



Autumn in the Abyss

John Claude Smith

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When enigmatic poet Henry Coronado disappears six months after the New Year's Eve, 1959, Welcoming Chaos event, he takes with him a profound secret wrapped within the words of his poem, Autumn In The Abyss. Fifty years later, an ill man's research into Coronado's work and life reveals that poetry can indeed change the world, or leave it in ruins.

The Word is a living thing...and often with lethal intentions.

Reality is the strangest mirror...

"The stories in John Claude Smith's new collection take their characters to the limits of human experience, the places where our bodies come asunder in the face of the abyss. Positioning his stories in the seams of our cultural history, Smith chronicles the efforts of artists of all stripes--poets, musicians, sculptors, filmmakers--to break through our common experience to another, more essential one that is painted in blood. It's a quest that draws these artists into proximity with the serial-killer in the book's single and singular tale of a police detective's obsessive manhunt. Whether with pen or carving knife, Smith's characters will not stop until they have gone too far, into a space where revelation and terror are part of the same, vast thing." —John Langan, author of *The Wide, Carnivorous Sky and Other Monstrous Geographies*

"These five emotionally complex tales ask, above all, what it means to be human in a tempestuous universe. What part of ourselves do we owe to the pursuit of goodness, especially if there's no apparent advantage to being good? How can we define ourselves in the absence of moral authority? Blurred lines of identity, the role of the artist, and the nature of temptation are explored in these stories of sacrifice and self-destruction. Autumn in the Abyss is another dark and captivating collection from a writer who isn't afraid to plumb the depths of our greatest and most dangerous desires." —S.P. Miskowski, Shirley Jackson Award nominated author of *The Skillute Cycle*

"The best compliment for any artist is leaving the audience desperately wanting more. And that's exactly what John Claude Smith accomplishes with the tour de force of Autumn in the Abyss. The title novelette is a breathtaking exercise in dark fantasy—a surreal, unabashedly literary, horrific mystery with a surprising, heartrending truth at its end. It's a tough act to follow, and yet the next four tales not only hold their own, but occasionally even up the ante. The novelette "Becoming Human" is a chilling mix of the serial killer genre and... something much more frightening. And three shorter tales all share a common gatekeeping character, as Smith explores some "Night Gallery" style places that are... just beyond the pale. Smart, creepy, unexpected ... these are stories from that nightmare zone that will stick with you long after midnight. Hell, these are stories that will haunt you beneath the bright sun at noon. This is one of the best collections I've read in years!" —John Everson, Bram Stoker Award-Winning Author of *NightWhere* and *Violet Eyes*

"The Rhythmic flow of John's words instantly absorbs you into his world, bringing not only his words to life but the story as well." —Joe Mynhardt, Crystal Lake Publishing

Autumn in the Abyss Details

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From Reader Review Autumn in the Abyss for online ebook

Joe Zanetti says

"The impossible scenario witnessed by eyes wide with panic and ears praying for silence suggested truths the mad display confirmed. Everything he thought he knew was false or at least altered."

My first experience with the writing of John Claude Smith was his chapbook, "Vox Terrae," published by Dunhams Manor Press. It contained classic elements of Weird fiction but written with a fresh voice that took readers on a nightmarish journey through horrifying realms that no human being had any business knowing. In his collection, "Autumn in the Abyss", I think Smith took the formula of "Vox Terrae", mixed it with some black and abyssal ingredients from the tenebrous depths of places that even angels won't set foot in, and created a new mutant strain of Horror that deftly balances characterization, plot, pacing, and narrative, culminating in an experience that will fill you with disgust, sadness, and even a hint of both optimism and hope.

Published by Omnium Gatherum, "Autumn in the Abyss" is a collection of five grotesque and disturbing stories that explore a variety of themes, such as obsession, desire, humanity, redemption, hope, identity, insignificance, and the power of words, all while traversing through places that make us uncomfortable; places that we tend to stay away from and turn a blind eye to. Smith's writing in this collection possesses a grimy and corrosive quality; it slowly eats away at you, digested by the dregs of life. The atmosphere Smith creates is like a haze of thick smog that chokes and disorients you; it weighs you down and slows your pace, so that you have no choice but to take in Smith's unsettling and horrifying imagery. You have no choice but to witness the worst that life has to offer; a side of humanity that is so revolting, it makes your stomach turn and inevitably numbs you.

