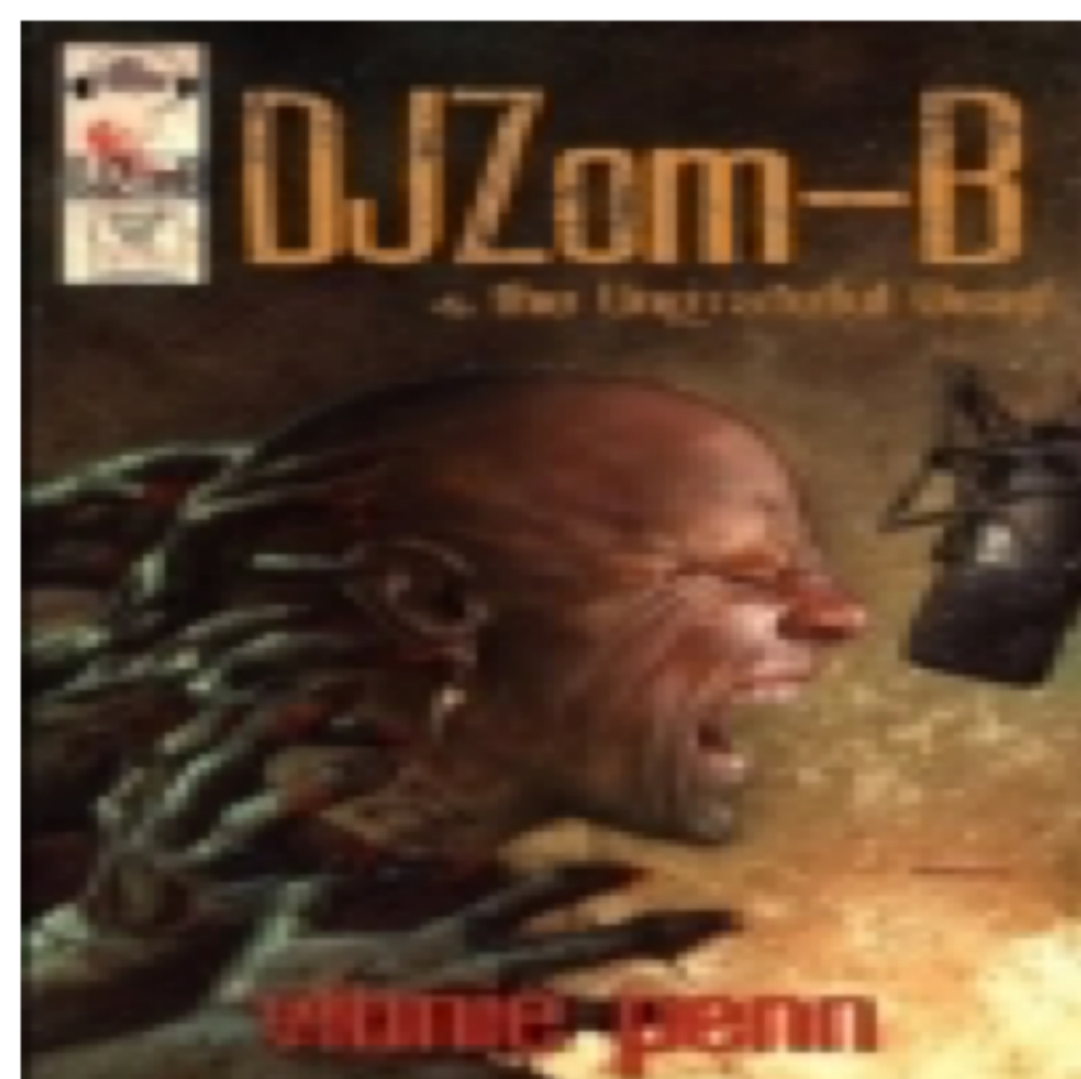


DJ Zom-B & The Ungrateful Dead – Book Review

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DJ Zom-B & The Ungrateful Dead

Vinnie Penn

23 House Publishing

Trade Paper, 190 pages, \$16.95

Review by Sheila M. Merritt

Putting an atypical spin on the relentless pop fiction assault of zombies, radio personality/disc jockey Vinnie Penn rides a horse of a different color. The walking dead sport the usual gray pallor studded with crimson, but Penn's polychromatic palette is more

