



Speculative Faction Book Review

Book Title	Norylyska Groans
Author	Michael R Fletcher & Clayton W Snyder
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Stars	

You know, in advance, any story from either of these two authors is going to be violent and bloody. It's a given. They don't hold back. Well, be prepared for it to get worse. Because this partnership creates violence and gore – squared! This is not a story for the squeamish. But it is one helluva story all the same. I loved it.

Set in a Tsarist Russia, in a wintery apocalyptic setting, its backdrop is bleak. Human life is without value. In the first page someone is chewed up in a meatgrinder. No one cares. This event sets the scene for a story about corruption, crime and vengeance. Everyone behaves in established ways because there is no choice. Survival is like that.

This story's greatest assets are its characters. They are vivid, desperate people. Gen has been a soldier, struggling to cope with the memories of experiences in the war. (PTSD is not something anyone bothers about in this world.) But memories are important to this story, as I'll explain in a moment. The story is also seen through the eyes of Kat. A young woman cowed by a dominant patriarchy until given an opportunity to become a different type of person. They are surrounded by others, all original, distinct and morally grey.

The premise of the story centres on the idea that memories can be taken from others and stored within stones. These memories are then accessed by others, for whatever reason. To hijack the old adage, memories maketh the man. Or woman. The wearer of these memory stones can live different experiences, with no memory after they're taken off. They become a useful weapon. They also become a valuable historical record.

The arcs of Gen and Kat is one of huge change. Their paths eventually meet as they navigate routes to find answers to questions linked to the memory stones. In doing so, Gen especially, is forced to torture his victims. Either under orders from his criminal bosses or to find information needed to survive. Torture that is graphic and highly imaginative. Fight sequences are visceral.

The thing is, the violence is essential to the plot. It reflects the savagery of life. It reminds us that civilisation is no more than a veneer. Scrape it away, this is what you get. With what's currently happening in eastern Europe, it is a vivid, salutary reminder.

And the twist at the end? Oh yes. This is a story that leaves you reeling. It is wonderful.