Some of the protagonists in Smith's stories are at the bottom of the barrel of humanity. They are people who are detached from the rest of the world; they are plagued by obsessions and desires and will stop at nothing to pursue and achieve them; they prey on others who they deem as being less than human, but fail to see their own inhumanity. Some of them are so far gone, there is no hope for them; they are beyond reach. Others, though, are still inside the circle of redemption and will take the necessary steps to make things right for not just themselves, but for those they hurt as well.

In the story, "La mia immortalità", Samuel Nisi is an artist who has been successful in photography, oil paintings, and now in sculpting, a profession he took up several years ago. Despite his success, however, he is searching for everlasting fame. He wants to create something that will be remembered and revered long after he is gone. He wants immortality, no matter the cost.

"His aspirations had grown cunning. He would attain his goals at any cost, which had cost him friends, colleagues, personal relationships- not that they mattered to him. Anything that got in the way of his life's purpose, as whittled to spear sharp intensity as the years tolled, was easily discarded."

Nisi cares not for his current girlfriend Claire. She wants to talk to him but he cannot be bothered. He cannot stand the fact that he is associated with the human race; he sees himself above everyone else. Claire tells him she's pregnant and all he can say to her is to get an abortion; he wants nothing to do with Claire or the baby. So much, in fact, that he's willing to murder Claire and his unborn child. All that matters to Nisi is his quest for immortality; he cares only for himself and what he wants. The story, "Broken Teacup", also explores this theme of detachment and viewing other people as being less than human. The story explores the depraved lives of Mr. Rickart, Lemmy, and Elvis. Mr. Rickart and Lemmy prowl the bowels of small towns in Texas,

looking for the "lowest of the low" hookers and propositioning them to perform "the most disgusting encounters imaginable". They record their encounters and responses from the hookers and use the footage and sound bits for their sleazy noise band, Texas Chainsaw Erection.

Lemmy and Mr. Rickart's deplorable acts were turning heads but not bringing in the money. Their particular venture, however, draws a unique fan base and brings them cringe-worthy, nauseating requests, which eventually leads them into the realm of murder. Being offered a lot of money, coupled with this sick idea of taking your act to a whole new level of depravity and inhumanity, is something that cannot be passed up by them.

"The killing was odd in the beginning. No problem for Lemmy, but I only did a couple girls before I realized that wasn't my thing. That said, most of these girls, hell, they haven't been living for a while, so it's not like they was missing anything important. It was not like their missing would be noticed."

Once they decide that these women have nothing to live for; that they have no family that miss them and are looking for them; that they are somehow less than human... it is they who crossed over into the realm of inhumanity. It's almost as if there is this sort of predatory hierarchy. This is how genocide begins: the moment you begin to view the other as being beneath you; as being sub-human and not worthy of life. "Broken Teacup" is not an easy read, but Smith is exploring a side of our existence that is all too real and horrifying. "Becoming Human" is also in the same vein. In this story, we have two men who are on opposite sides of the human spectrum, but both have lost touch with humanity and the world around them.

Before his years of spiraling into physical and emotional decline chasing Corbin Andrew Krell--also known as Krell the Destroyer, Krell the Creator--Detective Roberto Vera was an idealist. He was strong in both motivation and spirit.

"He'd believed in justice, in right and wrong. Black and white. Rather patented and predictable and sounding like the spiel from some cigar chewing TV detective, yet he believed it to his core. He knew and understood there would be many sullied signposts along the way, showing him scenes and situations that measured darkness in blood and power, in minds gone to rot and obsessions mired in immortality. His resolve was stalwart."

Many of us are like Vera, or have been Vera, or even want to be Vera. Yet, we all have that one encounter; that one experience that tips the scales and changes us for the worse. For Vera, his tipping point was his experience with Krell. Krell is the Joker to Vera's Batman. Krell is viewed by Vera as being an evil monster who represents the worst of our kind. What started as killing his victims soon turned to rape, torture, and mutilation. Krell saw himself as changing, and he was changing his victims, too, reducing them in nature, humanity, and identity, while he saw himself as ascending. Through his crimes, he's transforming. He wants to "not be". In his self-perceived transformation, Krell is moving beyond evil. In a face-to-face with Vera, Krell says this:

"I strive for something else, beyond evil's claustrophobic clutches. I strive to transcend evil by becoming pure nothing. I strive as my followers strived. I am, yet I strive to not be."

