



Very Bad Deaths

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Aging baby-boomer Russell Walker wants only to retreat from the world and the shattering death of his beloved wife, into the woods of British Columbia. But the real world won't let him become a hermit. Instead, he finds himself thrust into the mystery of a series of mass murders by a monstrous sadist and serial killer who makes Hannibal Lector look like a boy scout. And he is caught in a frightening predicament: He is the only possible intermediary between a telepath called Smelly, so sensitive he can't stand to be near most people, and a skeptical police officer who needs to hear and believe what Smelly knows about the fiend. This involuntary trio may be the only ones who can catch the inhuman butcher before he kills again-if he doesn't catch them first.

Very Bad Deaths Details

Date : Published September 1st 2006 by Baen (first published December 1st 2002)

ISBN : 9781416520832

Author : Spider Robinson

Format : Paperback 352 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction, Fantasy, Mystery, Thriller

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Bryan says

I've read a few Spider Robinson books now, and I think I've noticed some trends:

1) Spider writes himself into his books. He's the main character.

Not so bad, is it? But imagine if Spider had written 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. Then we'd have Captain Nemo who smokes pot and quotes Heinlein. Or what if Spider had written 1984? Then Winston would crack puns and enjoy Travis McGee novels.

Okay, not fair - Spider writes a different style than those novels. But as enjoyable as his books are, they can get kind of annoying when you realize you're getting the same character over and over again. If Spider were an actor, he'd be the type that could only play himself, and never take on a role with any differing characteristics.

It's almost preachy, in fact. Spider expresses himself (through his characters) on a variety of topics, justifying the viewpoints and preferences (lifestyle, music, art, literature, food, etc) through self-referential logic. It almost makes me feel like Spider is telling me "if only you could think clearly and analytically like me, and then you'd have the same ideas I have as well". But of course I don't, not very often.

So in this book we have Spider (oops, I mean Russell Walker) who is an aging, liberal, hippie caught up in a neat little SF hook involving telepathy. So how about the other characters? They are either props, or thought experiments.

Props? The female cop (Nika) is really only a shell. We never get to know much about her other than the details that are needed for the story to move on. What about her interests? She argues a bit with Russell, but it's almost implied that given time, she might start changing some of her thinking to be more aligned with Russell.

Thought experiments? The telepath is really interesting and memorable, but again we don't ever get to know enough about the real Zandor. It's as if Spider asked himself "what if a telepath couldn't turn the power off, and all the noise was painful?" So everything about Zandor (aka Smelly) is required to make him elusive to other people. He is exactly what he needs to be, and we never get beyond that really.

And another thought experiment that didn't go so well as Zandor was the psycho (Allen). Here's the fatal flaw in Spider's novel - Allen is just not scary. Spider tried... it seems to me that he asked himself "what's scarier than a serial killer?" And of course that would be a serial torturer who revels in pain, not necessarily killing if at all possible, but prolonging the agony. Good start, but that's all we get about Allen. So there's no sense of dread, and he's never as horrendously monstrous to the reader as Spider intended. (Certainly the other characters perceive that Allen epitomizes evil, but they didn't get it across to me). This really detracted from the overall plot, and I dropped a star from my rating for this alone.

(And can I complain about making Allen a Trekkie? C'mon, the last time I was scared of a Trekkie was... never?)

But enough about characterization... on to more Spider trends:

2) Spider's writing is an enjoyable read.

Spider's work is always fast-paced, and written in a conversational tone that is humorous but rarely silly. He does draw you in, and hold your attention, and I do plan to read more.

3) Spider writes good science fiction.

Although this book only has the telepath device, it's still good SF because Spider takes pains to make it internally consistent. That's a very good thing, and it redeems a lot of what Spider writes that might otherwise be ordinary and forgettable genre tripe. When Spider introduces any SF element, he takes great pains in determining all the resulting details that are implicit, even the minor ones. Good SF novels always do this - it's one of my main complaints with televised SF (sooner or later something contradicts what came before).

And Spider always tries to come up with a human solution to the science fictional dilemma in which the characters find themselves. Theodore Sturgeon would be proud...

Final verdict - 3 stars. It's good to spend some time with Spider once in a while... I feel I'm starting to know him well. He does spin a good yarn, but it's best taken in small doses here and there.

Salamandyr says

This book is, if not the worst book I've ever read, then at least the laziest.

Jim says

Robinson wowed me with Callahan's Crosstime Saloon, a collection of short stories, many years ago. Unfortunately, he hasn't done so since then. I occasionally try to find the magic, but it isn't there. Wasn't this time, either. An interesting, quite imaginative story, but he dragged it out way too long. It became a vehicle for his snarky comments about some of the ills of our society. I don't have much patience for people who can only complain without offering up a solution & this meandering narrative used up all of mine. I almost quit at the 3/4 mark.

