

Shelter for the Damned by Mike Thorn, JournalStone, 2021,
190pp.

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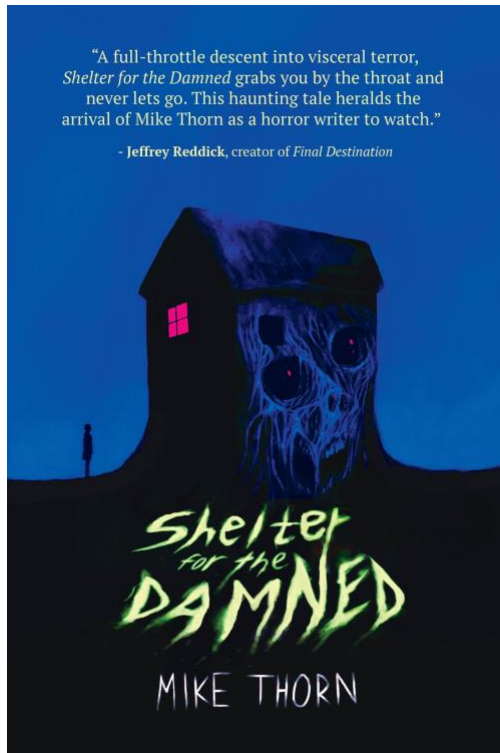
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Book Review

Shelter for the Damned

By Mike Thorn
JournalStone, 2021

190pp.

[Editor's Note: The following critical review discusses specific details of the novel's plot.]

Shack and Awe

Shelter for the Damned, the first novel by Mike Thorn (2017's *Darkest Hours*), foregrounds a pervasive, ineffable

monster that carries the brutal markings of fraught masculinity. The book highlights performances of maleness undertaken by three fathers who deal in different forms of violence, passing the trauma and lessons of their toxic masculinity to three teenage boys, Mark, Adam and Scott.

The sense of urgency in the novel is palpable, the intensity of adolescent yearning well defined. The shelter of the title is introduced on the first page and its pull on the main character Mark is immediate. The book moves at a fast pace to match these extremes. From early on, Thorn conjures the sense of all or nothing—the pull of chaos and the seesaw of emotional states.

Mark sees the shelter for the first time with his two friends, Adam and Scott. Each of them defines the structure they see before them differently. For Mark it is “something vaguely house-shaped” (11). For Adam it is “More like a shed” (11). For Scott, “It’s a house” (11). In short order, we get a sense of the boys’ personalities and the not-always good-natured ribbing that goes on between the three. Mark’s idea that the shelter is “vaguely house-shaped” sets the tone for his own interactions with the structure. His description is open, uncategorical. He sees it as something that suggests or even performs ‘house’ but may not be what it seems. In Mark’s assessment, the shed/shack/house “had the symmetry and structure of any beat-up old building, like a tool shed

you might find in some forgotten industrial place—but there was something formless about it” (13). Mark finds that the shack palliates him, allows him to forget his problems. He is the character who craves refuge; a place to go that is not school or the home he shares with his parents. And he is in its thrall immediately.

At the beginning of Chapter 2, Mark starts a fight at school with another boy named Clinton. Mark has a habit of fighting and has gotten into trouble before, but this fight begins without Mark remembering what he has said to provoke it. The shelter seems to be exerting its influence. It may have a fixed location, but the structure is an entity that expands beyond the confines of its location. It has tendrils.

There is elegant writing in *Shelter for the Damned*, especially when Thorn describes the house, hewing closely to Mark’s sensibilities: “He set his eyes on a fissure between the door and the wall. A distant slit, a hair’s worth of blackness. A teasing glimpse of inside” (13). The novel has other moments that are thrilling, quasi-erotic depictions of awe, that kind of reverence tinged with mingled wonder, fear and desire, as when Mark goes to the shack alone and feels and hears a presence:

All his discomfort faded as he stepped inside. Not in an instant, no, but in smoothly subtle movements. His pain, now dim, disappeared with similar subtlety. He inhaled. Smelled the musty air. He walked further inside, trembling. He rested his back against a wall and slid to a sitting position, then set his hands on the floor, palms down. The dust and grit rubbed into his skin, and it excited him. (41)

When Mark begins a tentative relationship with Madeline, a girl who smiles at him, Thorn makes clear during their interactions that Mark is intrigued, unsure, anxious, inexperienced, and not always able to reciprocate Madeline’s feelings in the moment. Mark is constantly on edge and he feels that the house is a place for him to experience something intensely, even if that something is fear. Mark always seems to be running or fleeing. And the titular shelter offers a welcoming, titillating embrace.

