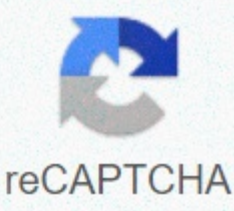




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## The girl next door book review

Whew, where to start? Girl Next Door, nearly a quarter of a century since its publication, has reached the notoriety several other modern horror novels can match. It was Dallas Mayr's third novel, written under his now-famous pseudonym Jack Ketchum. Now I haven't even heard of Ketchum or this book until the last five or six years, I think, around the time it was reprinted in The Leisure Book. None of his other vintage-era books, Off Season (1980), Cover (1987), or She Wakes (1989), seem familiar to me, and he didn't start receiving the nominated Bram Stoker Award until the mid-90s, by which time I stopped reading contemporary horror, so it seems that the book's reputation has grown due to reprinting and the Internet. That doesn't mean he's not deserved as he is. Oh, or not. Girl Next Door is loosely based on the mad curd in the 1965 torture/murder case of 16-year-old Sylvia Likens. While some readers, if not most, may balk at the depths to which Ketchum goes to recreate what happened, he fills his book with enough compelling details that the issue never seems exploited or cheap. Ketchum is, for better or worse, a reliable and insightful guide to how he delves into these places of heartlessness and cruelty found not supernatural or extraterrestrial, but, perhaps, literally, next door. He puts it all in simple strong prose, which neither titillates nor overestimates; he directs his words and images in a way a cheap and stupid writer - whose ranks in the horror genre are legions - could only ever dream. This is told by the first person David, 30 years after the terrible events that occurred when he was about 12 years old. His regret and sadness and confusion moved everything. After posiluting his three failed marriages, he tries to tell the story. The whole story, without faltering, when teenager Meg Loughlin and her 11-year-old sister Susan come to live with David's next door neighbor, Chandlers, after the girls' parents were killed in a car accident. Ruth Chandler, a distant relationship with Loughlin girls, middle-aged, heavy smokers and drinkers, but not without her appearance, is well known to all children living on a tree-lined, dead-end street, as parents who will give beer to them while they hang out with their pre-teen sons Willie, Woofer, and Donny. Her husband left the family a year earlier, fleeing with another woman (this explains some of his future actions towards Meg). David becomes smitten with Meg in a not exactly romantic way; he's three years younger than her anyway, but spends some beautiful, memorable moments with her at the beginning of the story. Cute, sweet, well done, desire, without knowing what one craves. Therefore, this descent is more upsetting. When the boys try out the tree behind her window to spy on Meg undressing and deny it, David's answer is bitter and I could have smashed something. I could have torn that house into bits. This surprised me; it could have come straight from one of James Ellroy's noir crime novels, for sure (more on Ellroy later). Overlook Connection Press 2002 The hardest thing when reading a book is that you know where it's going. When it happens – when Ruth's abuse of Meg begins – it happens quickly, but it also happens slowly if you know what I mean. The inevitable doom thread pall through an early narrative, malevolence hovering over each scene of innocence. He's waiting. He's waiting. This will not be denied. There is simply no other word on what happens: torture, physical and mental and sexual. First capped by eating her, Meg then physically ignores Ruth in front of David and the other boys. Outraged not only by the measure, and with the help of her son, Ruth ties her into an abandoned bomb shelter in the basement and horror begins. This goes beyond the horror genre to what Douglas Winter said: that horror is not a genre, but an emotion. An emotion that will settle down and stay for a while. There are things you know you're going to die before you tell you what you know you should have died before you ever saw it. I used to watch and see. As Ketchum structures the novel as a troubled adult looking back at the traumatic event of his past, Girl Next Door reminded me of Stephen King's novella Body (found in various seasons from 1982, and the basis for Stand By Me. I guess I don't need to say that). Still completely haunted by Ruth, adult David glids sometimes and explains why this or why, and especially how he was able to stand, while Ruth organized such horror and why his friends went along. And it just makes sense. Children are helpless. Children should endure humiliation. Adults control every way of life of children. I think this is particularly convincing for children growing up in the early 1960s, when adult rule was a divine order. The gap between the world of children and the adult world has been huge and unbridled. Why didn't he try to tell you? Meg doesn't actually, once, have a cop who doesn't take her very seriously. As a result, the boys begin to feel a vague contempt for