

Review of "Infected" by Scott Sigler, reprint ed., New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008
J.A. White, Morgan State University

The first of a projected trilogy, "Infected" is the perfect novel for a generation raised on the Internet: it recognizes that curiosity, speculation, and fear all run in the same pack. It is impossible to "live" on the Internet. One cannot read CNN, Huffington Post, Facebook, Snopes, or Funny or Die, and the hundreds of quirky and downright bizarre stories which appear there every day, and not have those medical incredibles, conspiracy theories, and first-person accounts of ghost sightings and sea monsters interact subconsciously with our own insecurities. This is what Scott Sigler, podcaster extraordinaire and the book's very smart and sadistic author, does best: give us a reason to worry that at least some of those stories which have crossed our screens are true, and worse, that there are dangers out there that may hit us long before any official outlet lets us in on the story.

Sigler plays upon nearly every fear conjured up by scientific, social, and political sites these days. Sane, upstanding citizens randomly turning into bloodthirsty killers? Check. Unstoppable pathogen? Check. Possible bioterrorism? Maybe. Unknown means of transmission? Yup. Disruption of life as we know it? Yes--in the very near future. Does the government know and try to cover it all up? Absolutely. Most creepily, brings down an infection much, much worse than Ebola, then sends us scurrying for psychological cover. While he details every last boil, bloodbath and bursting eyeball, he gives us something worse. The things invade one's brain and then communicate with it, giving a new twist to the idea of voices in one's head. And then, like Henry James did 100 years ago, he gives it another turn of the screw: he makes them needy. Feed us!

We are also seduced into identifying with an unpleasant protagonist. Perry Dawsey is the guy we all knew in high school who never got beyond his glory days on the football field. An abusive son of an abusing father, he loses his self-control and his well being slowly but surely; yet still we root for him. Why? Because he's a damaged soul long before he develops this...problem. And then, for all his faults, he shows a gritty determination to survive that is far more impressive than anything else he's accomplished in his life. Other characters, while more likable, make an equally strong impression. The lone-wolf CIA agent, Dew Phillips, has survived Vietnam and a distinguished career only to become the administration's secret go-to guy; he is given the task of investigating the original crime of how the infection was let loose. The epidemiologist, Margaret Montoya, is one of many female scientists in entertainment today who must find their way to the right balance of compassion and toughness; however, in this case, she already has the compassion. It is now up to Dew to help her find her most assertive voice. Each is credible; each is a fighter; and best of all, each knows that in this fight-or-flight situation, flight is simply impossible.

The pacing of this novel is what matters, and Sigler delivers on all levels. A series of quick vignettes gets us going, and short chapters propel us very quickly into the maelstrom. Perry Dawsey gets a rash; a narrator lets us know what is happening to him medically. Actually, we get a detailed description of how the infection works on a microbial level, with a solid emphasis on how random the whole process is from the "birth" of the first-stage microbe until its terrifying expression in a human body. The detective works to solve the murders; the doctor works smartly to unscramble the puzzle; they both work against a governmental paranoia which tracks the information, but keeps a close hand. There's plenty of blood and quease-inducing moments. And meanwhile, people get more and more nastily infected.

Of course, as we find out, there's nothing random at all about any of this.

This is an absolutely horrifying book.