

Haunted

by Chuck Palahniuk

reviewed by Calum Kerr

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A book of twenty-three short stories, a collection of twenty-one poems and a novel published on the same day? It seems for a moment as though Chuck Palahniuk is trying to be as prolific as a Stephen King or a Barbara Cartland and then you realise that this is only one volume. *Haunted* is the latest book from Chuck Palahniuk and as ever the intricacies of its structure and narration are at least as important as the stories being told. From the short disjointed chapters of *Fight Club*, through the 'black-box recording' of *Survivor*, to the somewhat more self-explanatory format of *Diary*, Palahniuk has always stamped his novels with a structure that gives him the greatest ability to control the reader's experience and provide the shocks and twists which have become his trademark. In this way he is able to reflect the fragmented lives of his characters in the seemingly random juxtaposition of event with event.

Haunted is no exception. Neatly sectioned up, each of his cast of grotesques is featured in the ongoing narrative before they are ushered in with an introductory poem and allowed to tell us a story. Each of these characters is identified by their nickname: the Duke of Vandals, Comrade Snarky, Lady Baglady, the Matchmaker and Saint Gut-Free. These nicknames serve as a signpost leading to the stories these characters want to tell. If nothing else, this is a book about stories and those who tell them.

The main narrative which runs through *Haunted* is ostensibly the tale of a group of writers going on retreat. The mysterious and enigmatic leader of the group, Mr Whittier, has convinced each of the characters to leave their lives, leaving behind notes which range from polite messages propped by the kettle to spray-painted messages

across bus-shelters, and to deliver themselves into his hands for three months. In these months he promises that they will find the isolation and freedom from the world and from themselves to be able to write their stories. Of course, being Palahniuk, nothing is quite what it seems, and the whole scheme barely gets off the ground before things start to go awry. Once again we see that no matter how hard his characters try to find isolation, they can never escape from themselves.

As the story of the group and their retreat unfolds, we are introduced one by one to each of the characters and this is where Palahniuk hits his stride. Each writer tells us his or her story, but these are no fictional affairs, no screenplay ideas which will make a million bucks. These are the stories behind each character, the reasons for their nicknames - Baroness Frostbite, Chef Assassin, Miss America, Miss Sneazy and the Missing Link - and the reason why each of them would be willing to leave their lives to spend three months with a group of strangers and an old man who promises to change their lives. They are the stories of how the Saint became gut-free, how a lady became a baglady and why the young woman is so sneezy. These are the stories which Palahniuk revels in telling us in all of his books. They are the willing members of Project Mayhem from *Fight Club* looking in the mirror and telling themselves 'I am the all-singing, all-dancing crap of this world' (169). They are Shannon MacFarland and Brandy Alexander from *Invisible Monsters* with only a single face to share. They are Peter Wilmot from *Diary* hiding his word-filled bile in walled-off rooms.

We have been here before, but it has never been so succinct or overt. The free-flowing style that characterises Palahniuk's writing is

very much in evidence, but the repetitive motifs which mark - and sometimes mar - his writing are largely reserved for the poems, freeing the narrative to be individuated for each voice.

Again, as with his previous works, the main theme which Palahniuk explores in the book is the self-disgust of human beings for themselves and their actions. However, with the use of the increasingly fragmented structure in this text he manages to expand it to include the whole species rather than simply his chosen cast of characters.

This is not to say that Palahniuk always pulls it off. The use of the individual characters' stories serve to obscure the lack of any substantial greater plot, but they cannot hide it altogether. The narrative on which he hangs his poems and stories is little more than an insubstantial novella and while they are as interesting as any side-show oddities, there is little to forge a connection with the reader and little emotional investment in the outcome. Ultimately, it is a book of unrelated stories and the title, *Haunted*, is apt enough as each of them - Mother Nature, the Earl of Slander, Director Denial, and the Reverend Godless - tell us about the events which haunt them, but it is rarely more than that. As with any collection of short short-stories the emphasis is largely on events rather than character. In many cases, the reader is left unsure if the character's stories are meant to be fact or fiction within the context of the world of the book, and so the emotional connection which could come from the confessional sharing of life-changing events is lost.

Ever since the publication of *Fight Club* in 1996, Palahniuk seems to have been trying to find his way back to the simple hard edge of nihilism that characterised that book. The stories in *Haunted*

show some flashes of what made *Fight Club* such an entrancing debut, but ultimately the complexity of the structure and the constant deviation into story after story blunt this edge. Palahniuk seems to be aware of this lack as he strives harder and harder to shock the reader. His writing in this book is perhaps more graphic and involves more sexual, social, moral and emotional perversity than any of his previous books. It is at times undoubtedly shocking, but it does also feel, at times, as though shock is being substituted for substance.

This is, however, a Palahniuk book, and if there was no shock and no perversity, it would be a fundamental disappointment. Held up against the concise slice of anger and nihilism that made up *Fight Club*, any books will look fat and sloppy in comparison. This is a fascinating and intriguing read in which each of the characters - Sister Vigilante, Agent Tattletale, the Countess Foresight and Mrs Clark - act as mouthpieces for Palahniuk to find new ways to expose the problems of the human condition as it exists at the beginning of the 21st Century. His anger and his disgust have not been blunted and his sheer level of invention should put most writers to shame.

Works Cited:

Palahniuk, Chuck. *Haunted*. London, Jonathan Cape. 2005.

--- *Fight Club*. London, Vintage. 1997.

--- *Diary*. London, Jonathan Cape. 2003.

--- *Survivor*. London, Vintage. 2000.

--- *Invisible Monsters*. London, Vintage. 2000.