Krell and his ultimate goal are beyond Vera's comprehension. Yet, Krell is Vera's whole life. Vera is consumed by his obsession to try and understand Krell, along with putting him away for life. Vera's partner, Derek Sommers, ended up taking his own life because of the horrible things committed by Krell. Derek witnesses true evil and cannot bear to live. Vera loses his marriage, his ideals, humanity... everything. Smith does a rather skillful job of reflecting the horrors we experience in real life and on an almost daily basis. Many of us cannot help but wonder why some people do the things they do. Why would someone leave a helpless baby out in the cold to die? Why would one group of people commit genocide against another group? We try to comprehend why we commit such horrifying acts against one another. We ourselves are

consumed by these thoughts, and sometimes are reduced to Vera's state: we are left numb.

There is an interesting twist to *Becoming Human*, though; a twist that adds tremendous depth, power, and emotion. In the present parts of the story, Krell is in prison, and Vera is tracking down a Krell copycat killer. Once Vera is face-to-face with the copycat, he discovers that it's Krell. How can that be?? Vera's next discovery is that the copycat Krell is, in fact, an alien from the darkest depths of the cosmos. Vera asks it, "What are you?" The alien responds with:

"I am nothing, in search of something. In search of... being. I... I and my others, fragments splintered off the deep shroud... out there. We fled to the farthest reaches of... infinity. We are connected by thoughts. We hear each other's thoughts. Our aim is to fit in. To... assimilate into the society of those whose planet we choose to... be on. To be. We find a random figure of the primary race of the planet we've chosen and follow it, learning the ways of the beings we wish to... live with. It takes time to get all the nuances... precise. From nothing to something takes time."

This is what makes "*Becoming Human*" easily the most powerful, gut-punching story in the collection. Here is an alien being that is nothing, but wants to become something. Of all the people it chooses to help with its assimilation, it chooses Krell, a monster who is something, but wants to become nothing. The irony is so palpable. The innocence of the alien makes the story even more effective. It knows nothing about right or wrong, or what is good and what is evil. It simply wanted to fit in with humanity, but it ended up choosing the worst example of humanity and continued Krell's awful crimes. It is through this experience, though, that Vera rediscovers his own humanity, as he explains to the alien the kind of human Krell is, and goes on to explain the other side of humanity, the side that works together for the betterment of mankind; the side that is capable of displaying compassion and empathy; the side that is capable of love and kindness.

After much discussion between the two, the alien wants Vera to take it to Krell. It wants to give Krell what he most desires: to become nothing. I think Vera is somewhat baffled as to why the alien wants to do this for Krell, but I believe the alien is displaying a small amount of compassion for Krell, despite his monstrous nature, and, perhaps, as a way of saying, "After all I've done through copying Krell, let me make it right by doing this." It also clicks in Vera's mind that Krell will cease to exist; the alien would be doing the entire human race a favor by "taking out the garbage". It's the scene between Krell, Vera, and the alien that makes the title of the story so appropriate. After all of his philosophical talk of transcending evil and becoming nothing, when Krell discovers what is happening, he experiences a common human emotion: fear. He breaks down and becomes the very human he doesn't want to be. He's granted his wish but is scared to death, reduced to a child being left alone in the dark and calling for help. As for Vera, he realizes there is still hope for himself; he can turn his life around for the better, and he starts by reconnecting with his wife.

Smith's stories also explore themes of balance and insignificance. Four out of the five stories have one thing in common: Mr. Liu, an enigmatic figure who traverses a realm between humanity and something other. This also creates something of a shared universe, adding an element of connectivity. The characters in the tales exist together but in different places, yet they all have doomed and unpleasant encounters with Mr. Liu. He acts as a messenger for what he calls "caretakers of the universe", and all we know is that they, according to Mr. Liu, maintain balance.

In the case of Lemmy, Mr. Rickart, and Elvis, they are commissioned to do a rape, torture, mutilation and murder piece; however, it's a means to set them up and make them pay for swinging the pendulum too far in one direction. They have a woman they call "Broken Teacup" and are ready to perform their end of the deal, when Mr. Liu appears and Broken Teacup makes short work of Lemmy and Elvis. Believing that some people are salvageable, Mr. Liu offers Mr. Rickart and opportunity "attain a kind of dignity amidst the chaos, within what is left of your existence". Broken Teacup wants to be shown love. It's an opportunity that cannot be fulfilled though. You see, how can a person like Mr. Rickart possibly know what love is? He's so far gone from humanity, considering the horrible things he has done with his now dead cohorts, he's never felt, let

alone shown, love. Not wanting to end up like Lemmy and Elvis, he better learn fast.

