



Burnt Black Suns

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In this fourth collection of stories, Simon Strantzas establishes himself as one of the most dynamic figures in contemporary weird fiction. The nine stories in this volume exhibit Strantzas's wide range in theme and subject matter, from the Lovecraftian "Thistle's Find" to the Robert W. Chambers homage "Beyond the Banks of the River Seine." But Strantzas's imagination, while drawing upon the best weird fiction of the past, ventures into new territory in such works as "On Ice," a grim novella of arctic horror; "One Last Bloom," a grisly account of a scientific experiment gone hideously awry; and the title story, an emotionally wrenching account of terror and loss in the baked Mexican desert. With this volume, Strantzas lays claim to be discussed in the company of Caitlín R. Kiernan and Laird Barron as one of the premier weird fictionists of our time.

Cover artwork by Santiago Caruso

Burnt Black Suns Details

Date : Published May 2014 by Hippocampus Press

ISBN : 9781614980834

Author : Simon Strantzas

Format : Paperback 308 pages

Genre : Horror, Short Stories, Fantasy, Weird Fiction, Anthologies, Fiction, Lovecraftian

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From Reader Review Burnt Black Suns for online ebook

Chrystral Hays says

I bought this in search of the New Weird.

The stories are not bad, but more straight horror or sci-fi...they don't have the emotional texture I associate with New Weird.

They might be considered a little weird, but not really.

It's a good enough collection, but tempered by my expectations, did not seem outstanding.

Nicholas Kaufmann says

After four collections, weird fiction author Simon Strantzas is still going strong. Maybe even better than ever. Strantzas's brand of weird fiction draws from numerous sources -- Lovecraft, Chambers, Ligotti, Aickman, Barron -- but thematically they are unmistakably his own. His protagonists are deeply flawed people, usually fragile men who have suffered some terrible emotional blow and are making the wrong choices to set it right, and who uncover unknowable and relentless occult secrets that shatter what's left of them. Of the nine stories present in BURNT BLACK SUNS, the ones I liked the most are "By Invisible Hands," about a senile old puppet maker who is charged with creating a new and terrible puppet by a secretive client; "Emotional Dues," which follows a struggling artist as he falls into the hands of an eccentric benefactor; and my favorite of them all, the centerpiece novella "One Last Bloom," which is a stunning piece of scientific horror with an ending that packs a wallop. Any of Strantzas's collections are a good jumping-in point, but BURNT BLACK SUNS presents the author at his most confident. Highly recommended.

Seregil of Rhiminee says

Originally published at Risingshadow.

Simon Strantzas' Burnt Black Suns is a collection of weird stories. It's the author's fourth short story collection (his previous collections are Beneath the Surface, Cold to the Touch and Nightingale Songs).

Burnt Black Suns is an excellent short story collection. It contains weird fiction stories that range from the modern Lovecraftian Thistle's Find to One Last Bloom that's pure scientific horror at its best and most effective.

I can honestly say that it's been a while since I've been this impressed by a weird fiction collection. I've read lots of weird fiction collections and I've enjoyed reading all of them, but collections like this one are rare, because all the stories in it are excellent and worth reading. There are no weak stories in this collection.

Burnt Black Suns contains the following nine stories (it also contains a foreword by Laird Barron):

- On Ice
- Dwelling on the Past
- Strong as a Rock

- By Invisible Hands
- One Last Bloom
- Thistle's Find
- Beyond the Banks of the River Seine
- Emotional Dues
- Burnt Black Suns

Simon Strantzas uses several classic weird fiction elements in a modern way in these stories. He writes creepy, disturbing and unsettling stories that can be categorized as weird fiction, horror and dark fantasy. He easily conjures up nightmarish images and visions that are difficult to forget, and shows his readers how the characters in his stories come face to face with unnatural and supernatural threats.

These stories are just like good old-fashioned weird fiction stories, because they're weird and unsettling stories. Some of them are creepy while others are disturbing - there's originality, creepiness and disturbing elements in them.

Here's a bit more information about the stories:

On Ice: A story about men who travel to Melville Island to explore fossils. The oil companies did a research there, but they weren't looking for rocks and didn't notice certain things. Some of the men feel that they're confined there. Soon they notice that something strange is going on there...

Dwelling on the Past: Harvey has lost his daughter, Emily, and works for the Henco Industries (his sorrow for Emily is handled well by the author). The Henco Industries have problems with the Six Nations protestors. The Six Nations have been digging for something that looks almost like a dwelling...

Strong as a Rock: Garrison and Rex are brothers who have lost their mother. Rex takes Garrison to climb rocks, because he loves rock climbing. When Garrison injures himself, they begin to search for a hospital...

By Invisible Hands: An old puppetmaker has sacrificed all for his puppets. He wishes that the end would come for him. Dr. Toth contacts him and he finds out that Dr. Toth has needs of his services...

One Last Bloom: A story about Randal and Olivia who work with Dr. Markowitz at the Microbiology Department. Randal and Olivia are worried about the missing Dr. Markowitz and Linden. Dr. Markowitz and Linden have supposedly died while doing underwater research. Soon things escalate into a scientific nightmare as Randal and Olivia begin to investigate what Dr. Markowitz sent them...

