



Evil Dark

Justin Gustainis

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My name's Markowski. I carry a badge. Also, a crucifix, some wooden stakes, a big vial of holy water, and a 9mm Beretta loaded with silver bullets.

A series of seemingly motiveless murders of supernatural creatures points to a vigilante targeting the supe community. Markowski wouldn't normally have much of a problem with that, but his daughter may be next on the killer's list...

File Under: Urban Fantasy [Unnatural Law | Thicker Than Water | The Bite Stuff | Duty Calls]

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Evil Dark Details

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From Reader Review Evil Dark for online ebook

Ben Babcock says

Welcome back to the alternative Scranton, where the supernatural is out in the open, and Stan Markowski and his partner, the undead Karl Renfer, have to investigate supernatural crimes. *Evil Dark* is the second entry in Justin Gustainis' *Occult Investigations* series. Stan, Karl, Christine, et al continue to process the aftermath of the first book. Then two FBI agents rock up to town, looking for some help tracking down the creators of supernatural snuff films. Stan and Karl investigate, only to find themselves on the trail of a conspiracy to incite the race war to end ... well ... everything.

The spoiler alert is purely about the last three pages of this book, and not so much actual details of the plot, for what it's worth.

Too long a time has elapsed since I read *Hard Spell*. I had completely forgotten Stan and the other characters and anything that occurred in the first book. Fortunately, *Evil Dark* leaves enough breadcrumbs to let you get a morsel-sized idea of what happened. But this book is mostly self-contained. Stan has to deal with the fallout from the first book, but the mysteries are new.

Both mysteries (which, surprise surprise, turn out to be related) are interesting. Gustainis is good at describing police procedure without going into so much detail that it becomes tedious. I like that Stan is not a "shoot first, ask questions later" cop; not only does he try to do things by the book, but he goes out of his way to be courtesy both to his colleagues and to people who are in distress. The scene in which Stan talks an ogre into surrendering himself instead of shooting the ogre outright reminded me of how, in our world, cops are very quick to shoot first, particularly if the person they are confronting is Black and/or mentally ill. In Stan's world, supernatural creatures are not *de facto* bad people. Some supes just want to get by. Others are criminals—just like some humans are criminals.

If you like urban fantasy mysteries, then, or like police crime novels and don't mind a little supernatural layered on top, then *Evil Dark* will appeal. I wouldn't go so far as to call it "hard-boiled" or noir. But Gustainis has a lot of success translating the police procedural into an urban fantasy novel format. I can't say I was ever bored while reading; seldom was I happy to put it down when the real world beckoned.

But what the fuck was up with those last three pages??

Look, the elephant in this book, for me, is the creepy male gaze forced down our throats by Stan-the-narrator-man. I noticed it in *Hard Spell*, going by my review, and it's back and then some here. Stan can't help but comment on the attractiveness of any female characters (who are not related to him) and whether or not he's interested in sleeping with them. For some characters, like Lacey Brennan, this comes up repeatedly. There's a scene where she starts stripping to her non-sexy underwear to interrogate a prisoner by sexually exciting him. Gustainis tries to play Stan as a "nice guy" by having him leave the room before Lacey gets totally naked, but it's ... just unnecessary. And while there is nothing wrong with a straight male character remarking on when he finds a woman attractive, the frequency and way in which Stan does it becomes uncomfortable, particularly given that he is the narrator. And I can't help but wonder who Gustainis assumes his target audience is—is this just the #everydaysexism of the "wink, wink, nudge nudge, know what I mean?" Because I really don't.

I was going to mention the male gaze in any event in this review, but I was mostly going to downplay it and brush it off. Because I *did* enjoy this book! I want to recommend it. I want to critique it, but I want to recommend it too.

Then that little epilogue happened, and now I can't do that.

So the story is *over*. The bad guys are caught (or at least discovered). We can all go home. And then in the last scene, Stan wakes up in bed next to Lacey Brennan, who is described as such:

her blonde hair disarrayed in what my partner Karl, who is known to be crude, would call a "freshly fucked look"

And then we learn that he didn't just get it on with Lacey, no, it's actually a threesome with the lady FBI agent who was hot for him earlier in the novel (emphasis original):

I closed my eyes, but when I opened them, Lacey was still there. "You, me, and Thorwald... celebrating? Together?"