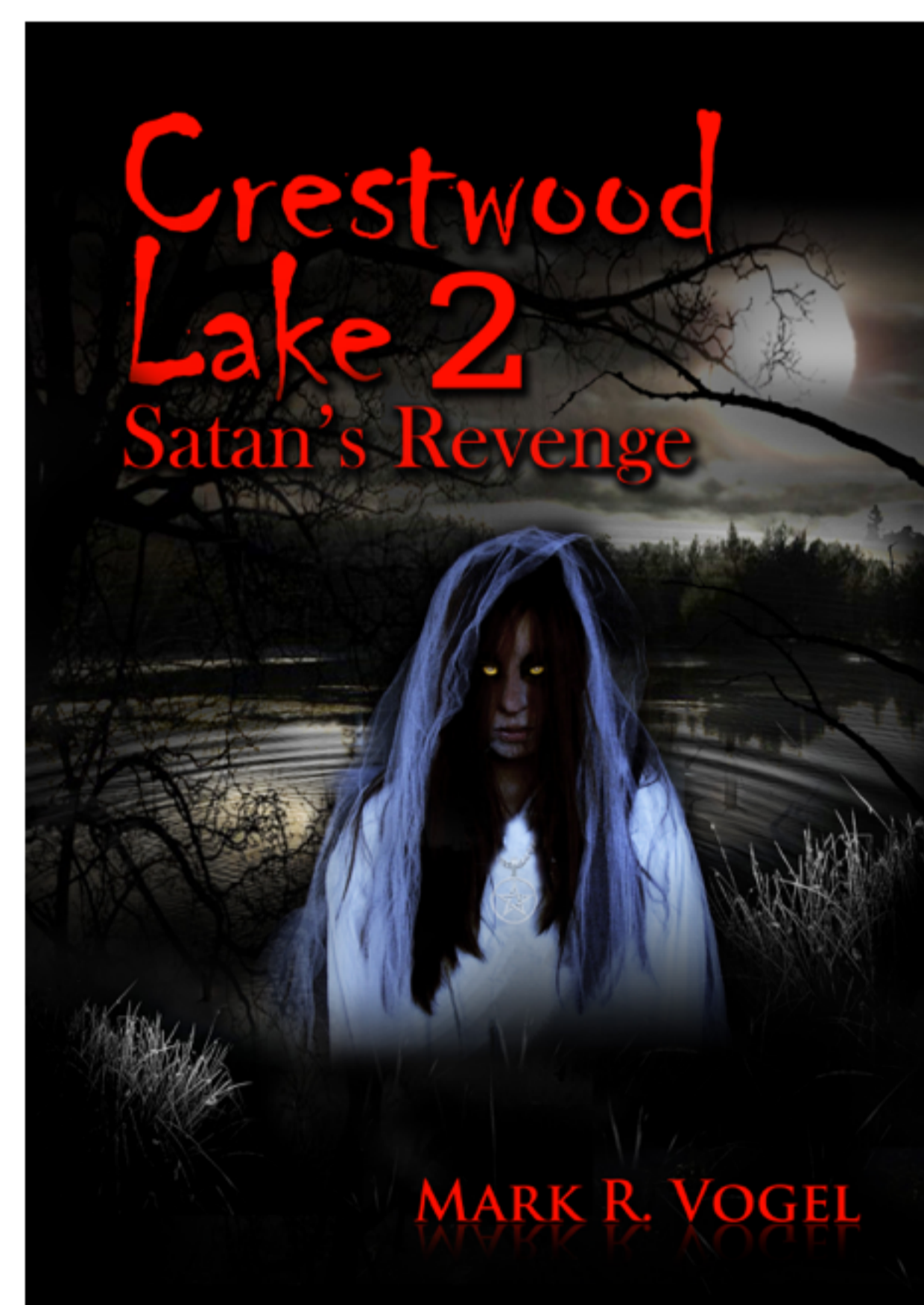
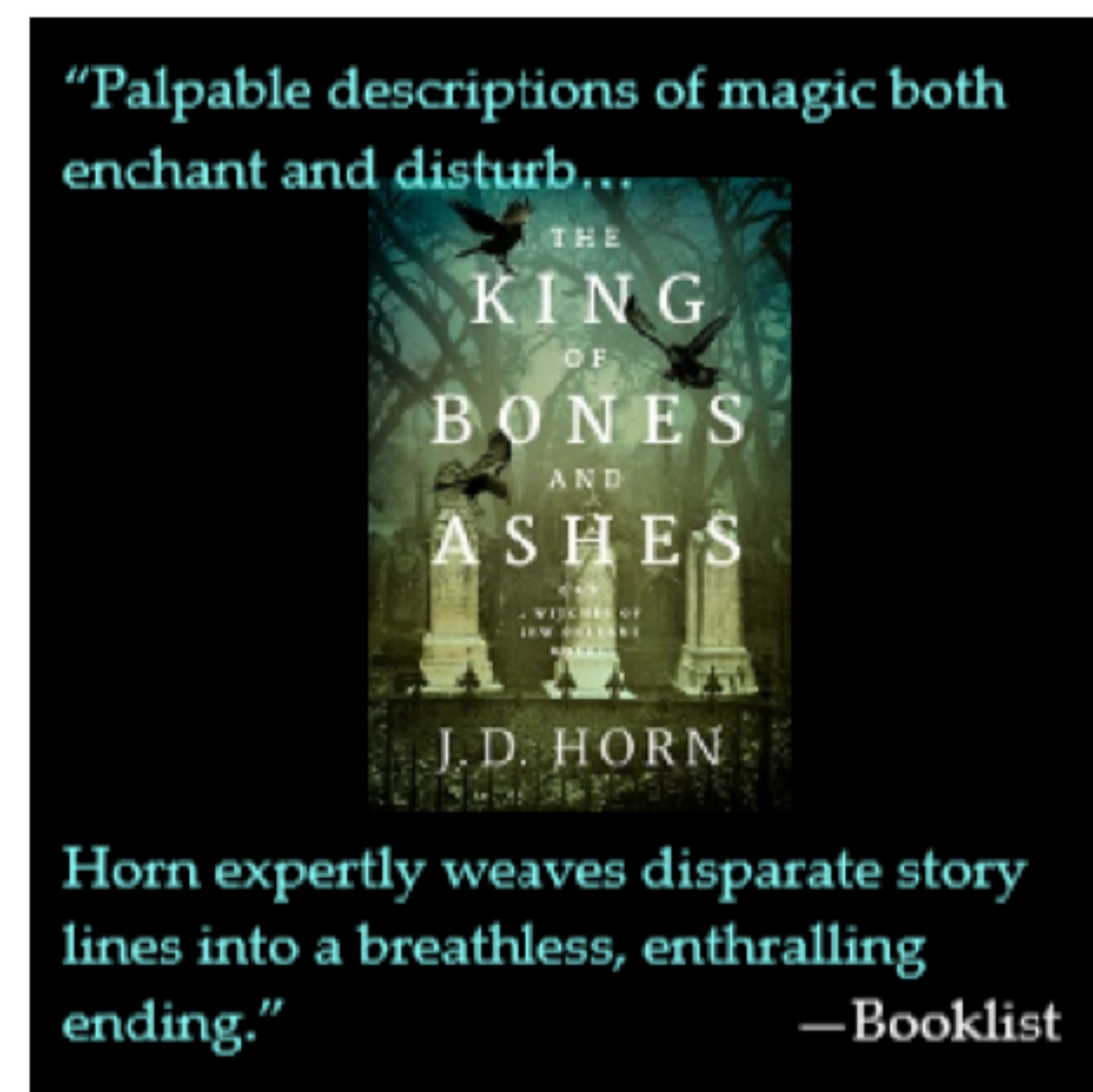
extensive. It's a Whiter Shade of Pale mixed with Purple Rain; at once ghostly and bruised. In *DJ Zom-B & The Ungrateful Dead*, the author takes a sardonic look at the medium in which he works, while executing a twisted flying leap into the most popular subgenre around. The tone is satiric yet sensitive; bitter and bittersweet. Within the social comment and snark resides a tale about relationships. Penn whips the been-there-done-that formula into a cynical concoction with heart. The lingering longing for reciprocated love may lumber and drag its foot. And, to continue the zombie metaphor, it is hard to permanently kill.