Thistle's Find: Owen is acquainted with Dr. Thistle and visits him when he's in trouble. The doctor shows Owen something that he's built...

Beyond the Banks of the River Seine: A story about Valise and Henri who are composers and friends. Valise is more successful than Henri. When Henri becomes obsessed with a project, Valise begins to worry about his friend...

Emotional Dues: An intriguing story about Girder and his paintings. Girder decides to approach Mr. Rasp directly and not through the gallery, so he visits Mr. Rasp and shows him one of his paintings. When Mr. Rasp invites Girder to stay with him, things become weirder...

Burnt Black Suns: Noah and pregnant Rachel travel on the bus to Astilla de la Cruz. They're trying to find

Noah's ex-wife, Sonia, and his son, Eli. When they arrive to their destination, the weather is hot. Noah and Rachel meet a priest who tells them of old gods and a cult, the Tletliztl...

It's nice that Simon Strantzas has a talent for keeping the readers interested in his stories. He gradually builds tension and then shocks his readers with horrifying revelations. For example, the journey towards the end in the final story, *Burnt Black Suns*, is amazing and when the ending is reached, it's a brilliant and unforgettable ending.

Simon Strantzas writes fluently about love, loss, sorrow, melancholy and life in general. His descriptions of love, loss and sorrow portray skillfully how the characters feel about their loved ones and objects of affection. For example, in *One Last Bloom* the author writes well about Randal and how he feels about Olivia. In *Beyond the Banks of River Seine* the author writes longingly about Valise's feelings towards Elyse, and in *Burnt Black Suns* he writes about Noah's longing and desperate search for his son.

Simon Strantzas writes about relationships and difficult choices in a realistic and unflinching way. For example, in *Burnt Black Suns* the author writes perfectly about what kind of a strain Noah's search for his son causes on his relationship with Rachel. When Rachel asks Noah to make a choice between her and Eli, Noah acts in a desperate, but realistic way that reflects his feelings.

On Ice and *Thistle's Find* deserve a special mention, because they're wonderfully Lovecraftian stories. As a big fan of Lovecraftian stories (and stories containing Lovecraftian elements) I was delighted to read these stories, because they were excellent and unsettling stories. These stories differ greatly from each other, but they're both well written stories. *On Ice* is a perfectly written story about Arctic nightmare and what happens to the exploration team when they travel across the Arctic and find out that something's following them. *Thistle's Find* is a weird and disturbing story about Dr. Thistle and what he has built and brought into his house. Both of these stories are among the best Lovecraftian stories ever written.

I love the way Simon Strantzas writes about wilderness and nature. The characters in his stories travel across a harsh icy and snowy landscape, go mountain climbing and wander in the scorching desert where the sun burns relentlessly. His way of looking at nature and its forces feels both natural and threatening, because nature can be cruel and unforgiving and nobody can do anything to change that. People just have to be prepared to accept the harsh realities that come with travelling in the wilderness.

I find it interesting that the author writes about culture (music and paintings) in an intriguing way in two of his stories:

- Music plays an important role in *Beyond the Banks of River Seine*. It was interesting to read about Valise's success and how his friend wasn't as lucky as him when it came to music and composing. Reading about Henri's sudden change and obsession with his project was fascinating, because the project turned out to be a big surprise for Valise and others.

- Paintings play an important role in *Emotional Dues*, because it's a story about a painter called Girder and how he becomes acquainted with Mr. Rasp. Art is a way for Girder to address his emotions, so he paints what he feels. Mr. Rasp's pleasure in his paintings makes him happy, because nobody has ever called his works perfect. The author writes interestingly about the relationship between Girder and Mr. Rasp and the sudden turn it takes.

In the foreword Laird Barron mentions body horror. I agree with him on what he says about the foray into the realm of body horror, because body horror is strongly present in this collection. If there are readers who

aren't familiar with body horror, I can mention that body horror is a subgenre of horror fiction in which horror is principally derived from the graphic destruction or degeneration of the body (decay, disease, mutation etc). There are a few scenes in these stories that reminded me of Clive Barker's bold descriptions of body horror and certain films directed by David Cronenberg.

It's great that Simon Strantzas writes unflinchingly about body horror and uses it effectively and in moderation, because there are authors who tend to use body horror elements too much and lose sight of what's important when they begin to describe the changes in human bodies. As an example of Simon Strantzas' ability to write body horror I can mention that it was fascinating to read what happened to Olivia in *One Last Bloom*.

Although the stories in this collection are modern stories, it's easy to see that the author has been greatly influenced by classic weird fiction and old horror stories. These stories owe a debt to the works of such authors as H. P. Lovecraft, Robert Aickmann and Robert W. Chambers. It's possible to see that Thomas Ligotti and Ramsey Campbell have also affected the author's writing style.

There are many readers and a few authors who have said that this is the new golden age of dark fiction and weird fiction. I agree with this statement, because there are many authors who have published excellent horror and weird fiction stories during the last couple of years. This collection is a proof of this statement and its accuracy, because it's full of excellent stories.

