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What we talk about when we talk about Hell

Review of *Parallel Hells* by Kris Van der Bijl

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WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT HELL

Review by Kris Van der Bijl

Craig, Leon. *Parallel Hells*. Spectre Books, 2022. Short Story Collection. 158 pp

Leon Craig's debut short story collection *Parallel Hells* (2022) is diverse in scope. Taking its reader as far as medieval Iceland to modern-day Mexico, the stories most common connection is – albeit obviously – the title *Parallel Hells*. Each story in the collect delves into situations that can be defined as hellish. There remains, however, a freshness to each story. Experimental, sometimes funny, often weird, Craig's collection stands as a welcome addition to the queer Horror genre.

The collection opens with the story "Suckers." The story follows a father and daughter on holiday in Mexico. The daughter meets a boy who appears to be in a strange relationship where he claims to be "owned by someone" (19). Still, the two of them become intimate in a macabre way that is to become characteristic of relationships in the collection. Craig descriptions lean heavily on the macabre and she uses this to create an almost fever dream-like atmosphere that culminates in the boy being found dead the next morning. The daughter's involvement, along with everyone else at the hotel, remains allusive.

The macabre form carried through into the weird tale "Unfinished and Unformed." It is the first of the collection's medieval tales, where Craig draws from her degree in medieval literature at University of Oxford (UK). We have an unnamed narrator living with her "Creator" in a remote European village. The story's success comes from its engagement with power in society and, by extension, in storytelling. Part of why power is central to this story stems from Craig's experimentations with how to tell medieval stories through different narrative methods.

Narrative experimentation is a common thread throughout the collection. One of its most successful examples comes from "raw pork and opium." We are introduced to a group of young and hedonistic people partying in a mansion. Very little happens until the end, where there is an incident of sex-related violence. The narrative is split towards the end. Doing so allows for two simultaneous versions of the events to play out, with neither of them needing to be reconciled with the other. Some kind of violent act is carried out in both narratives. Their proximity would suggest that they are related – even the same event – yet whether it is or is not does not need to be answered. Their parallel co-existence is enough and readers can deduce that something horrific has occurred between the two stories.

"A Wolf in the Temple" harkens back to Craig's medieval knowledge again, with characters coming straight from the Icelandic Njáls saga. The story follows a woman staying at home while her husband Gunnar is away fighting. In the original Icelandic saga, Gunnar is killed during a battle after his wife, a victim of domestic abuse, refuses to come to his aid. While this background hangs over the narrative, there is no explicit mention of it in "A Wolf in the Temple." Instead, and without making a hero of the woman, the benefits and possible love of being with a man to escape a father's house are precariously fore-fronted.

Another story that incorporates medieval folklore is "Lick the Dust." Here Craig explores different narrative methods through an M. R. James-like style. James, a medieval scholar himself, was famous for his ghost stories (1904-1925), as they reinvented the form by abandoning Gothic elements to focus on realism. Craig's story follows a graduate student who finds an old book with a Hand of Glory in it. This hand turns them invisible and they use it to spy on a colleague. While she is sleeping, the narrator chokes the woman, gaining pleasure from the act when she startles awake. By doing so, Craig reinvigorates the Jamesian horror. Craig includes the details that are obviously absent from James, seemingly to re-engage with an old form and possibly to illustrate what old forms left unsaid.

There are instances where the experimentations did not work for me. In "Pretty Rooms," Craig again provides us with an experimental narrator. From what I can make sense of, the narrator of the story is the space of the rooms, specifically the space created between the furniture in the rooms. I call it unsuccessful because, unlike the other stories, the weight of what is being said and what is occurring does not develop as smoothly. It is a story that requires reading and re-reading. While the experiment is commendable, I cannot say that it works like the others.

The two next stories, "Ingratitude" and "Lipless Grain," also fail to stand out. They each develop a sense of eeriness and continue to showcase Craig's development style: "Ingratitude" by leaning on a Jamesian tale of a cursed bracelet and "Lipless Grain" by following a father as he prepares to give his daughter away at a wedding. While the stories are engaging, and are worth reading, there are other stories in the collection that show Craig's style more successfully.

"Hags" is easily my favourite story in the collection. We get to know a winged, timeless being who spends the story attempting to love someone new while still being reminded of an old lover. Craig's worlds are often hedonistic, where "time in molly houses, siphoning off my friends' overflowing shame" (83) is part of the lives shared. However, the first-person speaking does not easily fit alongside these friends, as they had "begun to lose interest" (83). The narrator appears trapped by needs far older than others hold. She recalls times with her old lover Ishi, where the two of them "tore through so many serfs during snack breaks we had to bury the estate under a landside" (82). While not quite idealising the past, the narrator is nostalgic for a time when it was possible for 'hags' to fly and kill.

While most of the stories in the collection have first-person narrators, the story "Stay a While" is an exception. Like "Hags," this story follows a woman on her queer sexual exploits. Whereas in "Hags," the narrator was the more dominant was in the relationship, Livia, the story's protagonist, appears to enjoy being a submissive partner in her relationships. These parts of her life might appear sorrowful to the reader. However, with a third-person narrative, the story is filtered. The story becomes sorrowful only through a narrative lens that is filtered by someone who is not the focal character. To call it 'hell' then is only ever to call it hell as defined by someone else.

The collection culminates with "Saplings," a good story, if any, to exemplify themes found throughout the collection. We have a queer couple visiting one of their fathers. The eeriness builds up to an attempted sacrifice, which is soon thwarted. The couple leave (at least possibly) the same people they were at the beginning. Although the possible terror that the characters experienced might have changed them, we are left unsure and in suspense. Ultimately, it is not a feature of Craig's writing to question someone's way of life. The question seems directed at what structures surrounding someone's life causes their definition – demonic or not – to be imposed.

Leon Craig's debut collection is a fascinating showcase of a welcome voice in the queer Horror space. Her boundary-pushing narratives and readable prose marks *Parallel Hells* as a text worth reading, even if some of the stories are not on par with the others. If anything, the diverseness of the collection highlights that Craig is a writer worth following as they continue to develop as a writer.

BIONOTE

Kris Van der Bijl recently completed their MA in Creative Writing from the University of Cape Town (South Africa). Their writing interests vary, but tend towards ghost stories of the global south. Van der Bijl's writings have appeared in *Wasafiri*, *Brittle Paper*, and *New Coin Poetry Magazine*.