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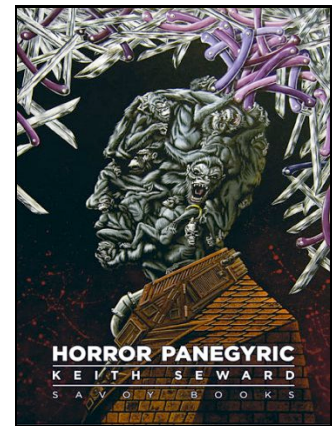
Keywords: Popular culture, criticism, cult

Title: Horror Panegyric

Author: Keith Seward

Publisher: Savoy Books

ISBN: 0861301188



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Latest in Savoy's ongoing series of books about Savoy is this Lord Horror sampler and essay, a handsomely bound hardback boasting an Arcimboldo-inspired John Coulthart cover painting of the great man himself. As for the contents, you get four extracts from the Lord Horror books plus Seward's appreciation and a Horror timeline for under a tenner, which brings this as close as Savoy have got to populist publishing since AC/DC and Kiss.

Lord Horror certainly deserves critical appraisal but Seward's tone is altogether too casual for the job and his arguments unlikely to convince any but the converted - or even many of the converted. Much of the essay is written in the first person - 'It's a good name, and I thought Motherfuckers was good too' - and consists mainly of Seward attempting to categorise the Lord Horror books, a daunting and probably pointless task: surely the work's category implosion is itself half the fun? Reiterations of similarities between Horror and works in the accepted canon of Great Art (Burroughs, Swift, Bosch) are swiftly wearying - can't Horror stand on his own daintily shod feet? - and the pretzels Seward contorts himself into while trying to place the morality of the books surely miss the point: if Horror's 'about' anything it's the transformative power of an imagination weaned on Fudge & Speck, rock'n'roll, fascist iconography and unwarranted incarceration.

Seward's final call to arms, for a US publisher to publish the Horror books as a 'nicely

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designed line of paperbacks' for broader consumption, is baffling - this is never going to be mainstream fare. I imagine sixties readers would have had similar problems believing that a handful of Burroughs titles would be stocked by every branch of Borders today, but Burroughs never baited his readers as relentlessly as Britton and Butterworth: their most extreme imagery may be tempered and finally redeemed by an imagination prodigious enough to join the dots between Auschwitz and Oz, but this is still dangerous stuff. Calls to add Lord Horror to the academic canon seem similarly misplaced: academic appraisal is sure to draw the sting from even the most brutal work, while Savoyards have long celebrated the obscure, unsung and hopelessly irredeemable - what better place for their own work than shoulder to shoulder with the likes of David Lindsay and Robert Aickman?

Seward does make the astute point that Savoy is 'in a weird place, like one of those soldiers lost in a forest and still fighting the war after it's over'. As fantastic fiction Lord Horror continues to impress; as censor-baiting statement in an age of beheadings and bukake piped directly into British homes, perhaps its relevance has lessened. And it's hard to fault the enthusiasm of the essay, which if nothing else is likely to prompt a re-examination of the Horror canon. Happily the extracts published here show Horror at his strongest: like a lacklustre support band, Seward's appreciation only serves to make Britton and Butterworth's work shine ever brighter.

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