


Speculative Fiction Book Review

Book Title	Flesh Eater
Author	Travis Riddle
Date	September 2020
Stars	

OK, I'm going to make the declaration here and now. I believe Travis Riddle is currently the most original fantasy writer in the genre. It's not an idle assessment. Let me explain my thinking.

The fantasy genre is huge, with lots of sub-genres that speculate about a range of different premises on which sit variations made up of unusual populations and places. There are writers plying stories which invent new technologies, new forms of magic, variations on themes about characters and settings. On that we can all be agreed.

For me, Travis Riddle dispenses with those things and starts afresh. I've stopped having expectations when I turn to the first page on his novels and this decision was reinforced by the opening to *Flesh Eaters*. It's not his opening line either, where he hooks us with the statement, *'The first time Coal Ereness spoke to his father's ghost was the night the man died.'* It's a great line, one that sticks in the memory. But it doesn't encapsulate the originality of this story.

It's what follows. Coal watches a burlesque show. There's no spoiler here if I quote from the first page, *'There was a single dancer on stage, a pretty racoon covered in white fur. A rarity. Her stage name was, appropriately, White Rose.'*

Yeah, there's the original premise. Not just one but every character in the story is an animal.

OK, there's stories which have precedence here but invariably with human (or human-ish) characters. Not here. There are characters which, like Coal, are foxes. There are anteaters, bears, hedgehogs, woodpeckers, bats. No human beings.

The question that struck me as I came to terms with this unusual premise was this – can you relate to characters when they are animals? Do our audience sympathies stretch that far? The answer is, yes, when each character is vividly brought to life so their qualities are what define them and their actions. *I want to emphasize, this is not an attempt to anthropomorphize these characters.* Their mannerisms, behaviours, their social cultures, define them and they are representative of their species. For instance, there are moments of affection between two characters which are utterly non-human that shift us out of any conventional world and remind us we are the aliens in it. The clever decision taken by the author is to leave descriptions vague enough for us to imagine what the characters look like. Sure, there are references to arms and legs and clothes but also to feathers and tongues and spines.



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I loved the story too. It has an unusual narrative that isn't always about the dramatic and exciting set pieces. It's another facet about any Travis Riddle story which I enjoy so much. He takes time out to put us into social and cultural settings that help make them unique. He turns a meal into something special and unique, a festival likewise. They don't have to be there but they add a certain eccentricity that makes the story stand out – and makes it all the more real.

I don't want to mislead you with that last point. There is excitement galore in this story, it's full of action which is fast-paced and unpredictable. Tension ramps up as the narrative progresses because we're made to care so much for our hero, Coal. He's a wonderful character, friendly and charming, courageous when he needs to be but otherwise a coward. His relationship with Ilio, the woodpecker, is particularly delightful and heart-warming.

I read this book in five days. It's testimony to the pace of the novel but also its originality that had me wondering where it would go next. It's also grabbed a space in my Top 5 novels of 2020.

At the front of this book Travis is kind enough to quote part of my review of Spit and Song. I said, '*We need more of Travis Riddle's imagination. He's a revolutionary in this genre.*' Not only do I stand by that statement, I believe with *Flesh Eater* he has gone one better. I predict his revolution will lead to others emulating his fresh take on fantasy. For now, I repeat my verdict. Travis Riddle is currently the most original fantasy writer in the genre.

