



Dramatic awakenings in assorted twists of the zombies

HORROR FICTION

HANDLING THE UNDEAD. By John Ajvide Lindqvist. Text. 364pp. \$32.95.

THE FOREST OF HANDS AND TEETH. By Carrie Ryan. Gollancz. 310pp. \$29.99

HATER. By David Moody. Gollancz. 232pp. \$29.99.

Reviewer: **COLIN STEELE**

Scandinavian crime literature in the past few years has become much more appreciated, particularly through authors such as Henning Mankell and Stieg Larsson. Now Scandinavian horror is being promoted through the writings of John Ajvide Lindqvist.

Let the Right One In, published in English in 2007, was a powerful mix of social commentary and vampire horror and has now been filmed. Lindqvist's new novel, *Handling the Undead*, moves from vampires to zombies but, like the earlier book, uses the horror settings only as a framework for the examination of social and political issues.

Lindqvist's "living dead" who emerge in Stockholm are not the brainless killer zombies of many horror films, but rather real people arising from morgues and cemeteries. Relatives are torn between seeing recently departed loved ones return, albeit not quite whole, yet realising this "reliving" is not the same as their being

alive. Lindqvist, through a number of personal cameos, depicts both the horror and the attraction of the "awakened dead".

The reliving have rudimentary brain functions clearly linked to a mysterious dramatic outage in the Stockholm power system. Lindqvist places his Stockholm crisis within the realistic structures of an emergency, with on-the-spot CNN reports, and military and medical experts summoned to deal with the national crisis. He realistically reflects the reaction of the authorities. If the dead are alive in some way, do they have posthumous rights and can they return to their homes and families? The plot hinges more on how the living affect the dead than the reverse. *Handling the Undead* unerringly explores the nature of family relationships, how to cope with loss and literally the nature of life and death.

The Forest of Hands and Teeth, Carrie Ryan's impressive first novel, also involves zombies and a struggle for survival. There are echoes of many novels and films, especially M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* and those of George Romero, but Ryan is an original voice in her carefully constructed yet unadorned prose. Ryan has said that she tends "not to think of *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* as a 'zombie book' but rather a



book that happens to have zombies in it. *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*, which takes place generations after the apocalypse, is really about a girl [Mary] struggling with growing up, desire, and a controlling society set against the backdrop of a world with zombies (called 'Unconsecrated') constantly pushing against the fences".

When the zombies penetrate the village fence, Mary must choose between her village and its entrenched religious rituals, her family and loved ones, and her unproven belief in the existence of a wider world somewhere beyond the forest. Ryan says, "I wanted to show how the characters in my book have been so isolated and controlled that . . . they have no conception of the world." As with Lindqvist, the living dead serve as a mirror for personal challenges. *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*, an often bleak but gripping narrative, follows Mary's struggle to survive in a journey of discovery and, hopefully, redemption.

Hater has had an unusual publishing history, having been self-published by David Moody in 2006, but now picked up by Gollancz. A movie version is in pre-production by Guillermo del Toro of *Pan's Labyrinth* fame. *Hater* is a fast-paced novel written in a staccato style that highlights the growing horror of a British society falling apart. The main character,



Danny McCoyne, stuck in a dead-end office job and suffocating commuting lifestyle, observes one of an increasing number of violent attacks in the street. Moody fills out this scenario through dark vignettes of violence by "haters" who attack people without warning or provocation. Moody conjures up an increasing atmosphere of suspense and paranoia, society disintegrating into warring factions and McCoyne initially straddling the two.

The cause of the increasing epidemic of violence is largely unexplained. A hater reflects, "There is a fundamental genetic difference between us and them . . . which, until now, has remained dormant . . . it's now us and them." Moody says that unlike the novels by Lindqvist and Ryan, "What I've actually done is to write a zombie story from the perspective of the zombies." Moody's twist is that the haters "don't lose their intelligence or feelings, rather they are convinced that everyone else are the bad guys".

He extrapolates from current British fears about immigration, street violence and terrorism to highlight that fear is used in society to justify pre-emptive strikes. As one character says, "We know who poses a threat to us and who is on our side." While *Hater* lacks the depth of *Handling the Undead*, its relentless pace, tension and graphic images will lend themselves admirably to its film adaptation.

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