Based on this collection I can say that Simon Strantzas is one of the best modern weird fiction authors. In my opinion he's equal to Laird Barron, Richard Gavin, Livia Llewellyn and Caitlín R. Kiernan, because his stories rival their stories. He's a master storyteller and deserves more recognition among horror and dark fantasy readers.

I have to mention that the cover art by Santiago Caruso looks great. It's one of the best cover images I've ever seen on weird fiction book covers.

Everybody who loves weird stories and weird fiction, should take a look at this collection and put it on their reading list. It's an excellent collection to dip into, because the creepy and weird stories offer both chills and thrills in equal measures to the readers. If you're looking for new weird fiction to read, please read this collection - you'll love it.

Highly recommended!

Paul says

New old-school horror. And by "old-school" I mean Aickman, Ligotti, Chambers, Lovecraft... but Simon certainly puts his own stamp on the weird proceedings. There is a wonderful accumulation of voice, atmosphere, and dread as you wind through the collection, which ends with an emotionally authentic novella about grief and loss.

Theresa says

I know there are a ton of five star reviews of this book, but please do not be swayed out of six bucks like I was.

The writing is amateurish, the plots dull and predictable. These stories are riddled with continuity issues and there was much redundancy in Strantzas' seemingly desperate attempts to create a haunting, melancholic atmosphere through his flat protagonists' inner thoughts.

A lot of the selections read like this:

(Insert name) was so troubled. Look how haunted by the past he/she is. (Name) bumps into an ancient crone (or native, or professor) who says 'Hey, your guts (or your friend's guts, or your pregnant wife's guts) are going to explode into a million pieces because of this old magic spell that no one knows about.

Some really garbled middle parts happen here.

BAM.

Exploding guts.

What a fucking joke.

C McDaniel says

I struggled for a moment or two before rating this collection; it was very close to three rather than four stars for me, but I settled with four because, aside from the issues I'll get to in a moment, it's a solid collection of genuinely creepy Weird short fiction. Most of the stories have great atmosphere and a few promote that "feeling of dread" that I look for (and simultaneously love and hate) in the Horror fiction that I enjoy. The first story, "On Ice" is great, Mythos-inspired fun and is full of those sorts of "ice-locked" moments of dread, even if the reveal of the creatures was a disappointment ...for me, at least. There are numerous allusions to the Mythos in this collection but they are interwoven in a very light-handed way so that it avoids the cheesy, Lovecraft-inspired "pulp effect" that some Mythos stories can have. Strantzas does a nice job of varying writing style and tone to suit the spirit of each story, and there are some really interesting "takes" on concepts/tropes from Lovecraft's work, e.g., the "door" created by Dr. Thistle as it relates to the Resonator; the variation on the ghoul he offers; the combination of Innsmouth folk and the ice-locked setting of At the Mountains of Madness.

All of that good aside, I just want to mention a couple of concerns that I had in case anyone is using my opinion as any sort of guide or suggestion, etc. (thanks for reading, if you are) or if they want to discuss the reading.

The first is related to self-awareness/consciousness observable in the writing. I love Horror; I don't think much is off limits when it comes to content, either--it just needs proper treatment. However, weaving-in certain ideas/concepts requires, for my enjoyment, a sort of observable awareness from the writer--even if they are presenting the entire tale through the p.o.v. of a horrible human being. It's tricky, I know, and maybe I'm making too much of it, but "Thistle's Find" was extraordinarily frustrating for me and almost compelled me to stop reading--and that would have been a shame. I loved the "door" device in the story. I loved the setting, and Thistle is as disgusting of a character as you'll find (he brought to mind "The Picture in the

House," as well). I was simply disappointed, though, by the truly strange--and not in the good way--direction the story took. I did not expect to encounter ghoul-raping; although, to be fair, we don't "see" the act but are made very aware of Thistle's seemingly long-term practice of it with the poor creature he's captured. I didn't see any of the details related to it as necessary at all to the Horror at play or to the progression of the story. It was just so distracting and odd. And why in the world would it make sense for a character to automatically jump to sex-trafficking if they've discovered a race of humanoid creatures accessible through a dimensional gateway? I didn't get enough character development on the two men to make head or tails of that sort of bizarre leap. I mean, am I to just assume it's logical that men, if given access to a girl-like creature who isn't quite human but still sexually desirable, will want to rape it/her? It just seemed to fall apart for me at that point, and that frustrated me.

I think the story took the most un-Lovecraftian turn I've ever encountered in a story whose roots were clearly (and thoughtfully) Lovecraftian when the protagonist destroyed the machine. I can't imagine anyone who loves Lovecraft advocating the destruction of the portal/door device--even if it meant suicide. (You could see other worlds, for god's sake!)

I won't harp any longer on that story, but--again--I think it bothered/s me so much due to what felt like its wasted potential. What's observable in large amounts in that story, with regards to what I call "problems in awareness," is observable to a much smaller degree in many of the other stories, as well.

