

Gravesend by Jason Fischer

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Saturday, 30 January 2010
Last Updated Tuesday, 16 February 2010

Black House Comics 2009 ISBN 9780980600643

Adelaide-based Clarion South graduate Jason Fischer is probably best known for his story *Undead Camels Ate Their Flesh* from Jack Dann's *Dreaming Again* anthology, and for recently becoming a quarterly winner of the prestigious *Writers of the Future* contest. In addition to these enviable achievements, Fischer was nominated for the 2009 *Ditmar Award* for Best New Talent, and won the 2009 *Australian Horror Writers Association* short story competition. Given Fischer's love of post apocalyptic settings and all things undead, it's no surprise that Black House Comics now brings us *After the World: Gravesend*; one of the first novellas in Black House's new shared-world zombie apocalypse pulp series, and Fischer's longest published work to date.

Gravesend unfolds in the English town of Gravesend, Kent. In this intriguing place where the legendary Pocahontas met her end, we find Tamsyn Webb, a plucky young girl trying to stay alive, alongside her father and friends. Tamsyn's skill with a bow and arrow, her sad past, the constant hordes of groaning undead beyond the Safe Zone walls, and the interpersonal politics between those who haven't yet developed a lust for brains combine to form a grisly adventure.

The strongest aspects of Fischer's zombie novella are the no-holds-barred, fast-paced, gory action sequences, and the emotional depth of his characters. Fischer is a writer of obvious talent and ability, and *Gravesend* is a skillful, efficient, and powerful work. Some of the more gruesome imagery Fischer splashes on the pages required me to take a break from reading, which speaks to their effectiveness. I enjoyed the fact that Tamsyn is a somewhat unique protagonist in the zombie apocalypse stable – a very strong female with unusual weaponry skills, who is also very young and vulnerable and makes colossal errors. There's some lovely work done with subtext, subplots, and theme. Fischer is well aware that he's working with an oft-done trope, and he packs in enough character development and back-story to give it that little extra.

Complaints are few and minor. There are moments of repetition in the descriptions of the zombies, but it's difficult to avoid that when repeatedly showing the reader large crowds of the shambling undead. At first I found the layout of the novella jarring to the eye (no indent at the start of paragraphs, double spaces between paragraphs) but I got used to it as I became immersed in the story. Sometimes I wanted to reach into the pages and slap Tamsyn for her choices and actions, but that isn't really a complaint, more a sign of successful character development and my emotional involvement in the story.

Gravesend is a deliciously savage, moving work. Lovers of old school pulp will gobble this novella up (like braaaaaains!) and those who appreciate the zombie subgenre will get their kicks here too. Even those who aren't normally drawn to pulp or zombies will find something to like in *Gravesend* – there's horror, drama, action, and dark fantasy aplenty. I look forward to reading more in Black House's range.

Jason Fischer can be found online at <http://jasonfischer.livejournal.com> , and Black House Comics can be found online at <http://www.blackhousecomics.com/>.