The characters were interesting, as always. The book veers off for entire sections that were pretty good, too. I'm sure I would have liked this far better if he'd made it a set of short stories. Mashing them all together just didn't work well for me.

Jeff Yoak says

This is a little dark for Robinson, but had the wit and charm I associate with his work, and was warm and comforting to read.

Stephen says

2.5 stars. Set in present day Vancouver, this is more of a detective thriller with the only SF element being ESP. Main characters include Russell Walker, a newspaper columnist who stays up late and is addicted to coffee, Zandor Zudenigo, Walker's friend, who is a telepath, and a sadistic torturer/murderer whose MO is to kill his victims only after causing them as much pain as humanly possible (hence the title of the book). The basic plot involves Zandor, who is a recluse and can not stand to be near people due to his inability to shut out the "noise" of their thoughts, seeking Walker's help in preventing the killer from murdering his next victims (who Zandor has seen through his visions).

Cool premise, but the story was not as good as it could have been. I thought the character of Zandor to be best drawn and the description of this smart, sensitive, eccentric guy trying to function in a world where he is constantly bombarded by other people's thoughts was well done. However, the main protagonist, though set up as a really evil villain, was never really explored and so the sense of dread that should have been present was absent.

Really good potential, but the end result was just okay.

Anna says

Russell, the protagonist (although not the driving force behind the story), is described as being incredibly open-minded and easy-going, with no strong opinions, which is allegedly why Zandor can stand to be around him. This would make sense, except for the part where everything about the character denies this. The man is a columnist, for crying out loud. He makes a living by publishing his opinions and ranting about random things. Throughout the book, he gives very decided opinions about marijuana, the Canadian police force, coffee, and a host of other things I can't even remember off the top of my head. His opinions are all very left-wing, liberal, but that doesn't make them any less firm. It does put him at odds fairly often with the conservative Nika, but while he accuses her of being uptight about his pot-smoking habit, he refuses to back down on the issue himself.

Aside from that glaring inconsistency, the characters were all very well-rounded, interesting people. I was particularly fond of Zandor, and the gentle temperament he needed to live with his unique ability. Small details give the characters unique touches, like Russell's frustrated determination to befriend the paranoid cat who lives in the woods near his house. Several flashbacks to college years give us insights into both Russell and Zandor as well, and the peculiar relationship between them.

I was excited to find out this book is set in Canada; I'm Canadian myself, and there just aren't enough stories about people who live up here. My glee faded, though, at hearing over and over how useless our police force is. At one point, Russell refuses to call 911 because they wouldn't send enough people to be helpful, so he'll just count on Nika showing up by herself instead. I have a very hard time believing this is a better scenario than having even one or two extra police officers on the scene. But no, apparently they're so very incompetent, even having them there would be a detriment.

The other thing that bugged me was hearing Russell inform the reader that he's been through more pain than they have, because he's suffered from collapsing lungs and the operation to help fix them. I have no doubt it's a very painful procedure, but I suspect there are a number of things people suffer through that hurt as much or more. Childbirth comes to mind. Kidney stones. Burn victims. Russell also maintains after his operation, he was in so much pain he didn't sleep a wink for more than three weeks. As far as I know, that's not actually

possible. The Guinness World Record is for 11 days, and after only a couple of days, most people start suffering from hallucinations and all sorts of other side effects. It's just the annoying sort of detail that takes me out of the story, beyond the point I can suspend disbelief.

The dialogue was excellent, and some of the best parts of the book were delivered through conversations. A conversation with Allen, the murderer, was particularly interesting, hearing his candid viewpoint about the things he enjoys doing to other people. The entire writing style feels more fast-paced than it is, which kept me turning pages even when not a lot was actually happening. The charm of this story is actually less in the plot details and more in the characters and their interactions with each other. The story ends perhaps a bit too neatly, but there's the hint of an intended sequel that will perhaps remedy that.

In spite of its inconsistencies, I did enjoy the book. It was a quick, interesting read with some interesting ideas. One of the quotes on the back describes Robinson's style as "Stephen King on acid" and I have to agree. For all its faults, it was ultimately readable, although anyone who would be disturbed by hearing anything specific about the sort of tortures the sadistic Allen liked to employ may want to think twice before picking up the book.

Benjamin Kahn says

This book is well-written, my problem was that I didn't read the blurb on the back carefully enough. I got it from the sci-fi section of the library, I know Spider Robinson as a sci-fi writer, probably saw that it was set in BC and away I went. I didn't realize that it was about a serial killer until I got into it and by then it was too late. It's just not my kind of book.

The whole flashback to the '60s thing really reminded me of a lot of books that I read in high school - *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Robinson's style reminded me a little of Max Braithwaite.

I think without the serial killer, I might have found this book amusing, perhaps even charming, but the whole crime angle is a bit of a turnoff for me.