Other than the issues with Thistle and unnecessary plot-props, I just want to mention an issue that I had with race in the collection. A prime example of it comes with "Dwelling on the Past." I understand the need to establish setting and context--this situation into which to thrust the struggling protagonist relied upon an excavation site, high-tension, etc. I didn't "get," however, the use of the Six Nations as (what seemed to me) "mysterious" props for the tale. It smacked too much of the "magical/murderous Native" trope that goes too far back in Literature to even begin to discuss. I like the qualities of that tale that make it Weird, of course--the resistance to "show the monster/horror," the dread the progression of the tale inspires, and connections to something "bigger" at play; I just wonder, as I do with the treatment of the ghoul/girl in Thistle, if the author is consciously interweaving some of these ideas and intentionally avoiding a nod towards awareness of what effect they might have or is simply not aware of what he's doing. It happened to a lesser degree in a few other spots, as well. I'd rather it be clear that an author is intentionally posturing a character as racist, see a purpose for the racism as an integral part of the story (so that it's brought under a critical lens, etc.) or have it be clear that s/he shares those perspectives than have it appear to be thoughtlessly accidental or just a carelessly undeveloped aspect of the tale (if that makes sense).

Again, I may be picky with this collection, but it's only because I did get a lot of enjoyment from it, on whole. It's good Weird fiction. It's when I find the good stuff, though, that I tend to knit-pick, I guess. I do recommend it, and I would love to chat-through a few of the stories with anyone who reads it--just to get a better grasp on my own issues with some of the stories.

C.M. Muller says

The compulsion to read a book for a second time, directly after finishing its last page for the first, strikes me now and again. More often than not, however, I shy away from the impulse, only too aware of all the new offerings which lay in wait. Not so with "Burnt Black Suns". I simply had to re-examine these nine finely textured tales—and I am glad that I did, for they bloom even more darkly on the second go-round.

It is clear that Simon Strantzas has spent a substantial portion of his existence poring over the volumes that comprise the Library of Weird Fiction. Aickman, Barker, Klein, Ligotti, Lovecraft: these are just a few of the scribes who come to mind; their shades are here, dark gods whose strengths the author has transmuted into his own, into works powerful and new; carefully-crafted Horror, strong as rock.

"On Ice" — A group of scientists land on an island in the Arctic Ocean, searching for fossil evidence of ichthyosaur. "There is something worth finding no matter the cost," says the expedition lead. What they discover shall not be revealed here, though a certain character name (Dogan) might point you in a possible direction. Strantzas does an excellent job creating a supremely chilling atmosphere of isolation, and it is obvious that he has done his research in the realm of arctic exploration.

"Dwelling on the Past" — A "fixer" named Harvey returns to his disreputable employer (Henco Industries) to settle a land dispute between it and indigenous protesters. The protests, however, are only a front for what is truly going on, as Harvey quickly discovers during his investigations. Both "fixer" and protesters dwell on the past in their own way, and that past is anything but cheerful. Strantzas excels here in relaying the horrors of memory, and how those memories can in time bury us.

"Strong as Rock" — Two brothers, polar opposites in personality, fill the void of their mother's passing in their own unique ways. The adventurous Rex eventually lures Garrison out of his basement depression, believing that a rock-climbing expedition is just what they need in order to reconnect and "move on". As one might suspect, Garrison can't quite handle the climb and is injured in a fall—and from there the story grows increasingly surreal, as the brothers end up in a mysterious hospital in the middle of nowhere. The denouement is appropriately bleak and riffs nicely off said personalities.

"By Invisible Hands" — A supreme Thomas Ligotti tribute. On the surface we have a tale centering on an elderly puppet maker lamenting the passage of time and the fact that his skills have become obsolete. He is "a relic of a bygone age where creativity had value, and skill was paramount." Out of the blue he receives a handwritten note from a mysterious figure named Dr. Toth, who seeks to commission the elder in fashioning a life-sized (and quite nightmarish) marionette. This is ouroboric fiction at its finest, with a mind-numbing conclusion that completely took this reader by surprise.

"One Last Bloom" — This begins prosaically enough, focusing upon two university students (Randal and Olivia) awaiting the return of their beloved Dr. Markowitz. The professor is off researching aquatic life that exists around a super-heated "vent" off the coast of Mexico; his hope is to gain a better understanding of the resiliency of said life and apply this knowledge to assist humankind when it one day ventures into deep space. When a package containing samples arrives ahead of Dr. Markowitz, the two researchers can't resist opening what turns out to be a veritable Pandora's Box. The implications of the professor's discovery are terrifying, and the "monsters" which Strantzas has fashioned are quite literally ingenious.

"Thistle's Find" — Reminiscent of Bob Leman's classic "Window", but narrated by Holden Caulfield. Strantzas does a fine job making the reader question whether the proceedings are real or mere fantasy as seen through the eyes of two damaged souls—in this case "Doctor" Thistle and the first-person narrator, Owen, who befriended the elder in his youth, against his parents wishes, and who now returns after a long interval. Even at tale's end, one is left wondering whether the "find" is real or imagined (or a combination of both). This back and forth is quite unnerving, given the limited character history and the very real subject matter the author is bold enough to present.