Samuel Nisi also encounters Mr. Liu. Not knowing who Liu is, he accepts a commission from him to sculpt a piece that he is given free reign over; however, it's all a ruse, as Nisi must not be allowed to end the life of Julie and the baby inside her, for the baby is to have, according to Mr. Liu, an incredible future, and Nisi is just to awful to exist, so he inevitably experiences the horrors of the caretakers. In the case of Derek Jenner in the story, *Where the Light Won't Find You*, his curiosity causes him to encounter Mr. Liu purely by accident. Liu set the stage for another person to be disposed of; someone who outlived their usefulness, and Jenner was there to see the whole thing, much to the dismay of Mr. Liu, who sees no choice but to dispose of Jenner as well. After much discussion with Jenner and the higher beings, Mr. Liu agrees to let Jenner go, but makes him swear that he is never to speak of this event. It's an ending that is similar to how *Becoming Human* ends. Jenner isn't quite in the same boat as Vera, but he's not perfect. After what he witnesses, though, he decides to try and live a better life, starting with his girlfriend Daisy. He promises himself that he's going to love her right. These two endings help highlight that it's possible for us to turn things around in our lives. Sometimes, we are not beyond hope and redemption; we have a chance to makes things better for ourselves and the ones we love. We no longer take certain things for granted. They're not happy endings, but, rather, nice reminders of the kind of people we can be, and of what we have and should appreciate and be thankful for.

The first story, "Autumn in the Abyss", is the longest out of the five and also explores themes of identity, balance, obsession, and how words have the power to change the world around us, for better or for worse. Mr. Liu appears only briefly, but the caretakers are in full effect. The story revolves around a man who is obsessed with finding a poet named Henry Coronado and a poem he read, called *Autumn in the Abyss*. He suffers from a rather severe case of agoraphobia, coupled with a weight problem. His days are spent eating Ramen noodles and looking under every rock and in every nook and cranny searching for Coronado. The man eventually learns the truth about Coronado, himself, and his place in the hierarchy of the universe.

Smith's collection is packed with grotesque imagery and disturbing situations that, on the surface, makes you want to turn your head, but the stories do well in addressing how people let themselves be consumed by their obsessions and desires, and the terrible consequences that often follow. These stories emphasize that to be human is to be flawed. We are not perfect. We are capable of doing good things, and we are also capable of doing bad things. We can be selfish one day, and altruistic the next. Sometimes, however, we find ourselves crossing over that line of no return, and the farther we walk, the more difficult it is to come back. We can be afforded opportunities to make things right, though; we can turn around and walk in the other direction and back over the line. Then, there are some who walk so far they can never return. Smith's stories have a dual effect of painting a gruesome picture of how awful our kind can be. And they also make you thankful for what you have; appreciate the things we take for granted.

Bill says

Mr. Liu lives in the shadows. His employers are responsible for keeping the balance amidst the chaos of the universe. When Mr. Liu comes calling you can bet that the universe is about to be adjusted. Adjusted...Hard.

While our friend does not show up in person in all of these stories, the suggestion of him and the Guardians he works for are most surely present. You can feel them lurking in the shadows of these stories. Dark and sinister shadows. Judging and violent.

What we end up with are 5 stories with interconnecting themes that John Claude Smith manages to weave

together to create a deeply disturbing and original vision of a world on the precipice of the abyss. Separately, these tales are very good. But together, they are great. 4.5 Stars! Highly Recommended!

Paul Roberts says

There is an argument to be made that John Claude Smith is at the sharpest end of the violence fantasia concerning modern practitioners of the current dark renaissance. Many have championed his story, "Autumn in the Abyss", and while that tale is a deft achievement, I find "Broken Teacup" to be the most crushing story here. A fantastic idea served by the courage of its creator. Perfect for those darkest October nights. 4.5/5

Randolph says

4-1/2 stars. This slim volume was very good. I liked this a lot. It would be hard to categorize but I would call it weird horror. The stories are tight and the prose evocative. Smith's worldview is kind of like a Ligotti with a ray of hope. You better be good and cherish what you've got in John Claude's universe.

All the stories are memorable but *Becoming Human* seemed to me a riff on Michael Shea's *The Autopsy*. Not the same story by any stretch but it reminded me of it in a lot of ways. There was a linkage (I'm not telling you what it is, buy the book!) between several of the stories which was kind of cool also. Not for the faint hearted!

This is a print on demand book and one of the things I appreciate in this digital age is there were **no typos**. Nice cover graphics too.

Oh, and if a dude named Liu shows up, don't make eye contact and go the other way fast.

