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Grootka

by Jon A. Jackson
Foul Play Press, 1990

Reviewed by David Curran

Grootka is the name of the retired homicide detective who was Detective Sergeant "Fang" Mulheisen's mentor/tormentor. He pops back into Mulheisen's life when, after visiting the abandoned vehicle officer on his rounds, he discovered the dead body of one of his old informants in an abandoned vehicle's trunk. Grootka seeks the busy Mulheisen out because Grootka supposes there is more to the crime than he can let just anyone know: a connection to a thirty-year-old sex killing where Grootka acted ethically but illegally.

Mulheisen may be one of the most carefully crafted, realistic characters in detective fiction. Combined with an unpredictable plot that sucks in and turns the reader every-which-way like a babe in an undertow, this is detective fiction as literature.

Jon Jackson has said, however, that any story can be made better. *Grootka* does have a few minor flaws, and one important one. For example, I recommend you don't read the "Night of the Hawk" preface. If the narrator had presented a report by one of the skid-row bums who saw the event it would not be as distracting. As this introductory section is written, however, the narrator of the book, who is normally omniscient, becomes limited. Unfortunately, this limited-narrator opening had me expecting a Stephen-King-cliche-type villain, an expectation I couldn't escape until near the end of the novel, despite the fact that Jackson actually did a fine job of characterizing all his people throughout the rest of the novel.

Jackson provides some of the finest prose about the experience of computers I've seen:

He had a sudden vision of the thin walls of his many programs melting, like the walls of cells, allowing all the players, even the eliminated ones, to slip and

slide, oozing through the filmy walls to pollute and corrupt other programs.

But in one section he has one character, who happens to be drunk, play a game with the computer that's just too incomprehensible a game for the reader to get into:

DO YOU WISH TO COMPLETE ROSTER AND STATUS OF PLAYERS? IF YES, PRESS CTRL-X, CTRL-STAT. WHEN MENU APPEARS INDICATE PERIOD: E.G., PREVIOUS EPISODE, PREVIOUS 5 EPISODES, ENTIRE HISTORY, ETC.

We don't know if this character is playing a game with the computer or is working up to a game he intends to play with real people. Rules are mentioned, but not requested because the player obviously knows them. I didn't have a clue as to what was going on, or why I should care. Fortunately, this only goes on for a page and a half.

In literature, in one way or another, the reader is allowed into the minds of the important characters. We do get deep insight into Jackson's characters in *Grootka*. There is one important person, however, whom we do get to hear a lot from, but whose side of the story we don't get to completely hear. This is difficult to discuss without revealing too much. But, after the surprises have unfolded, I wanted to know what story this person told himself/herself about all the events that lead to the novel's conclusion. Not having this self-account, I see, as being the novel's greatest flaw. Don't misunderstand, the novel isn't bad without it; it is just that the novel could have been even better than it is.

In any event this was great reading, and I look forward to Jackson's next novel.