Lacey nodded. "I don't normally do things like that, but it *was* a special occasion. And, besides – you know what they say."

"Uh, no, Lace – what do they say?"

"That every straight woman is just two drinks away from bisexuality. And I *know* I had more than two."

"OK, now I'm *positive* I'm dreaming," I said. "But the only complaint I have is, sooner or later, I'm gonna wake up."

I felt weight shift on the mattress to my right. The sheet moved a bit, and then Linda Thorwald was looking down at me from the other side. Her hair was pretty mussed, too.

To be clear, Stan is not dreaming. Even if he were dreaming this would be an odd and uncomfortable way to end the novel. As it is, this is just strange straight dude fantasy wish fulfillment: "awww yeah Stan saved the day and now he gets to trophy fuck the two hot, competent lady law enforcement agents written expressly for this purpose".

It's superfluous and, the way it's written, gross. It's hard enough ignoring Stan's chauvinism for the majority of the novel, but then these last three pages are like Gustinis running up to you and slapping you with a fish of fuckery.

(Kate Stark ftw!)

I wish I could say "read *Evil Dark* because it's a good urban fantasy mystery novel." Alas, all I can say is that you shouldn't read *Evil Dark* because it's a good urban fantasy mystery novel utterly ruined by patriarchy. Which is why we can't have nice things.

My reviews of the *Occult Investigations* series:

← *Hard Spell*

Ruth says

C2012: So, the story of the Occult Crimes Unit continues apace. The characters are developed a bit more in this book and some urbanology (I know!) added. Dry humour was good and the deft turning of some historical information by substituting some supernatural names was also humorous. I still enjoyed the style of writing and the pace but the last 2 and a bit pages were absolutely soul destroying and I actually re-read the paragraphs (so I tortured myself twice) to make sure that I had actually read it correctly.

Nooooooooooooooooooooo! I can't believe that the writer managed to insert such a jarring- out -of -character event. I am not explaining myself correctly but noooooooooooooo, Mr Gustainis – What. Were. You.

Thinking?????? A Ménage a trois..... Where was your editor when you needed him/her the most? Typo on P219. FWFTB: vigilante, cynical, daughter, community, supernatural. FCN: Sgt Stan Markowski, Christine Markowski, Rachel, Thorwald, Karl Renfer. *“If we lack data, perhaps logic will get us somewhere. Isn't there an expression you detectives use – cui bono?”/“Who benefits? Yeah, we use that one sometimes.”*

Mike (the Paladin) says

Well...in keeping with my rule that a book which drives me completely away gets a 1 star rating, this gets a 1 star rating and ends my following of the series.

There are a lot of problems with this (for me anyway). His world is very fluid. We met ghouls in his first book and learned a little about them. We meet ghouls in this book and most of what we learned in the first book went out the window. He changed several of the details of the world this time and that sort of jumped out at me. It wasn't a deal breaker, just a little of a ..."huh?" when you run across it. (view spoiler)

All that aside however it was just the author's voice that finally ended the book for me. I just didn't really enjoy the writing. I laid the book aside a couple of times and finished other books. Finally at about the halfway mark I threw in the towel. No more of this series.

Sorry if you like it. Enjoy, but for me.

Dean says

3.5 stars really, but the rating system will not allow.

If you read my review of the first in this series, "Hard Spell," then you know how I came upon this book-via the author.

If you have read that or any other of my reviews you will also know that I tend not to summarize plot.

I can read dust-jackets. So can you.

How was the book?

How was the character development?

How did the book draw me in?

These are things that I attempt to convey from my own, very subjective narrative.

"Evil Dark" did not hit me quite as well as "Hard Spell."

I really did enjoy it, but I just felt it was not as well-written as the first in the series.

I love the characters. I really enjoy the evolution of the Markowski and Renfer and spending time with them is great.

I would like to see more of Christine.

Sharkey was a great addition.

Gustainis gave me a little more description when it came to less savory scenes. I needed that to add grit.

The book lost pace in quite a few places and here it loses marks. Additionally, while the first book had some very humorous passages, this installment seems to be going so far out of its way to make a joke almost all the time. This is part of the pacing problem for me, but also makes the dialogue feel contrived at times.