"Beyond the Banks of the River Seine" — A fine historical piece centering around a pair of music students studying at the world-renowned Conservatoire in France. Valise, the narrator, recalls his best friend's descent

into madness and his subsequent (and meaningless) rise to fame after he transposes a certain diabolical play to music. This is a fine addition to the “yellow mythos” of the late Robert W. Chambers. Strantzas perfectly captures the seedy milieu of 19th century Paris, not to mention “lost” Carcosa.

“Emotional Dues” — This Barker-esque tale might well have been subtitled, “Portrait of the Artist as an Angry Young Man”. Shill is an emotionally damaged painter whose dark work attracts the attention of a wealthy patron named Elias Rasp. The corpulent and diseased Rasp entices Shill to take up residence in his palatial abode; all Shill need do is paint his emotionally-charged “masterpieces”. But the wheelchair-bound benefactor is not who he seems, and in time will become the “subject” of Shill’s final work. The ending is perfectly orchestrated and as captivating as watching Jackson Pollack fill his massive canvases, albeit with the lens of Horror affixed.

“Burnt Black Suns” — Noah and his pregnant girlfriend, Rachel, arrive in a small Mexican village, searching for his kidnapped child and the ex-wife who took him. The premise immediately brought to mind the very real struggles, a few years back, of David Goldman to retrieve his own son from Brazil. It also had the isolated and death-knell feel of the Spenser Tracy film, “Bad Day at Black Rock”. Most townsfolk want nothing to do with the couple, and it quickly becomes evident that no one can be trusted. The ending is an emotionally wrenching masterwork in itself, a “burnt offering” you will not soon forget. This is one of the most flawlessly conceived novellas, this side of T.E.D. Klein, that I have ever read.

“Burnt Black Suns” is an inspired and inspiring collection, one in which every story seems to out-perform the previous in some small way, so that by the time we set the book aside our perceptions have been altered to something as unnerving as the cover image which is our entry-point. While there were numerous aspects which impressed me about this collection (the writing was consistently excellent; the plots evolved with surety; the characters were fleshed out, or suited in flesh), I think perhaps what impressed me most was the author’s sheer ingenuity and finesse in regard to concluding his tales. This, as any writer knows, is no easy task. Strantzas (like the persistent and methodical creatures featured in a certain unnamed story from above) annihilates all past notions of Horror, making it seem so glisteningly fresh and new.

Bryan Alexander says

I carried on my October horror reading into November, moving on to *Burnt Black Suns*. This is the first full-length collection by horror writer Simon Strantzas that I’ve read. Previously I’ve listened to “Fading Light”, read by the Pseudopod podcast (one of the essential audio horror projects).

Burnt Black Suns is a satisfying mix of tales. Most unfold in an understated prose, quietly building up scenes of stress, catastrophe, and decay. The collection also offers a wide range of settings and subgenres, from tributes (to Ligotti and Chambers) to Mexico and Arctic Canada.

We can find themes repeated across these short stories. One is the damaged, self-pitying, and ultimately unlikable male narrator. Their desires are central to the plot, but the men tend to fail in their realization. This may put off readers looking for more convivial or robust protagonists. Another is the doom of scientists, sometimes mad, otherwise unlucky. A third is a general tendency towards entropy, as plots move towards tragedy, decay, collapse, and ruin.

The sense of horror here stems from that powerful entropic force. It’s often based on cosmic, Lovecraftian forces, although not always named or explained.

A word about style: Strantzas is no lyricist. His prose is very basic, not relying on unusual vocabulary or complex sentence structure. He reminds me somewhat of Tim Lebbon or T.E.D. Klein in this way. This isn't the lush prose of, say, Lovecraft or Clark Ashton Smith, nor the knotted, slippery, incantatory styles of Ligotti or Michael Cisco. Strantzas is direct. Which lets him slip in the occasional joke or surprise line to good effect:

"I love this place Sometimes, when it's windy, the howls sound like people screaming." The idea overjoyed Rex for some reason. Then he paused and looked down at his brother. "How are you doing down there?" ("Strong as a Rock", Kindle location 877)

"Beyond the Banks of the River Seine" is a tribute to Robert Chambers and *The King in Yellow*, and appeared in a collection dedicated to that author's work. The story captures much of Chambers' feel, both the sense of fantasy and also the centrality of romance.

"Burnt Black Suns" is the best story of the book, not least for its ambition. We follow a Canadian couple traveling to a small Mexican town in search of an abducted child. Our point of view character's mind unravels under stress and heat, the pressures of which also erode his very pregnant partner's support and health. Strantzas evokes the locale brilliantly, and ratchets up tension solidly. The climax, ah, (view spoiler).

"By Invisible Hands" is a nice homage to Thomas Ligotti, and appeared in the tribute collection *Grimscribe's Puppets* (my review)

"Dwelling on the Past" follows a security agent assigned to infiltrate a First Nation protest. A personal tragedy and something supernatural combine to undermine his mind. Nice pun in the title.

"Emotional Dues" concerns a desperate artist who lands a very generous benefactor, but things aren't what they seem. Some excellent characters names here: Rasp, Girder, and Nadir. Kudos to Strantzas for creating (view spoiler).

