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Road of the Dead, The

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

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The sky is always black with rain. Rachel is always getting off the bus, trying her mobile, hurrying across to the telephone box, trying to call Abbie. The phone is always out of order. Broken, busted, jammed. No signal. No answer. Rachel is always alone and there's always something out there, something that shouldn't be there??

This powerfully atmospheric story is mediated through the consciousness of Reuben Ford whose sister, Rachel, has been brutally assaulted and murdered on Dartmoor. Half-gypsy (his family's preferred term) Reuben has psychic flashes into the thoughts and feelings of those about him, particularly his family with the exception of Rachel (perhaps because the close relationship with his sister makes such intuition superfluous). But at the moment of Rachel's death, he becomes horrifically aware of her fear and pain and this reverberates throughout the novel, together with her voice, confusingly abjuring him to 'let the dead bury the dead?.'

However when the authorities refuse to surrender Rachel's body for burial, the third sibling - angry Cole - decides to take matters into his own hands. An avenging 'dark angel', Cole takes after their father, who is in prison for manslaughter in connection with a gypsy feud - a matter of personal loyalty and revenge.

As the two brothers leave London to retrace Rachel's last steps in Lychcombe, the village in the heart of Dartmoor where Rachel had gone to visit her childhood friend, Abbie, the story only gathers in menace. It remains at a pitch of horror as the brothers discover a local community mired in corruption - in thrall to Harry Quentin, a crook who is busy buying up the village on behalf of unnamed developers who want to create a leisure complex. A tangle of a subplot, involving the local gypsy encampment and the troubled history of the Fords' own father, ratchets up the tension.

The Road of the Dead references the medieval world in its title, the old name for the funeral road across the moor to the nearest church. However, this mesmerising thriller has all the charge of a Greek tragedy, recounted in a prose which is alternately gritty and incantatory. And if Cole is a latter-day masculine Antigone, determined to bury his dead honourably, the tale also has the savagery of unadulterated myth as Cole systematically dispatches Quentin's henchman in the village - at violent risk to himself and Reuben.

This is a bleak book, portraying a believable, but terrifying world, where the characters, if they are not amoral or

downright evil, adhere to a self-made, self-executed morality inexorable in its 'justice'. Redemption and relief for the reader resides in the powerful loyalty and largely unspoken affection between the brothers and in the nascent love between Cole and the traveller girl, Jess. I would place this title firmly in the adult category, although no doubt many teenagers will find their way to it and will be in the hands of a consummate storyteller. CH

Running Order:

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