T.E. Grau says

For the past few years, I and many of my colleagues have written and spoken at length about the Weird Fiction Renaissance currently taking place amid the long and twisting halls of genre fiction. More writers are doing more work in speculative fiction than any other time in the recent past. And while the double edged sword of self publishing services, POD, and electronic media platforms have provided easier access to that once elusive - and now often murky - label of "published work," removing necessary gatekeepers and truncated the time it takes to move from amateur to legit, some strong grain is being sifted to the surface amid all of that overeager chaff.

One of these Renaissance Men is certainly John Claude Smith, who proves his weird fic mettle in his second collection *Autumn in the Abyss*, published by Omnium Gatherum, a book of five bleak, well crafted tales just as liable to punch you in the gut as twist some dark corner of your mind, tied together with the sinewy connective tissue of recurring characters and familiar thematic overtones. This is cosmic horror, but this is also body horror and gore, with several of the stories plumbing the cruelest pits and most deviant acts perpetrated by humankind, much of it playing out in front of an audience of curious eyes not native to this planet. To Smith, we are not the center of the universe, nor are we alone in it, and that is a very unfortunate

thing, for a variety of reasons that become viscerally evident as each story unfolds. Dark forces have found our planet, and have reached out to it - to us - to study, to absorb, to form unholy alliances, embodied by the mysterious Mr. Liu, who shows up in several of the stories like a jaundiced tether, tying the collection together. Smith is a fetching stylist with an unflinching eye and a thoughtful take on modern horror fiction, showing us the beauty, the barbarity, the abyss that lies inside all there is.

The title tale kicks off the book, and serves as its longest and possibly its strongest piece. Admittedly, as a hopelessly romantic fan of the Beats, I'm probably biased toward "Autumn in the Abyss," but even without the callbacks to (and cameos by) a variety of Beatnik nouns, this story stands tall as a huge and engrossing work of uncanny fiction. While researching the public disappearance of "visionary poet Henry Coronado" - think a Ginsberg/Kerouac/Burroughs amalgam meets Thomas Ligotti - an agoraphobic investigative writer uncovers various clues, recollections, and interview fragments that begin to unravel the mystery that abruptly ended the career of a Beatnik star immediately after his first public reading - albeit a reading that ended with the death of nearly everyone in attendance. Smith shows a familiarity with the subject matter that blends the druggy jazz of the Beats with the dark yearnings of those intellectually and spiritually curious seekers who came well before them. It is also - at its heart - a rumination on the power of the spoken word, in which what qualifies as a "poem" and what can be classified as a "spell" or "incantation" or even "summoning" is often nonexistent, and only differentiated by what words are actually spoken, and in what order. "Autumn in the Abyss" is a fascinating work, worthy of the title (which is fantastic), and a perfect anchor tale to launch the collection.

"Broken Teacup" is a leering stare into the nauseating depths of human depravity, and the male lust for sex and death, often not in that order nor separated from one another. Smith's background in music journalism makes itself felt here through a confident handling of the sonic underworld where it crosses over with snuff erotica. This was a hard story to read, mostly because I know that such people are living and doing their business right this very second all around me. "Broken Teacup" marks Mr. Liu's first arrival in the book, but certainly not the last, and with each arrival, we see further into the mythos of Smith's dark universe, and the ties that bind our reality to what swirls just outside it.

The "wealthy Chinese gentleman" returns for a consecutive appearance in "La mia immortalita," John Claude Smith's requisite tale of a tortured (torturing?) artist, as it seems every writer of horror/supernatural fiction has one inside their pen, struggling to get out much like the waiting shape inside the slab of uncut marble. What will one sacrifice to achieve immortality through their art? I guess it depends on who is asking, and what they can offer.

Similar in graphic rendering to "Broken Teacup," the story "Becoming Human" takes on the tropes of the charismatic serial killer, a frustrated detective, and the copycat phenomenon that sometimes follows in the wake of a high profile murder spree of spectacular savagery. But, instead of treading the old familiar ground played out so often in film, television, and dog-eared paperback, Smith leads us in a new direction, elevating the story into the realms of not quite cosmic horror, but certainly cosmicism, as the horror elements are undeniably and concretely of this earth, buoyed by the atmospherics of the outer dark. "Becoming Human" is certainly my second favorite story in the collection (just behind "Autumn in the Abyss"), as it is both brutal and poetic, including some beautiful, thoughtful prose on prison, humanity, and on the tragic squandering of love. It could be just a coincidence that both this story and "Autumn..." are also the book's longest works. Regardless, I'd love to see Smith work more in the longer form, be it novella or novel, allowing his graceful style room to roam and dance with his feet while unlocking new monstrosities further up the body.

