

Blessed, by Remy Apepp
Thinklings Books

rev. by Michael Alerich

Blessed is a dark literary fantasy, the second book in author Remy Apepp's "Tales from the Mythusian Empire." In the world of The Mythusian Empire, humanity finds itself threatened by beings called The Accursed, creatures once human, now monstrously transformed and hungering for flesh. To balance the scales, the deities of the world bestowed Blessings upon certain humans, granting them extraordinary abilities. These Blessings, however, came with a price. The Blessings take a toll on the body, and lead to an early, debilitating death.

The majority of *Blessed* follows two male characters in their early adulthood, taking place almost entirely in a shadowy gothic mansion. The book begins with the perspective of Lux, who has lost his memory. He wakes up in chains, and is greeted by Illiaz, who owns the manor and the grounds around it. Illiaz is patient with Lux, who doesn't remember anything of his past, though it is clear that the pair of them knew each other prior to Lux losing his memory. The depth

and nature of their relationship isn't revealed by Illiaz, nor does Illiaz immediately explain why Lux has been outfitted with manacles on his wrists and ankles. Was he a prisoner? This isn't clear, to Lux or the reader, since Lux's memories are gone. Despite the presence of chains, Illiaz treats him like a guest in his home. Remy wastes no time, diving quickly into the horror genre with a grotesque offering of sustenance (I won't spoil it, but it's bloody) to Lux in the opening pages of *Blessed*, which had me questioning if these characters were something other than human.

The mansion is forever in darkness, with the curtains pulled to block the sun's intrusion. Illiaz warns Lux to stay out of the sun. These warnings, coupled with Lux's observation that Illiaz "smelled like living meat and fresh blood" again made me wonder if Lux or Illiaz was some sort of Accursed monster, or perhaps if they both were. Although this was a constant question I had gnawing at the back of my mind, it took a backseat to the philosophical debates between Lux and Illiaz. Many conversations were eerie, and fittingly thematically macabre, such as when the conversation turned to fear and death, and Illiaz told Lux, "If there's anything that you want to accomplish or experience in your life, then death is terrifying because it is the only thing that can prevent you from doing so," and then "If you've already achieved what you wanted to, you no longer fear death, because death can no longer take the ability to achieve that from you."

As the story of *Blessed* progresses, we the reader get glimpses into Lux's past. These segments are short stories, focused on Lux's time as a gladiator, where he was forced to fight the monstrous Accursed for entertainment. Remy uses these passages to world-build in an impressive manner. I didn't find any noticeable exposition in *Blessed*, which can be a problem in many other fantasy novels. Instead of breaking the immersion of the story to offer historical details of the fantasy world, Remy keeps the reader's attention on the story and gives these details through scenes. *Blessed* has many of these sunlight-inflicted flashbacks, but they are quite brief before returning to the "present" mansion setting. They functioned as a revelation tool, and by midpoint of the story, I thought I'd figured out just what was going on with Lux. I was surprised when a sudden event changed the dynamic of the story completely at about the midpoint of the

book before switching to the perspective of Illiaz.

This new perspective spends a bit of time on Illiaz's childhood. Here, we are introduced to someone Illiaz knows, who is Blessed. This person wields an incredible gift: the ability to influence peoples' minds just by speaking their name. As stated in the book's opening, Blessings come at a price. This person was destined to an early death, and young Illiaz had to watch the person weaken through the years until bedridden, sick and helpless, until they finally died. This person did not fear death and suggested to those Blessed that they should not refrain from seeking joy in life simply because they were fated to die young. Before dying, this person said, "What is the value and worth in a life? Is it its length? Is a life not worth living simply because it will be short and full of pain?" *Blessed* frequently explored the themes of life and death, and the perseverance of hope and love in a setting of constant horror.

Much of Illiaz's scenes retells the events already told from Lux' point of view. I thought I'd be irritated with this, but I wasn't. Remy does a wonderful job distinguishing the characters, and even though I knew *what* was going to happen, it was refreshing to have Illiaz explain the *why* of the events. Where Lux's tale was shrouded in mystery and kept the reader guessing, Illiaz held nothing back. It felt like a completely different story. With the curtain no longer drawn shut, the relationship between Lux and Illiaz was unveiled.

The cast of *Blessed* is small, but it felt focused, rather than limited. Nearly every scene was comprised of just two characters, Lux and Illiaz, with the exception of just a few sections of flashback. Rarely are authors able to pull off this lack of supporting characters well, but Remy does a fantastic job of keeping the tension throughout the story by deepening the relationship between Lux and Illiaz a little at a time.

The dark atmosphere and provocative questions on what it means to be human reminded me of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and the exploration and development of connection between Lux and Illiaz, two more-than-human beings, reminded me of Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* novels. When I first started reading *Blessed*, I had a lot of questions I wanted answered, one of which was if either Lux or Illiaz was a monster. Getting this answer seemed very important to me then. By the end of the story, all mysteries were revealed,

and I knew who was Blessed, and who was cursed, but long before reaching that conclusion of the novel, I found this answer no longer mattered to me. *Blessed* is a story featuring monsters, but it isn't *about* monsters. Remy leaned heavy into darkness, tragedy and horror, but despite this, or perhaps because of this, the messages of hope made *Blessed* shine bright.