feminist homophobe that the angel Festus represents? Are *He* and Satan in cahoots? These questions go unanswered because Palahniuk has depicted the ultimate absent father as we here on earth know him best: silent and disinterested.

Doomed is a callback to the tone and feel of Palahniuk's early work. The character of the grandfather brings back the halting silence of Palahniuk's own strain of American gothic:

'According to your nana, somebody's going to die pretty soon.'

Pappadaddy dipped his brush and resumed his work.

'Just so you know to be careful, the one who dies might be you.' (96)

Whilst the text's trapped female heroine, who is the key to the apocalypse, calls back to Misty in *Diary* (2003), *Doomed* sits closest to *Lullaby* (2002) in its exploration of family, loss and identity. Perhaps this is not so surprising, considering that *Lullaby* was written whilst Palahniuk dealt with the murder of his father in 1999 (Akbar).

Palahniuk's characters are locked inside a stream of events that are hurtling faster and faster towards their inevitable close,

and time and time again humor shows itself to be the ultimate coping mechanism. It can be lighthearted and juvenile but more often than not that glibness is evidence of some quiet, weighted trauma that the human animal carries around.

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