



Speculative Fiction Book Review

Book Title	The Maleficent Seven
Author	Cameron Johnston
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Stars	

The impact of the best books is when you're left wanting more at the end. I deliberately slowed down reading the final chapters – the last part of the battle – so I could savour it all. But that impact I mentioned goes further, it leaves you thinking about what you've read. As a reader you marvel at the ingenuity and skill of the writer and evaluate the issues and concepts they've introduced.

The Maleficent Seven is one of those books. I enjoyed it from the opening chapter and my satisfaction grew as the story developed. The premise of the story is pretty obvious from the distorted title. Like Akira Kurosawa's Seven Samurai and its western remake, seven baddies defend a small town from an even greater villain. As the tagline states, *Seven bloodthirsty monsters. One town. Their last hope.* It's a variation on The Suicide Squad (a better one). So, what makes this story so good?

Firstly, the chemistry of the characters generates an effective chain reaction. Everyone hates everyone else, simple. Yet it's not. Hatred and vengeance is affected by shifting motives and circumstances. People can change, even the evil ones. It brings about cautious allegiances and delayed betrayal. Evil can take many forms in order to achieve its goal.

In other words, you never know where you are. Expected the unexpected. This is what Cameron Johnston does so well in this story. You never know where the characters are going to take the story. Their relationships bring a deeper level of satisfaction with the barbed insults, the threats, the increasing antipathy. You're left laughing at times.

Secondly, the ethical issues are brilliantly dealt with in this story. Sure, everyone is bad. They've all done terrible, awful things. Some more than others, some with a great deal of enjoyment. I love how evil is placed on a scale in this story. Some of the baddies may be a mere 3 out of 10 in the evil stakes, their actions might be justified by ignorance or cultural differences. Others earn a whopping 10 out of 10 because they have no redeeming features and they deserve everything they get. And sometimes that is a truly terrible fate! By the end you're left reviewing the meaning of Evil, if it's done for the right reasons, is it so bad?

Thirdly, the quality of writing is sublime. This is an epic story, narrated over a broad landscape with a cast of Shakespearian proportions. The author glides over the events, skilfully giving us insightful moments before carrying us on to the next awful event. There is a lovely wry tone to the writing which alleviates some of the "badness" we witness.

All in all, this is a thoroughly enjoyable story, filled with villainous characters you will love to hate sometimes - and cheer on at others. Cameron Johnston goes from strength to strength.