"On Ice" takes us to the arctic horror subgenre via a scientific expedition to a far northern island that rapidly disintegrates. I'm not sure if I like the ending, because (view spoiler)

In "One Last Bloom" a grad student works hard to win both professional success and a fellow grad student's love, but runs into mysterious horror when his mentor's scientific expedition goes awry. This is another case of the unlikeable protagonist, who at least improves himself somewhat by the end, when (view spoiler) I enjoyed the cruel academic satire.

"Strong as a Rock" tracks two brothers as they react to their mother's death. The point of view man begins in near-collapse, barely existing, while his brother turns to vigorous rock-climbing. (With names like Garrison and Rex you might expect a pair of he-man) What could have been a simple story of outdoor adventure as psychological catharsis becomes something strange, as (view spoiler)

"Thistle's Find" gives us a gleefully mad scientist, who introduces our point of view character to his latest finds. Things do not go well. One deadpan line ("Sometimes I get put in strange situations", Kindle location 2548) is well placed.

Overall, an impressive work. I look forward to reading more Strantzas. Any recommendations?

Michael Sorbello says

Pretty good. The first story was easily my favorite, scientists exploring the dreadful arctic region and the smothering fear of ancient creatures lurking in the blizzard captured the fear and atmosphere that I experienced when I read Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*.

The rest of the stories were just average weird fiction in my opinion. I didn't like the way many of them ended abruptly without any kind of resolution or explanation, some of them made no sense to me whatsoever and left me wondering what the heck I even read. It had some pretty decent tension and grotesque imagery in there though and the first story was pretty fantastic in its own right. All in all a pretty good collection.

Aksel Dadswell says

Wow. This is the first I've read of Simon Strantzas, and what an epic collection of weird fiction it is. The stories here inspired by Ligotti or Lovecraft or Chambers are all fantastic and unsettling, but it's the more distinctly Strantzasian (if this isn't already a word, I'm coining it; it really rolls off the tongue) narratives that really made my skin crawl and my eyes widen and kept me reading till the early hours. *Strong as a Rock* reminded me of playing one of the early *Silent Hill* games and had a brilliant, understated ending. *Emotional Dues* was a very raw, desperate, beautiful story that made my skin crawl from start to finish — plus all the characters had awesome names. The title story, *Burnt Black Suns*, is a gruelling, sweaty nightmare of a thing that chokingly conveys the nauseating heat and hostility of the setting, and the protagonist's monomaniacal search for his lost son. It builds slowly and with an increasing sense of queasy unease until the climax that leaves you breathless and in awe. So yeah, overall a brilliant collection — and with fantastic cover art by Santiago Caruso.

M Griffin says

After I read *Nightingale Songs*, the prior collection of restrained and disquieting stories by Simon Strantzas, I found myself wondering what kind of work this author might create with a more direct, less elliptical approach. His follow-up, *Burnt Black Suns*, answers that question.

Whether this change in direction arose from a natural drift in the author's motivation, or a desire to prove he can successfully master new and different tricks, the stories here seem clearly designed to take a more straightforward approach than Strantzas has used previously. In particular, pieces like the opener "On Ice" and the titular closing novella hit so much harder as to seem almost the work of a different writer.

Not one story in the book is anything less than excellent, and the novella "Burnt Black Suns" is my single favorite thing Strantzas has written. This collection is a work of real excellence, which deserves to be read by everyone interested in intelligently crafted horror fiction.

Gary Fry says

I greatly enjoyed this book, was genuinely surprised by it (I'd expected more of Strantzas's previous quietness and allusions), and – most importantly of all – I was, in at least three significant passages, really rattled by it. Hey, some writers don't do that even once in a career. Here's some notes on the stories.

- On Ice

A solid opener, with a mounting sense of unease as researchers come a cropper one by one in an icy climate. I find tales, particularly relatively short ones, in which lots of characters are present from the opening sometimes hard to get into, but by focusing closely on one guy, this story just about got around that structural difficulty. There were some nice time-honoured methods used here – footprints outside camps, body-parts found in disturbing isolation from their owners, etc – and the conclusion was satisfying, even if [SPOILERS FROM HERE] the monster was presented (to my tastes) a little too explicitly. I'd have preferred a little blur and confusion during the beast's description, maybe a snowstorm distorting perception of it – something maybe to render it more elusive. But the Lovecraftian "reveal" is always a hard trick to pull off, and Strantzas does a nice enough job here, so don't let me be churlish. Good opener.

- Dwelling on the Past

A solidly handled story, with – not the final time Strantzas will use this device in the book – a tragic backstory, from which all the narrated events gain resonance. The guy's [SPOILER] descent into the pit towards the end was effective, as was the fur thing creeping upon him. I liked this layered story a good deal.

- Strong as a Rock

One of my favourites of the shorter pieces, this tale of two halves – first a climbing trip involving an accident, and then a rush for medical support – simply darkens and darkens, with its protracted, subterranean conclusion building to a great last scene, fully playing on psychologies established earlier. I particularly enjoyed the feel of the old hospital, with all its decay and ineradicable stains. Aickman is all over this piece, but so is Lovecraft, and that's a fine combination in anyone's book.

