

BOOK REVIEW

The Boston Globe

Killer confronts loss in 'Dexter in the Dark'

By Clea Simon | October 8, 2007

Dexter in the Dark

By Jeff Lindsay

Doubleday, 304 pp., \$29.95

Pity poor Dexter. The onetime serial killer, an unfeeling slasher who only experiences anything like joy while taking a human life, has become normal. The Dark Passenger, as he calls his evil guiding spirit, has flown, leaving him vulnerable and alone, incapable of dispatching even a tightly bound suspect. It's enough to make a grown man cry.

At least, that's the premise of "Dexter in the Dark," the wonderful third installment in Jeff Lindsay's darkly amusing Dexter series. In previous books, we've come to understand and root for Lindsay's horrific protagonist. Seriously traumatized in early childhood, Dexter Morgan was raised by a special kind of caring foster parent. Harry Morgan loved Dexter and saw him for what he was, and since Harry was also a cop, he managed to teach Dexter how to elude capture. He also instilled a rudimentary morality in his foster son. Dexter restrains himself to only killing other killers. This rule, the "Harry Code," makes Dexter almost a hero, in a particularly grisly way.

But what really animates these books - and what makes the latest heart wrenching as well as hilarious - is Dexter's passion. Our handsome murderer may consider himself emotionless, but his sheer joie de vivre - or joie de mourir - is both obvious and contagious. Even when he is not indulging in his usual alliterative playfulness, calling himself "Dogged Dexter" readying for the "Dark Dance," his first-person narration conveys his glee, as he considers his victim and "the delicious taste of his terror" and how "the tangible bite of his panic . . . made us very glad and strong." (Much of this playfulness has been captured in the capable Showtime program, "Dexter," which is loosely based on the first book, but for the full effect nothing beats the author's prose.) When that pleasure disappears, along with the mystifying departure of the Dark Passenger, Dexter is left bereaved and very dull indeed.

The loss couldn't have happened at a worse time. Not only is a serial killer stalking Dexter's home turf of Miami, burning and beheading his victims like ancient sacrifices, but Dexter is also preparing to deepen his cover of real humanity. Following the small steps toward an assumed normality made in the previous two books, Dexter is about to get married. To be faced with a mortifying loss, a loss that cannot be shared, while being forced to kowtow to pretentious caterers is enough to drive anyone to murder. To, then, not be able to dissect anybody - even someone who may deserve it - is sheer torture.

The one redeeming factor in Dexter's new life is his soon-to-be-stepson, Cody. Both Cody and his sister Astor were equally traumatized by their real father, and in the young boy Dexter sees a smaller version of himself. If perhaps, he has lost his powers, at least he can train this surrogate son in the Harry Code, he tells himself. But Cody is both precocious and perceptive, speaking of Dexter's new impotence and his own "shadow." "Inside," he tells his soon-to-be-stepdad, "Like you used to have." These traits will complicate both the plot and Dexter's life beyond what even our hero can imagine.

Even beyond this Addams Family-style drama, what sets this third book apart is the amount of self-analyzing Dexter does as he seeks to understand and regain his powers. Marriage and impending parenthood prompt such inner scrutiny in many of us, of course. But while most of us make sacrifices as we proceed through life's stages, giving up certain liberties in exchange for intimacy and family, those sacrifices do not usually include losing some kind of driving demon. As Dexter strives to comprehend his departed demon, and also help his police sergeant sister solve the latest murder spree, he finds a kind of self-awareness any of us can envy, even if only vicariously.

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