The overuse of Gustainis' own colloquialisms continues here and starts to grate: "Whiskey Tango Foxtrot" being the number one offender (that one really go on my nerves) and references to "Helter Skelter" came in a close second.

Last, but not least-the ending. Part of it was great. Part was way out of character and left me feeling like I did not know the protagonist as I thought I had. I felt a bit let down by the author in this.

All of this having been said, I still really enjoyed this book!

Please do not let the negative dissuade you from reading it. It was truly enjoyable, as was the first, and I will most definitely be reading the third soon.

I was asked to be honest in my review and so...the good with the bad.

As noted, the characters are a great deal of fun, the mural is vivid, the laughs are plenty (while sometimes stilted) and, importantly, the story is a good one.

I look forward to reading "Known Devil" soon.

Namaste~

@camuspam

Ken says

"Evil Dark" is the second book in Gustainis' Occult Crimes Unit Investigation series. Both books so far have been fantastic!

A series of snuff films featuring a sadistic demon are appearing in the underground market. Additionally, someone is burning witches in what may be an attempt to start a Helter Skelter-esque race war between humans and supernatural beings. Detective Stan Markowski and his partner Karl Renfer are saddled with both cases and racing against time to prevent a further loss of life, both human and supe.

Gustainis mixes a fair amount of wit, an engaging storyline and a few not so subtle twists to assemble a very impressive and unique novel.

4 STARS

Ami says

There are several cases that Stan and his vampire partner, Karl, are dealing with in this book. First, a case of torture-snuff films, where demon is called to torture and to murder human. Then, there is a case in which witches are being burned and other supes (werewolves and vampires) are killed. Other than that, they also must deal with 'side-cases', like saving a fairy from killing himself or a drunk ogre that take a human hostage in a bar.

I postponed reading this because of a not-so-good reviews at Amazon.com. Well, that teaches me to *trust* reviews from person I am not familiar with ... because turns out that I enjoy this story VERY much!!!

The book has a great and steady quick-pace. All those cases end up connected to each other, into one big plan that deals with *Helter Skelter* and a war race between human and supernatural beings. I enjoy the investigation process, most definitely.

Other than that, I also welcome Stan's daughter, Christine. She doesn't have a big role in the first book. But here, there are several interactions between Stan and Christine. I enjoy learning more about her and it's always nice to read about family.

There are some gritty and gory scenes that involved lots of blood ... but it fits the title of "Evil". The ending is pretty 'naughty' -- but I think Stan deserves the celebration after what he has been through.

Will definitely check out book #3 next year ...

All Things Urban Fantasy says

Neither as hard-boiled as most police procedurals, nor as arcane as pure urban fantasy, **EVIL DARK** is a blend that does justice to both genres without taking either too seriously. The dry police banter, methodical exploration of crimes, and a story and world that were easy to jump into make this a great introduction to the series as well as a satisfying stand alone.

I enjoyed the casual humor and camaraderie between Markowski and Karl. These two swing from good-natured jockeying to bad puns and dirty asides in a way that is authentically masculine. Their relationship was both entertaining and believable, and I'm looking forward to reading **HARD SPELL** to see how their partnership began. Gustainis also made sure that not all supernatural crimes were exotic mysteries. On the contrary, the "business as usual" nature of arresting an ogre that smashed up a bar and other little details were excellent counterpoints to the complex conspiracy of the main mystery.

Perhaps the most difficult part of any mystery is balancing an ending between surprise and believability, a feat that Gustainis pulls off with flare. **EVIL DARK** wraps up with action, a little luck, good police work, and a touch of male fantasy come to life. I finished the book with a smile and a chuckle, looking forward to my next ride along with Markowski and Karl.

Sexual Content: References to sex, rape, child abuse, and a threesome.

Krycek says

(Note: original review 10/19/2012, edited 8/13/2013)

The cover caught my eye at the local library. It reminded me of those old mystery paperbacks from the fifties and I hoped that the story inside was just as cool as the cover. Happy surprise, it was. Timely, too, since *Dragnet* reruns have been on the TV lately. This is a supernatural *Dragnet*, but with more violence and swearing.. This thing's been done before, sure, but it's done very well here.