Down on his luck radio disc jockey Luke Zombulli, more popularly known as DJ Zom-B, is embarrassed by his workplace moniker. It isn't such a swell sobriquet to own to when the walking dead take over his hometown of New Haven, Connecticut. The Z word doesn't inspire trust or confidence. Jaded Luke has other emotional baggage, which extends far beyond a nuisance of a nickname. His anger management issues, guilt, and frustration with his career and personal life, intertwine and isolate. He employs gallows' humor as a coping mechanism: "The mailman's cries are a combination of delirium and gut-wrenching pain, and he's hitting a high note that is reminiscent of a time I saw Mariah Carey perform at the honoring of a record label exec."

References to the recording industry abound; razor sharp in their cutting observations. When Luke's unfortunate path again crosses that of declining pop star Mercedes, the couple doesn't initially make beautiful music together. She is guarded by Smack, her muscle bound lover/co-worker. Smack's impressive physique chips away at the already fragile ego of the protagonist. The hard and toned body is put to the test when dealing with the legion that rises from the dead. Additional attacks come from the monstrously inhumane: A police force bent on serving up violence rather than protecting survivors; creating further chaos. Abuse of power is rampant as a maverick lawman orchestrates human-zombie smackdowns. The cop relishes the events, with the sadistic gusto of a Roman emperor with the best seat in the arena.

The aforementioned trio of prey keeps company with a jaundiced radio sound engineer, who could be in the throes of transformation into a brain eater. There are others who join the assembly; peripheral characters, given odd bits of business and quirky traits to define them. Mostly, however, the narrative is about love and loss. Luke lost both parents to cancer. The cold cavernous chasm, of an abandoned casino's atmosphere, prompts mournful introspection: "I am reminded of Hospice, its endless floors, the nonstop cries, and the bedding being eternally swapped out, and the leaving your parents to watch *Wheel of Fortune* but having to turn it up considerably because the person next to them is writhing in agony and making no brittle bones about it." One type of horror promotes thoughts of another.

Feeling devoid of hope, and wit's end with witticisms, the dejected deejay struggles with meeting his end: "Death's hand is easier to shake if you were deemed lovable by someone other than your mother or father, but its grip is even more crushing to someone whose heart never swelled, whose love was never returned." Poetic and caustic, romantic and raucous, Vinnie Penn adroitly covers the bases. *DJ Zom-B & The Ungrateful Dead* is fiendishly funny, dead-on in its satire, and dear at its core.



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