The Girl Next Door by Neal McPheeters

A Grinding Morality Play

Features a 3,000 word Introduction by Stephen King!

My Personal Review:
The Girl Next Door is probably Jack Ketchum’s most sought after book. I scrambled to pick up a copy when it briefly appeared back in print because buying a used copy requires a second mortgage on the house, signing an agreement to turn over your first born son, and swearing to never resell your copy for less than Bolivias gross national product. When I finally clutched a fresh new copy in my grimy hands, I was struck with a sudden shudder of fear: is this book worth all the heartache of acquiring a copy? Is it as gruesome as everyone says it is? No, the book is not worth shelling out an insane amount of money for a used copy, but it is an unsettling, gruesome, and soul shattering read.

Jack Ketchum has a tendency to fictionalize real life crime stories. He accomplished this in Off Season, Joyride, and here in The Girl Next Door. In 1960s Indiana, Sylvia Likens and her little sister moved in with Gertrude Baniszewski while their parents went out of town. Baniszewski, her children, and several neighborhood children tortured and eventually murdered Likens over a period of months. At the trial, the children involved in the crime got off with an insignificant punishment, leading to outbursts of rage among the community and anyone with an ounce of moral fiber. In what must surely rank as one of our justice systems lowest moments, Gertrude herself was eventually released from prison, dying peacefully several years later somewhere in Iowa. This case serves as the loose outline for Ketchum’s diabolical novel.

Set in the seemingly bucolic era of 1950s America, The Girl Next Door starts in the present day with our narrator, David, setting the stage for a flashback to that peaceful time in American history when Ike was in the White House, McCarthy chased Commies out of the State Department, and the biggest fear for most people was the realization that the USSR had the bomb. For David, there is a worse fear from that time, something buried deep in his heart and in his mind that needs telling before it drives
him over the brink of sanity. Davids childhood was marred by a horrific event, made even more horrific by the fact that he stood by and watched it happen without doing anything to stop the nightmare.

When David was a child, he lived next door to Ruth and her three sons. Everyone in the neighborhood loved to hang out at Ruths house, even though the father of the children no longer lived there. Ruth allowed the boys who came over to drink some beer, watch TV, and generally goof off. Ruth treated the kids like adults, which impressed David to no end because his own parents do not get along whatsoever. Going to Ruths is a great way to blow off some steam if you can put up with Ruths occasional tirades about her worthless ex-husband.

This is Ketchum, so the story gradually moves into realms of unspeakable evil. The trouble starts when Meg Loughlin and her crippled sister Sarah move in with Ruth. Meg and Sarahs parents died in a car accident, and Ruth is the only family they have left. Life is fine at first, but David realizes gradually that Meg is having big problems with Ruth. Ruth gets nasty with Meg, meting out harsh punishments for innocuous behavior. Then Meg and Sarah begin to suffer verbal assaults from Ruth, often times in front of David and other boys in the neighborhood. Ruths rants begin to take on an insanity and incoherency that frightens David. Ultimately, Meg ends up locked in a bomb shelter in the basement, where the real pain begins. All of the kids in the area participate in the torture and debasement of Meg, overseen by Ruth. The final indignity committed against Ruth is so horrible I refuse to refer to it here.

The violence in the book is horrible and stomach churning, but the cruelty takes a back seat to the moral lessons Ketchum is trying to convey. While reading this book, Hannah Arendts phrase the banality of evil repeatedly came to mind. These people are not monsters springing out of closets or hostile aliens invading the earth. Ruth and the children involved are everyday people caught up in an unexplainable web of heartless and devastating malevolence. Even David is caught up in the unfolding events, although he does not take part in the actual deeds. It is safe to argue that Davids role is worse than those who commit the crimes because he knows it is wrong and does nothing to stop them until it is too late. The Girl Next Door is not a horror novel per se; it is a morality play. Ketchum draws us into this warped world and forces us to condemn David while at the same time recognizing that we very well might do the same thing if it was us in his shoes.

You will not soon forget this grim and unsettling novel. Ketchum penetrates depths here that he rarely plumbs in his other books. It is a darn shame The Girl Next Door is not available in a mass-market paperback edition. Many people want to read it, and an introduction by none other than Stephen King lends a stamp of credibility to the book. Look around for a copy, but think long and hard before shelling out large amounts of dough.

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