her. (Let's not forget Matt Dillon's immortal words that teenage riot classics over the edge: A child who talks about another child is a dead child. Because, as David reminds us: Shit, [adults] can just dump a river if they want. We were just kids. We were property. We belonged to our parents, body and soul. This meant that we were condemned in the face of any real danger from the adult world and this meant hopelessness, humiliation and anger. Children know better than trying to tell. Telling is. Telling even worse makes the situation worse. The story is offensive and deceit. Children even play what they call The Game, a dubious past time that when Ruth learns He wants to play. And it makes it even easier for kids to go together... It's a whole game, right? If Ruth says it's all right, well, it's good for kids, no matter what is done on the body (you said that we can cut her, Mrs. Chandler). That is when David admits he flicked a slow mental switch [and] turned off [Meg] completely. Because how could she be so stupid to still think that a cop was going sideways with a child in front of an adult? So I think Ketchum isn't dead on the job to get into a mindset that would become a willing to witness hell, even drink coke and play crazy8s while doing it. This is entirely plausible. 2005 Leisure Books reprint so other neighborhood kids get involved and everything is just normal, they spend boring summer afternoons in the chandlers basement, hey, didja hear they got the girl there and they... do things for her. Describing sniggering remarks and abandoned humiliations and then distressing cruelty unflinching details, Ketchum is thoroughly dispassionate, even when things turn, no wonder sexual young boys, as well as Ruth and even a young neighborhood girl (initially Ruth restricts the boys to touch Meg after she was deprived, not because molestation or rape is wrong, but ... for who knows what diseases this pancreas has. Do you just feel your throat close? Okay, okay. It was David wondering if all this would have happened if Meg hadn't been so beautiful if her body wasn't young and healthy and strong, but ugly, fat, flabby. Maybe not. There is an inevitable punishment of an outsider. But he rethemsety how he looks back at this: But I find it more likely that it's because she was beautiful and strong, and we didn't make Ruth and all of us did it with her. Make a kind of decision about that beauty, because of what he meant to us and what he didn't want. Note that sayingTerror, not Horror It's such an insight that allows The Girl Next Door to work so well when you think you couldn't: It's true, it's how people who do these things think. Debase, degrade, deflower. When the words I FUCK FUCK ME burned on the stomach - yes, you read that right - it's as if the boys are losing interest; Meg has been reduced to nothing. David tries to help her escape, and he fails. He's trying to tell his father, then his mother, but he can't find the words to express something like that... So. I mean, don't I? Knowing you know all the time? David understands that he's the only one who has the imagination to imagine what's going on in the enormity. I think it makes this book stand out from other extreme horror novels. Darkness may be over, but it's true and true. You can't be surprised to learn that I read Girl Next Door in one sitting in a white heat rush, completely forced and spelling, my eyes lit and wet to the end. I could feel fat in my chest and shoulders. But it's not without its faults, and I can't really go to the main because it's a spoiler, but I understand it. So. I've seen it in other books and movies. I can't blame Ketchum or, I think. But none of the failures is the result of a subject or graphic detail; this is an extreme novel made right, with understanding and honesty I found completely sincere. Look at it again, if you forgot how stupid it was it's not a tawdry paperback filled with high school horror hijinks, as clueless cover means; there is no fun or funny cheese. In fact, the art of the cover of Warner Books is one of the most insidious, primarily paper horror covers, an insult to both readers and the book itself (I don't blame artist Lisos Falkenstern; it's likely that she didn't know what cover she illustrated). What the hell is wrong? Someone who doesn't give shit about books, that's for sure. In some Amazon reviews I skimmed after finishing I saw that many people hated the fact that Ketchum invented the Likens case, but what? What Ketchum does with the novel is quite similar to what Ellroy did with The Black Dahlia: take a case of real-life murderer cruelty and fancy it, reinventing the characters to probe the psychology of those involved so that they are inaccessible to us normally, so that you can understand the weakness, fear, rage that can lead to such incomprehensible actions. In this regard, Ketchum's book has more in common with crime fiction than with horror fiction. Which is absolutely fine with me. Horror fiction or crime novel or a bit of hellish concoction, and maybe something else entirely, Girl Next Door gets my biggest but most reserved recommendation. Recommendations.