- By Invisible Hands

This was one of the two tales with which I didn't get on very well. I suspect that's because I'm not steeped in, nor drawn to, the kind of fictional landscape it seeks to explore – Ligottian, I'm guessing. I'm not the best person to judge, so I'll remain relatively quiet about this puppet-based story.

- One Last Bloom

As the most overtly Lovecraftian piece in a Mythos-infused book, this story, the first of two novellas, is most remarkable for its characterisation, with the lead guy a particularly unsympathetic (though not uninteresting) person: self-regarding, privately ambitious, romantically fickle. This sour human backdrop forms a suitable framework for a journal-based side-story, involving a second narrator detailing the events of an ocean-based research trip. And what comes back from there is not pleasant at all – in fact, it's genuinely mysterious, insidious and gruesome. I loved this tale, which includes a genuinely frightening scene (hint: it involves a visit to a flat) – one of those moments of terror that hold us all in the genre, reading story after story until someone does the same business again. Strantzas certainly manages that here. Fantastic tale.

- Thistle's Find

I really enjoyed this snappy, pungent story of a rather alluring creature plucked from an alternative realm. It had the cosy framework of an old-fashioned crazy-scientist tale, but with a risqué sequence of events. I liked the narrator's "street" voice, as well as the manic scramble for safety at the end. A solid tale.

- Beyond the Banks of the River Seine

Another tale that didn't really push my buttons, but I enjoyed it more than the puppet story above, maybe because I'm interested in all that "old music". An enjoyable, lyrical story.

- Emotional Dues

Along with "Solid as a Rock", this was my favourite of the shorter pieces, with its slightly surreal events clearly functioning as a metaphor for artistic expression and what this demands and then takes from the artist. The ending is brilliantly orchestrated, and [SPOILER] the image of that thing entering the room still burns in me now, days after completion. As in "One Last Bloom", Strantzas is excellent at stage-managing visually vivid horrors, to such a degree that frantic characterisation and firm, rhythmic, precise use of language conspire to drive the scenes home powerfully. Great tale.

- Burnt Black Suns

For a book that starts in ice, where else to end but in baking sunshine? This novella, along with "One Last Bloom" is the collection's most outstanding work, a brilliantly brooding, painful study of familial obsession and divided loyalties. Whereas I sometimes thought "On Ice" might have benefitted from a more laboured depiction of the icy landscape, there are no problems here (possibly because of the extra space available): far-flung Mexico is depicted in all its perspiring, poverty-ridden, semi-neglected, fly-blighted dereliction, with the central character's childless desperation perfectly represented by such a carefully wrought sense of place. (Strantzas must have visited somewhere similar, surely.) Anyway, the plot is quite straightforward, involving the search for a decamped wife and son, but the horrors it involves, including strange dreams, dark suns, untrustworthy clergy, etc, builds to a brilliantly intense conclusion, one worthy of the rise of a Great Old One. This is latter-day Lovecraftian fiction at its finest, all rendered in a Graham Greene-ish, Sergio Leone-esque manner. The characterisation reminded me of Patricia Highsmith and the prose of Emile Zola. But maybe that's just me. Whatever the facts are, this was, in my opinion, the best story in the book.

Geticus Polus says

I am sure I must be missing something here. Too dull, too mundane to even consider it a pleasant reading experience. Is this an example of brilliant mainstream weird / fantastic literature?

Teo says

This book carries the subtitle "A Collection of Weird Tales", and it's Simon Strantzas' fourth. And really, it's actually a collection of 9 pure, undiluted, no-BS contemporary weird yarn. Harkening, of course, to the masters of the past: R. W. Chambers, H. P. Lovecraft, ...

So far, Strantzas' stories were subtler and vaguer, with the end - and sometimes the plot itself - being very open to interpretation. This was especially evident in his previous collection, "Nightingale Songs". "Burnt Black Suns" does away with ambiguity. In the fashion of classic weird literature, the horror may be unseen and its nature only hinted at, but the story is always clear as day.

I would say "Burnt Black Suns" lacks distinctiveness; this is run-of-the-mill weird from start to finish. Strantzas has proven himself as an author of the genre, but he's playing it very safe here. Each tale is serviceable in the least: while being without a complete dud, some pieces are utterly unremarkable in both idea and execution (*Strong as a Rock, Thistle's Find*).

The rest is rock-solid weird that should not be missed by any fans of the genre.

Favorite stories: *By Invisible Hands, Beyond the Banks of River Seine, Emotional Dues, Burnt Black Suns*.

Forrest says

I'm all about the creepy, not so much about the gory. Give me *The Twilight Zone* and *X-Files* over "Saw" and "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" any day of the week. It's not about the blood or guts, necessarily, but about the feeling. I'm not a fan of being grossed out, but am a fan of that lingering feeling in the back of my head that things just aren't right. Perhaps this has to do with my love of existentialism, the thrilling notion that terror and death loom just around the corner, but aren't quite in your face . . . yet.

So when I tell people I like to read horror . . . well, I've been given some recommendations that I really, really hated. Part of it is that, all told, the quality of horror writing in general is . . . well, not that great. There are a number of reason for this, not the least of which was a sort of nepotism which Paula Guran referred to as "tribalism" at one point - the incestuous practice of editors who were also authors and authors who were also editors patting each other on the back and frankly looking the other way when bad writing came through from someone they liked.