Jack says

Robinson indulges in some (what he might consider) "just-left-of-center" preachiness at the end of this book. He whines and sings the praises of Canada's nationalized health plan (and, of course, Canada and its health policies will give deference to a world-famous author, won't they? I've heard from other Canadians who are not as well-known or well-off that paint a different picture). Much of what he says was written pre-2009 crash, of course, when many nations in Europe had to begin scaling back their national health care because of budget constraints.

While I agree with much of what the "Truman liberal" ex-CIA Agent Pitt says about America in his four-page speech at the end, I don't agree with a lot of the assessments. This is Robinson's most political and least personal book IMHO. I had to doggedly slog through the middle of it because, as always, Robinson's characters are compelling. But in this one, the dialog occasionally lost me and I had to keep going back to figure out who was speaking.

Karl says

I'm going to call this one 3.75.

I like Spider Robinson. A lot. His humor, his characters, his easy prose style have always made me reach for his books. This one, however, was challenging. In this novel Spider pits a MC (who shares most of the author's DNA) against an antagonist who is simply evil. Hannibal Lector evil, without the classical education. Hitler evil. Et cetera.

While I enjoyed most of the story, the scenes between the serial killer and the MC were hard to process, especially before bed.

There is a strong thread of humanity that redeems this story, but it was a hard slog getting there.

Lucy Takeda says

I enjoy Robinson's off kilter characters and philosophies. The outline of the novel did warn me that it involves a sadistic monster. Yes, it does, and he majorly creeped me out. I really liked Russell and Zandor. Russell is contemplating suicide when his college roommate (nicknamed Smelly) knocks on his door at 3:00 a.m. to ask for his help. It's a complex scenario involving flashbacks to college days in the '70's, marijuana, Canadian sensibilities, and the logic of police forces dealing with a psychotic killer. You need a high tolerance for fairly graphic descriptions of torture to take this novel on.

Donna says

Spider Robinson is like a guilty pleasure for me. His characters are in no way related to my life, and they usually partake of drugs and "free sex" in a measure that I'd normally think of as unhealthy and unwise. If I were to meet any of his characters in real life we'd probably part ways mostly unaffected by each other, each content with the respective non-intersecting realms we inhabit.

And yet.... I LIKE Spider's books. I REALLY do. His protagonists are generally mild mannered men who have had something really dreadful happen to them and are struggling to deal with it. The characters he surrounds these men with are often wildly off-beat and endearingly strange. I'd give up a month of Starbucks for an evening of drinking at Calahan's Cross-time Salon any time. Heck I'd even ask Mike to let me pay for a round of drinks!

So... this book was a bit of a... well... let down is too strong... not disappointment... um... it was like Spider was trying too hard to write a crime thriller. It was almost there, but not quite.

I had been warned about the violence, but it wasn't gratuitous and since the story was about a maniacal serial killer it wasn't unexpected. What bothered me more was the constant diversions from the plot line... the rabbit trails I was lead on that didn't really have much to do with the plot. This book would have made a great short story.

One of the high points of this was listening to Spider narrate his own work. Normally I don't like listening to authors reading their own work, but Spider has a very conversational tone that is perfect for the story. He is

Russell Walker, the main character of the story, who tells the tale.

Not bad, not great, and if you're squeemish... not your cup of tea.

Mike says

(A bit of a marathon read... er, listen...)

Mostly fun. As others have noted, there is about 20% fluff and 20% harmless proselytizing, and the only real science fiction element is telepathy. But it needed far less concentration than *The Bourne Identity*, so...

For SRC17Q4, Task 30.7A (modifier "very" in the title); awaiting To Say Nothing of the Dog

Steve Lundh says

I am a fan of Robinson's work due to his funny, somewhat bent story lines which are usually possible but not probable. *Very Bad Deaths* for me dragged on way too long, was a bit darker than I like and just did not keep my attention. Hoping he goes back towards the Callahan series style which was funny, weird but still thought provoking.

Jim Mantle says

A very colourful read, excellent descriptive, and some highly creative phrasing: "This woman was so tight-assed she probably broke wine glasses every time she farted."

Also lots of social commentary and commentary on the local governance in the Vancouver area - which may offend, or make you laugh, depending on your beliefs.

The characters are consistent and believable (with the sci-fi addition of ESP), the story amuses, engages and flows; but the book could have used a good final edit to tighten it up - there are a few spots where we get a chapter telling a story to illustrate a point, when we could have been given a sentence or three. Overall, I enjoyed reading the distractive bits, but it could have been tighter.

Well-woven, creative, well-researched, vibrant. I will search out the author's other books. And probably inhale them in a day, as I did this one.

Brian Gaston says

A good book but a bit of a downer for Spider. I suspect the writing was reflecting some of the tough things happening in his life at the time.