The fathers of the three main characters are particularly challenging antagonists. Mark’s father is insistent to the point of intimidation, demanding the interaction required of a relationship but never quite getting the tone right. Mark’s Dad doesn’t know which of Mark’s friends is Scott, an observation that comes up a few times and points to the general effacement (and ultimate disappearance) of Scott as a character. We learn that Scott is under constant

surveillance from his parents and is even told how to dress. Adam's father is a mean drunk who regularly yells at his son and sometimes resorts to physical violence. Through these almost mythically-styled father-son relationships, the author captures the intensity of being a teenager old enough to understand that life is complicated, but still too immature to envisage coping solutions. The shelter will change all that. Mark will bathe in the shifting atmosphere of the titular structure, take it in, absorb it, and begin to do its bidding.

The house/shack/shelter subsumes people. It alters them. It strips them of their bodies and, possibly, their lives. Mark craves it. There are no definitive answers to questions about the fates of the characters. *Shelter for the Damned* could be about the unraveling of Mark's mind, or a series of nightmares so real they encroach on "reality," or simply the recounting of the eerie influence of a shadowy, spectral space on those "damned" who come into contact with it. Whatever the solution, Thorn presents the unmooring of all the main characters, the destabilizing of those most in need of stability. The shack is multifarious, bringing and taking diverse things from each character. In the end, I thought of the shelter as a kind of portal to an uncanny version of Mark's world. What he finds on the other side of the shelter's boundary-crossing is a harrowing vision of "not-suburbia." The shelter is visited several times in the book and the experience is different on each occasion. The elusive, unknowable nature of the monster is key to Thorn's use of the shelter as a metaphor. One such scene crystallizes the ontological shiftiness of the novel's monster house. Mark, expelled from school for fighting, is ordered to stay home by his parents. As soon as his mother leaves, he heads for the shelter. It isn't there. Mark feels sick, retches and screams. A figure yells at him. The figure turns out to be the monster from his most recent nightmare. It gives chase.

Shelter for the Damned is reminiscent of Stephen King in its acute examination of the mysterious pull of place and atmosphere. The descriptions of the shelter are beautiful and evoke a sense of dread I associate with King's depiction of the Marsten House, the eerie mansion in *Salem's Lot*. As King's work often does, Thorn's novel also echoes H.P. Lovecraft's sense of destabilizing "outer" forces (most explicitly when a decidedly Lovecraftian tentacular monster assails Mark in his bedroom). The book takes these elements of Weird fiction and angles them towards the metaphysical. Later, the novel's outre tentacular monster will stare back at Mark with a horrifyingly familiar face. And Mark's unique union with the mysterious structure stretches Gothic convention beyond a case of uncanny doubling to a more Weird case of uncanny mingling.

Thorn’s writing during more intense sections of heightened violence reminds me of the setpieces of the slasher genre—those mini-films within a film that command attention in their own right. The novel marshalls and deploys the formal aspects of the slasher film to feature an intense staging—a kind of pageantry—of death. The wonderful descriptions of metaphysical horror in *Shelter for the Damned* acknowledge this link to the slasher’s cinematic death-staging:

He thought of screaming. He thought of every frightening image in every frightening film he’d ever seen. He thought of the anxiety cause by unlocked doors, the body-locking paranoia of hiding from the predator, the animal dread of being hunted, the sick and lonely underthought that he would die, that all the names and addresses and spoken words sifted quietly through an infinite and indifferent turnstile, that the notion of a great beyond was romantic drivel masking impenetrable blankness. (183)

Thorn excels in these moments of keenly-written descriptions of chaotic, all-encompassing horror, making *Shelter for the Damned* a powerful dive into chilling suburban torment, teenage trauma and anxiety—and a promise of “shelter” that taps into each visitor’s greatest need, only to trouble their fates.

— Anne Golden

Mike Thorn is the author of *Darkest Hours* (2017, expanded edition in 2021) and *Peel Back and See* (2021). His fiction has appeared in numerous magazines, anthologies and podcasts, including *Vastarien*, *Dark Moon Digest*, *The NoSleep Podcast*, and *Tales to Terrify*. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of New Brunswick.

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