"Where the Light Won't Find You" is - relatively speaking - probably the weakest piece of the bunch, closing out the collection on not quite as strong a note as the start. But, it does give us another piece of the Mr. Liu puzzle, who returns for his third and final bow. The story takes place almost entirely inside an unremarkable movie theater, and is plotted like a modern pulp rendering of fantastical fiction from an age gone by. And while I certainly enjoyed it (I'm a sucker for the pulps), I didn't think it quite lived up to the lofty bar set by

the other stories of Autumn in the Abyss. No matter, though, as it is a minor quibble and probably a bit of nitpicking, as the collection is so strong overall.

Admittedly, I have not read Smith's debut collection, *The Dark is Light Enough For Me*, but I have read and published his fiction in the past ("Beautiful," which appeared in the acclaimed *Strange Aeons* Issue #13), and based on everything I have seen so far from John Claude Smith, he is major talent with a firm place at the table of contemporary weird fiction writers currently carrying the smoky torch of supernatural literature. The Renaissance continues...

Char (Tacky Genre Buff) says

4.5 stars!

Balance in the world and in the universe is a recurring theme in this collection of five stories. What does it take to achieve balance? And who, or what, gets to decide what constitutes balance? The tales in this volume address these questions in a highly entertaining way.

The Autumn in the Abyss - Can words change the world? Not just your world, but the entire world? Sprinkled with quotes like "The Word is a living thing" and "Language is a virus from outer space", this is a beautifully written tale that is hard to describe. Can words summon things, things not of this world, things that thrive on human suffering? Can words twist things around so much that you hardly even know yourself anymore? You will have to read this to find out.

"All paths are paved with the carcasses of experience."

Broken Teacup - This was a short, nasty little tale, reminiscent of the bizarro genre or of hardcore horror authors like Edward Lee. In this story, Mr. Liu makes his first appearance. Think of Mr. Liu as a warped ambassador of the cosmic. Always trying to achieve balance at the behest of his superiors. I believe balance was achieved here.

La mia immortalita - Involved in his latest art project, Samuel's dismissive and arrogant personality is on display here. The more frustrated he gets with his work, the more unlikable he becomes. Mr. Liu makes yet another appearance after Samuel proves once and for all that he is a most despicable human being. As Mr. Liu himself states: "Those who require balance within the universe have a perverse sense of humor, Mr. Nisi. I am their liaison here on earth." We'll just say that Samuel's art sculpture did not come out as he'd originally planned.

"People-what a pitiable race to be associated with."

Becoming Human - I think this was my favorite story of the bunch-deep, dark and wicked, but with a sense of hope (against ALL odds), that shines through and in the end, wins.

Where the Light Won't Find You - This was a relatively short story that showcased a scary insect-like thing in a movie theater. In the dark. In the chair behind you. Yeah, it was good.

Overall, this collection was well above average. It features cosmic horror with undertones of Barker and Lee-a combination not often found. It showcases outstanding prose with fantastic ideas hiding within the words. I have no reservations highly recommending this collection to fans of horror, most especially fans of cosmic and/or literary horror.

I was provided a free copy of this book to honestly review for Horror After Dark.

Brian Steele says

(Advanced Reader Copy)

It's rare that you can finish a book and find that it has left you altered on multiple levels. Beyond just themes and concepts presented, it's how the book makes you *feel*. Smith does this with **Autumn in the Abyss**, and the results are brilliant.

A short collection of only five tales, no more are really needed for what Smith is trying to say. They are a loosely intertwined menagerie of human depravity as examined from a Lovecraftian point-of-view. All manner of unspeakable atrocities are spoken of and acted out, but never in a "gore porn" fashion. Instead, it is done only to strengthen Smith's argument for humanity's place in the universe, something he tempers with his fascination in art. Amidst all the carnage and obscenity, we are treated to details on poetry, music, sculpture, and film. It's part of a message of balance Smith seeks to impart to us.

In that same message, the enigmatic Mr. Liu appears in a number of the tales. He is a more literal representation of how the stories are bound together, but they all carrying a singular theme. The title tale "Autumn in the Abyss" follows a shut-in's quest to discover the truth about lost beat poet, while "Broken Teacup" is concerned with two purveyors of filth and their big score. "La mia immortalita" shows how far an artist will go to be remembered, "Becoming Human" details a cop chasing after a copycat serial killer, and "Where the Light Won't Find You" tells of an average young man seeing behind the curtain of everything.