All in all, a neat bit of UF without all the romance stuff, which isn't really my thing. Actually, the plot was a little all over the place and I would have given this three stars, but the fact that the story and Markowski's easy-going narrative kept my nose stuck in this book and wanting more bumps it up to four stars, (despite the ending)(view spoiler).

There are some pop culture references that are slightly altered to fit this world where the supernatural is out in the open, like a reference to a James Bond movie called "*Goldfinger*." These cracked me up. Melding this supernatural world with our own didn't always mesh smoothly, though. The anti-supernatural movement in the book was supposed to be analogous to racist and anti-gay movements in real life. I found this a little awkward even though I get what the author was trying to express. I'm just not sure the thing worked very believably in the book since real-life prejudice is a pretty big issue. Not a real complaint, just me being an analytical social scientist.

Overall, much better than I expected. Three stars from me means I liked it. Four means I liked it a lot and I liked this one a lot. And yeah, this is the second in the series. I haven't read the first, but it wasn't a problem in this case.

Edit, 8/13/2013--

I saw this in the library again the other day and it made me think of it and reconsider my initial enthusiasm. So, I'm reducing the rating to three stars. Not a big deal. It's still an enjoyable read, it just doesn't meet my own personal four-star standards, which are continually being honed. And I realized, after these months, that the spoiler I mentioned above is just too dumb to forgive.

Lady*M says

More coherent, funnier book, great dialogue, interesting case(s). Gustainis shows off some of his adolescent wet dreams with the threesome at the end of the novel, but I can forgive him because I had fun with the rest of the book. Vampirism/supernatural creatures and challenges they face as a metaphor for racism/homophobia/general bigotry are sometimes blatant, sometimes clever. I'll probably pick up the next book as well.

Mieneke says

I seem to be developing a taste for supernatural police procedurals. After discovering and loving Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* and *Moon over Soho* last year and Scott Sigler's *Nocturnal* last month, this month it was Justin Gustainis' *Evil Dark* and its protagonist Stan Markowski's turn. I had a tremendous amount of fun with this book. Its writing and tone of voice hooked me from the first page and by the end of

the book I was disappointed that it was over so soon, as I would have happily spent another three hundred pages with its characters.

The atmosphere Gustainis creates with his writing is fabulous. From the first page you get a feel for not only who Stan Markowski is, but also in what kind of town he operates. While some of the characters were archetypal, the fact that I thought them so might be due to the fact that I've read and watched a lot of police procedurals. There is the rugged, older main character, with his younger, slightly goofy partner, the gruff squad captain with his heart in the right place and the sexy, sassy female cop love interest among others. And naturally, the cops and the FBI have a hard time playing nice with each other. But archetypal or no, these characters are definitely a bit different, as they are part of a police squad that deals with occult crimes, that means crimes involving or committed by supernatural creatures ranging from vampires to ghouls and goblins. In fact, Stan's partner Karl and his daughter Christine are vampires themselves. Not having read the first book in the *Occult Crimes Unit* series, I'm not sure about much of Stan, Karl and Christine's back story, other than that it involved getting Karl and Christine turned into vampires to save their lives – or undeath, such as it is – but we do see Stan having mixed feelings about this change in his partner and daughter. There is a lot of hidden depth to Markowski's calm exterior, which makes him interesting to read about, even if a lot of that depth remains unilluminated, though I can't be sure whether it's truly unknown or things revealed in the previous book. Karl, with his James Bond obsession and his rather unique perspective on their case, is a good foil for Stan's serious demeanour and their verbal exchanges are some of the highlights of the book.

The different supernatural creatures found in *Evil Dark* are a natural part of the story's world, not monsters hidden from human society, but integrated and every day. In fact, I loved the alternate world Gustainis has created. His Cranston is a place unlike our own, but at the same time it could still be the next town over from ours. The supernatural creatures aren't just an everyday part of life; they even have their own history, such as ogres and goblins being distantly-related. They have even penetrated popular culture; there is a website called Drac's List, where vampires can meet potential 'donors', James Bond starred in *From Transylvania with Love*, Steinbeck's bestseller is *Of Elves and Men* and Stan buys his daughter something special for dinner at Sup'r-Natural Foods or the local Vlad-Mart. The little details Gustainis manages to drop into the narrative in this manner are awesome and add up to a very convincing alternate reality.

