

A Journey into the Strange: Review of *Apocalypse Now Now*

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REVIEW:

Apocalypse Now Now

Charlie Human

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Apocalypse Now Now, Charlie Human's debut novel, is a fast-paced urban fantasy set in the somewhat unlikely backdrop of Cape Town. It challenges traditional genres of South African fiction, and completely blows them out of the water. There is currently, I feel, a certain comfort zone in South African Fiction – certain safe bets in regard to publishing, especially in regard to genres, topics, and plot material. This novel is especially far from those norms, and despite its myriad number of minor to major shortcomings, it blazes a trail for the entire genre of South African speculative fiction, bringing a much needed breath of fresh air to the current landscape.

Baxter Zevcenko is a not so normal sixteen-year-old. He attends Westridge High, which is located in Cape Town's southern suburbs, and he appears to be a normal sixteen-year-old boy. On the one hand, he has your average school boy problems, has a girlfriend and generally tries to give his teachers a hard time, on the other hand, he runs an underground organisation in his school called, 'The Spider'. The Spider has two purposes: first it deals primarily in pornography and facilitates a variety of genres and fetishes, ranging from 'Vintage' to the quickly growing new genre of Creature porn (Not as bad as it sounds, while at the same time probably being worse...). Secondly, it tries to micromanage the two other factions in the school, both school yard gangs consisting of the stereotypical elements of the student body. Through these endeavours, he hopes to establish a Machiavellian advantage over them, and in the long run, make 'The Spider' as profitable as possible.

It soon becomes clear that these details are merely backstory, as the plot shoots into full gear when Baxter's girlfriend abruptly disappears, and it is quickly feared that she has become the latest victim of the "mountain killer", a serial killer that slits his victim's throats, and then carves an eye into their foreheads. With Esme's life in danger, Baxter decides to do the first selfless act of his life, and puts himself at risk in order to find and rescue her.

From there, the novel only becomes stranger and more spectacular. Human plunges us into the darkest depths of Cape Town supernatural underground. In an attempt to find Esme, Baxter resorts to hiring Jackson Ronin, a supernatural bounty hunter and ex-South African special operative, to help track her down. This leads to many strange encounters with denizens that are both very alien to Cape Town's landscape, while at the same time seeming strangely at home. From bloodthirsty Elementals that supply illegal electricity to the Cape's townships at the cost of animal sacrifice, to Tokoloshe's becoming the superstars of the questionable pornographic genre mentioned earlier, and throw in some other supernatural creatures inspired by a variety of African folklore spanning as wide as middle and west African in origin, the novel does well to demonstrate both the flexibility of Human's imagination, and that of the supernatural raw material he is working with.

The novel has strengths and weaknesses. The protagonist is a good example of both of these as Baxter is an engaging character, and can at times be both relatable and alienating to the reader.

His most interesting trait is by far the fact that he is an extremely unreliable narrator, and at times, the novel itself draws attention to this fact, often prompting the question, how much of this is real, and how much is just a schizophrenic fancy. This adds a lot to Baxter's personality, while introducing a variety of interesting themes and considerations into the novel. However, there are a few drawbacks to this novel. At times, it feels as if Baxter is struggling for consistency. It happens rarely and briefly, but sets up a momentary contrast that can appear disconcerting to the reader when it happens. Another critique I have is that the novel seems to be a victim of its own plot pacing. The novel hurls the reader through the plot at break neck speeds, but despite this, I found myself putting the novel down more times than I wanted to. The main culprit here, I believe, is the speed and pacing, which can in other ways be considered a strength in other novels. The pace of Baxter's quest to find his girlfriend, and the sheer number of wonderfully strange and bizarre encounters, seems to happen at a consistently rapid rate. This can lead to the reader feeling either overwhelmed or burnt out. Having some build up to many of these events might also have actually hardened its eventual impact on the reader.

The novel's strengths in the end though far outweighs its weaknesses, and many readers might not notice these critiques as they plunge headlong into the psychology of Baxter's inner world, and the deliciously twisted underworld Human created. *Apocalypse Now Now* is a welcoming experience in the rather stale-growing field of South African fiction. I believe it will open up an entirely new world for both the writers and the readers in this country, as it explores the much underutilized genres of speculative and horror fiction. At the same time, this kind of genre successfully shows us that there is more than one way to examine the South African condition, and that sometimes the lens can be much stranger than you first expect.

- Wihan van Wyk