Those days may be behind us. At least I hope so. But because I had seen this happen first hand back in the early 2000's, I approached Strantzas' collection *Burnt Black Suns* with a touch of caution. Not because I thought Strantzas had been caught up in all of that, but because I hadn't, frankly, read a Strantzas story before, at least not to my recollection. Plus there was the possibility that this was not the *kind* of dark fiction I most enjoy. But I read some very positive reviews and I positively loved the cover, so I thought I'd give it a shot.

I'm so glad I did!

Let's start with the first story, "On Ice," because no one reads intros, even when they are written by the talented Laird Barron. Okay, I admit it, I read the introduction. But like most other introductions it was forgettable. "On Ice," though, was not as forgettable. I had expected something along the lines of Lovecraft, but was pleasantly surprised (though I like Lovecraft's work a great deal) that Strantzas didn't just fall into the tropes that one might expect in an arctic horror story. Yes, there is a sense of desperation and fear like you might expect, but it's a slow burn, like holding your hand on the frozen juice freezer at the grocery store too long; mesmerizing and painful, but not so scary as to make you simply close the cover. "This," I thought, "is a solid four star story".

I was not quite as impressed with "Dwelling on the Past," which I felt didn't really get off the ground and,

once it did, meandered around a bit too much. Not a terrible story, but not terribly impressive, either. I felt that this might have been one of the "filler" stories in the volume.

I was, however, very impressed with the third story, "Strong as a Rock". I liked everything about "Strong As a Rock". It seethes with the dread of that-which-is-not-seen. The evocative character reactions to "off camera" events carry the horror in this, yes, I'll say it, "Ligotti-esque" tale. This story of two brothers, one full of confidence, one utterly lacking in it, starts blue and clear as the sky, and ends saturated in darkness. You may never look at rock climbing or hospitals in the same way again. Five stars!

"By Invisible Hands" was the weakest story so far, which surprised me, since it appeared in a Ligotti tribute anthology. Maybe it was just trying too hard. The right words were there, but the cadence was not, like a singer off beat. It also missed the emotional "oomph" I get from Ligotti, et al. Still not a bad story. Three stars. No more. No less.

"One Last Bloom" is an interesting title for that story. It took a little while to "grow," to be honest, but once it flowered . . . well, it was really gross and horrific. I was surprised by how well I accepted that fact. Maybe I've become desensitized? Extreme social awkwardness, combined with narcissism, make for some very uncomfortable moments. Strantzas has captured this perfectly, and, boy, is it painful to read! Painful in a way that drew me, begrudgingly, into the story. For a while, the main character's lack of touch with reality had me wondering who was real and who was not. It's an insane fugue of a story, as a result, and in the end, I liked the effect it had on me.

Furthermore, there was a phrase in "One Last Bloom" that caught my attention: "[I] knew the way one knows things in the middle of the night . . ." I love that turn of phrase. In the context of the story it totally makes sense and is one of the most clever articulations I've ever heard of that strange phenomenon of certainty at three in the morning. I've felt that. I know that feeling.

I wish I had thought of that seemingly simple phrase myself. You've earned yourself another star, mister Strantzas! Four total, in this case.

"Thistle's Find" is a good story, well told, of science gone wrong. Not spectacular or groundbreaking, but it still makes it into four-star territory.

Take Carcosa, The King in Yellow, a mysterious bookstore containing an even more mysterious manuscript, a restrained rivalry between two brilliant musicians, and the revelation of the "lesser" musician's grand opus, all wrapped in an emotionally-satisfying tale, and you've got yourself a five-star story in "Beyond the Banks of the River Seine". This one resonated in my mind for a long time afterward. I could see this being made into an indie movie by the same people who did the silent movie version of "Call of Cthulhu". It would definitely not work as a silent movie, per-se . . . well, maybe it would . . . hmm . . . interesting . . .

"Emotional Dues" is more hit than miss, but I thought that it slipped from its emotional footing at the end, favoring monster-horror, when it could have delivered a more compelling punch in the form of leveraged angst. Still the central conceit of the monster was interesting and "new," sort of a twist on Dorian Gray. Four stars, but just barely. Oh, and this is another one that would make a good silent movie. I think I'm sensing a pattern here. I wonder what Strantzas thinks of *Nosferatu*? He seems to stage some things in a theatrical way. Or maybe that's just my brain setting things up that way in my theater of the mind.

The titular story was as bizarre and horrifying as I like. Surreal and creepy. Though I found the protagonist annoying and narcissistic, I see why Strantzas made him so. This story was all the more horrific because I

have a friend who was in a very nasty custody case who idealized his son in the same way Noah did in the story. Kinda hits home. This one also stuck with me, all five stars of it.

Overall, then, four stars, when each story is looked at individually. I felt, however, that the sum was greater than the parts. This really was an exceptional collection of short dark fiction with a weird bent to it. So I'm bumping it up to five. It looks like Dark Regions press has seen the genius, too and is doing a signed, limited, leather-bound edition. Hey, my birthday is next month. Anyone feeling generous?