In this very real supernatural environment, we are presented with a frightening case which Stan and Karl get handed by the FBI; there are people making supernatural snuff films, not the urban-myth kind, the real deal. With such a big case on their plate, Stan and Karl get busy, but it seems that every day sees more cases added to their workload as the unit is inundated with cases. Gustainis manages to make all of the cases fit together in a way that leads to a surprising conclusion, one I very much enjoyed.

Evil Dark was a terrifically entertaining read, which kept me invested in its characters from beginning to end. Now I want to read *Hard Spell*, just so I can spend some more time with Stan, Karl, Christine and the rest, after which I'll eagerly await the as-yet untitled third book. A fun, fast read centred on an interesting case to solve, *Evil Dark* is a recommended read for anyone who likes police procedurals or the supernatural without sparkles or tramp stamps and leather pants. Meanwhile, I think I need to find myself some more supernatural police procedurals, to see if they are a temporary craving or a lastingly acquired taste. Any suggestions?

This book was provided for review by the publisher.

Morgan says

I was enjoying it, but then it all fell apart in the end. The last quarter of the book felt rushed, like there was a deadline to be met.

The final three pages seem like they belong somewhere else. Like they were randomly tacked on. I half expect the third book to start with "And that's when I knew I was having drug-induced hallucinations".

Elisa says

Super dark, yet funny procedural with a noir feel. I really enjoyed it, even when I realized things were a bit contrived, the jokes pushed a bit much and things were repeated a bit. I can't wait to read the next one. The name's Markowski, I carry a badge...that type of thing. Folks are being burned alive, tortured to death and other stuff. Markowski is trying to figure out who is doing these horrible things and keeping his family and friends alive, any way possible. Gnarly, yet funny. My kind of book!

Cathy says

A very enjoyable traditional police procedural with a hardboiled cop, tempered with a nice touch of warmth and wry humor. I always like the tone of this series, it rings very true to me. He just feels very real to me as a detective, from the opening with his curiosity making him stop to help the elf when he knew he shouldn't, to the tension with the FBI agents, to his relationship with his partner, everything just felt right. The mystery was high tension and interesting and held my attention throughout the book. I also enjoyed his relationship with his daughter, both the feeling of genuine love and the sense that he was just such a bewildered dad who just had no idea how to deal with her transformation; it's really relatable even though her transformation is into a vampire and most dads only have to deal with their little girls turning into women. All of the characters in the book pop off the page really well, good guys and bad, it's a very vivid story.

There was one small thing that happened that really made me think a bit. Stan was reading reading a book about a group of scientists who accidentally open a portal to hell and he was really hoping it was just fiction. It made me wonder if reading urban fantasy would be as fun if I knew it all really existed. But what else would I read? I'm a sci-fi/fantasy girl.

Anyway, I liked this book and I definitely recommend it and the first book in the series, Hard Spell, if you like somewhat darker urban fantasy.

Gail says

This is one of those books that starts out okay and then crashes and burns in the last sixty pages. And then the last few pages made it so very, very much worse. It is also the last book by this author I will read, as it is not the first of his books I have been underwhelmed by.

Mr. Matt says

I thought this was a better story than the first installment in this series, Evil Dark - although I'm not entirely certain why I feel that way. Maybe it was the fact that I had already been introduced to the author's world and the characters. I was able to pick the book up and settle right into modern day Scranton, complete with

goblins, trolls, vampires and, of course, magic.

Reading these books it is natural to draw a comparison with the Dresden series. I am a big fan of some of the Dresden books and not some of the others. I much prefer the books that are 'smaller' in focus than the books where Harry Dresden is "The One." And maybe that is why I like these books so much. The stories are smaller. In these books Stan Markowski is solving crimes, often brutal and scary, but not really involving the end of the world. And I like that.

Having said that, in this book Stan has to foil a plot of Human Supremacists who want to start a race war between humans and supernaturals. But even so, it is just Stan versus your average nut jobs. He's not "The One."

The book is a good read and I highly recommend to fans of the Dresden books.