While each individual tale is excellent on its own merit, this truly is a collection meant to be absorbed as a singular experience. Much like an artist's particular gallery show or a band's album with no true single, it flows as a collective work. Make no mistake, much of the darkness here is tactile, Smith painting us a view of ourselves in hues both bleak and abhorrent. However, the visceral evil has nothing in regards to the transcendental, where one finds little more than indifference with the faint coloring of authority. Can such things as hope exist? According to Smith's message, that's not the point.

There is good, there is evil, and there is *purpose*. There is definitely purpose in **Autumn in the Abyss**, and not just to tell a handful of grotesque horror stories. Fables on the extreme, Smith shows us the opposite ends that humanity can fall to, and how small we can still seem to those gods and monsters dwelling high above.

Karl says

The first story in this collection is "Autumn in the Abyss". It is also the longest story. Mr. Smith gives us an amazingly creative "quest story". The quest is to find Henry Coronado, one of the 50's Beat Poets akin to Burroughs, Kerouac, Ginsberg etc. The quest quickly becomes bizarre and grotesque. You believe unknown and unidentified animals are trying to dig through your roof so they can rip your flesh and drink your blood. Imagine the paranoia that is onset after consuming a few squares of blotter acid. Imagine to then having to delve out into the desolate and deserted world that has somehow changes since you last saw it, to begin your quest. Imagine projectile vomiting when you catch a glimpse of yourself in the mirror. Disgust, depravity and self loathing abound throughout this immensely well written story about how reality can be altered by our own words.

The second story "Broken Teacup" begins with a couple of guys in an Industrial Band. They are not really being successful. So they decide to start recording/filming snuff/sex tapes on consignment - for fun and profit and a great deal of enthusiasm. For a while one thinks this is an Edward Lee story, when things shift. Enter Mr. Liu offering the boys a project they just can't turn down. Now we have entered the twilight zone, only Rod Serling is not there to rescue us.

The Third story is a somewhat tamer story about a sculpture who wants to create his immortal creation with his newly commissioned work – commissioned by Mr. Liu, the cosmic fixer.

And there are two further stories, "Becoming Human" about a warn out detective.

The last story is another Mr. Liu story entitled "Where The Lights Won't Find You"

The stories definitely take you somewhere strange and leave you there. Masterfully written, artistically told with style and creativity.

Highly Recommended

Jayaprakash Satyamurthy says

With one exception, the stories in this too-short collection delve into the depths of human depravity and degradation, but the agenda is a thoughtful, probing ethical, even moral quest, rather than a prurient gutter-trawl.

The exception is the title track, which traces a shut-in researcher's quest to unravel the fate of cult poet Henry Coronado, who vanished from sight soon after his only reading, an event which resulted in a fire and several suicides. Several literary figures are alluded to and Kerouac, or something that looks like Kerouac, gets a surreal walk-on. The story creates a queasy sense of unease around Coronado and his universe-bending verse, parlaying William Burroughs' concept of the word as virus into a medley of unsettling revelations which leave the story circling back to its own opening as Coronado's Sisyphean fate is revealed.

With 'Broken Teacup' and 'Becoming Human', we're plunged into the world of visceral, gory horror. The former story follows a shady power electronics duo who move from simulating sexually charged atrocities in their music to perpetrating the real thing for the benefit of a shadowy clientele of extreme voyeurs. But nothing prepares them for what happens when they accept a commission from the mysterious Mr. Liu and pick up a new piece of fresh meat - an oddly naive woman whom the narrator nicknames 'broken teacup'. The story is not just about gore and comeuppance - the shadowy forces Liu represents are more interested in a kind of balance, each of the perpetrators meeting a doom or a twisted redemption that matches their transgressions. 'Becoming Human' brings us face to face with a serial killer who makes Hannibal seem like Dr. Kervorkian in comparison - and then it brings us face to face with an alien entity's attempt to learn what it is to be human in one of the most creative twists on this theme I have read in a while.

The remaining stories in the collection all feature Mr. Liu, intervening on behalf of his shadowy backers, dealing out a particular brand of redemptive justice that seems to transcend vengeance or reward; the key seems to be some kind of cosmic balance. Liu is an interesting character, and I would like to see more of him, learn more about his weird 100-bullets style mission.

