

Review: Monstrous by Charlotte Bond: Review by Allen Stroud

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Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

Stroud, A 2018, 'Review: Monstrous by Charlotte Bond: Review by Allen Stroud' BFS Journal, vol. 1, no. 18, pp. 45-47.

Publisher: BFS

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Review: *Monstrous* by Charlotte Bond

This short novella is part of a set of four from Hershram Horror.

Jenny and her mother, Pamela drive to an old communal settlement, aptly named, Haven, to take up a new life, 'off the grid'. Jenny is teenager, rightly concerned with how she has been taken from her friends and her education, but Pamela is smitten with her new idea and the chance for them both to start again.

They arrive at a commune that they gradually discover to be beset by old conflicts, secrets and strange figures in the woods. Jenny makes friends with Dan, a boy, close to her own age and together they try to make sense of the mysteries that surround the settlement and its people.

From the outset, *Monstrous* is a book with a clear voice. The premise is fairly simple and populist, drawing on the best traditions of British horror and isolation, but as you read on, the subject of the title is intentionally open to interpretation on many levels.

Bond's writing style is open and engaging, appealing to all ages as we get to know the characters and the issues at hand. There are two chief perspectives, Jenny's and Dan's, and it is very clear that Bond is conveying experience in some her descriptions. You can certainly picture the eerie woodland at night as Dan and Mick go out on their patrol.

One or two description choices distract from the experience. One of the first clues that all is not right in Haven is when Jenny smells ammonia, which seems an odd thing to be able to identify. Later, we learn this is the urine marking of something living out in the woods. I would have thought this would be how the smell was described in the first place? Certainly, that smell would be urine to me. The use of the word is extensive and detracts from the story a little bit, when you pick it up.

Sometimes, the hand offs of viewpoint between Jenny and Dan at the end of a chapter and into the next one are bookended with Lewton Bus style cliff hangers, which is an obvious conceit, but certainly raises a smile to those that know what the writer is doing.

The conclusion of the story deals with its many different monsters in many different ways. Events build to less of a dramatic climax than they might if one conclusion were being looked for, but Bond is juggling social comment as well as a more traditional horror plot, and the outcome is more realistic for that choice. The arcs of the central characters are given meaning by their final decisions, based on the experiences they have had in the settlement.

Monstrous is a well-structured and neatly organised novella. I look forward to seeing more stories from Charlotte Bond and Hershram Horror.

Monstrous is part of a novella series, which includes, *Perfect Darkness*, *Perfect Silence* by Richard Farren Barber, *Bury Them Deep*, by Marie O'Regan and *The Factory*, by Mark West.