As I've mentioned, this collection felt a bit short. I don't always feel that way after reading a collection, and a

couple more stories would probably have brought this book into the Goldilocks zone. While there is no shortage of extreme body horror in these stories, as well as more subtle forms of terror, the unifying thread of much of this material is a nuanced moral imagination which raises the stories above exploitation material. It is not a collection for the squeamish, but neither is it one for the schlock-hound.

Michael Sorbello says

A collection of sickening tales regarding themes of decay, depravity, obsession and the rotting of the human psyche. Each story features a morally questionable character that suffers some kind of major flaw that drives them to the lowest possible state of mental wellness. Feelings of claustrophobia, agoraphobia and maniacal sickness pervade every page with vivid prose and grotesque imagery to smother the reader in grime and bleak perversity. Brilliant.

Ronald says

Disclosure: I received a free reader copy, in pdf form, from the author. Later, I went ahead and bought a copy for my ereader.

This is a collection of dark, speculative fiction. If you like that approach to fiction, I think you will like this book. (I have seen reviewers here at goodreads say that they don't like fiction in the short form. My response to them: Really? So you don't like Edgar Allan Poe? How about Borges? How about J.G. Ballard? I'd rather read one story by them than any bloated novel, anytime.)

Of the fiction in the book, the stories I liked are "Autumn in the Abyss" where the main character researches an obscure, Beatnik poet who, when he read one of his poems, caused madness and mayhem. Quite entertaining. Robert W. Chambers and H.P. Lovecraft would approve.

While reading "Becoming Human" I was worried that the story was going into a splatterpunk direction, a style of horror which I dislike tremendously. But stay with it--the story goes into a creative direction and I was moved by it.

The story "Where the Light Won't Find You" mainly takes place in a movie theater. I wonder if the author read the anthology of cinema themed fiction *Silver Scream*, which I read last year. Cinema themed fiction can be interesting.

Ian Welke says

I read this last week, and I'm still blown away by it.

The title story in this collection is phenomenal. It's worth the price of admission, everything else is almost just a bonus. In some ways it kind of reminds me of a modern day *King In Yellow*; a lost piece of literature that drives people literally wild and the way the story plays with identity. The plotting is perfect. The storytelling is right up there with many of my current favorites: Laird Barron, Caitlin Kiernan, John Langan.

The second story, "Broken Teacup" is savage. So much so, that it nearly turned me off. I nearly stopped and skipped to the third story. I'm glad I didn't because a) the way it worked out was incredible and b) I have to give it credit, I thought I was pretty jaded, but this disturbed me. Not a lot of fiction manages to accomplish that.

"La Mia Immortalia" and "Becoming Human" got me thinking again about comparisons between this and the *King In Yellow* collection. The way that both stories played with identity and art, and the way that Smith bends story tropes to work this theme throughout the collection is amazing.

"Where the Light Won't Find You" is one of those noirish stories where the actions of the main character, rather his mistakes, are so understandable that it's all too uncomfortably easy to empathize with him. It felt like what a Jim Thompson character would be doing in the modern world.

M Griffin says

Five stars for the mind-blowing title novella, more like four stars for the other stories, none of which is less than compelling. John Claude Smith writes stories packed full of darkness, nightmare and delusion in a style that's always energetic and razor sharp. I really like what he's doing here, and at his best, Smith is truly impressive. Can't wait to see what he does next! Give me more along the lines of "Autumn in the Abyss," the title novella, and I'll be very happy indeed. Recommended for any reader of horror, and highly recommended for those who prefer stories with a transgressive edge.

Layton says

I really liked this short story collection even though it surprisingly took me a while to read. Every story was very good except the third, Le Mia Immortalia.

All in all, I liked it and thought it was pretty hard to put down when you pick it up. I guess I was just savoring the stories as I read them and didn't want to rush it. The first two, and fourth stories were the best.

4.5 out of 5

Donald Armfield says

This is some hardcore strangeness at best. Smith has takes on horror in a different way. Not the typical scare from a haunting, or vampires (you know the normal clique madness) He gives shorts with powerful story telling such as;

Autumn in the Abyss: (Title novella) In the search of an ugly man during the Beatnik days with (Burroughs, Ginsberg, & Bowels) and turns it in too an hallucination of weird horror.

Broken Teacup: Thinking with your ****other brain**** can lead to eternal death, you better show her love when she crosses your path. Read this and find out who "SHE" is.

Becoming Human: Evil has a new name. Krell is a mad man and needs to be laid to rest....or something to make him suffer.

Those are my top favorites the title novella I had a huge interest in, since I have gotten into the Beatnik writings. I have a list of authors from the genre to checkout one day. This collection needs to be read by all!!
