

New Review by Adrian Bonenberger: John Milas' "The Militia House"



In the Mind of Madness

There is a nightmare I used to have with some regularity even before my time in the military, in which a house from my childhood concealed some horrible and sentient threat bent on doing me harm. How else to describe it? The house – its bannisters, its rooms – the attic, sometimes the basement, sometimes a room at the end of a hall – contained within a horror so awful that to perceive it would be to go mad, or die. Naturally, I'm sitting here writing, so the horror was never perceived... but what if... someday... ?

This dream contains within it the purest and most intense fear I have ever experienced. No event or encounter approaches it, in or outside combat. Fear, paralyzing and irresistible, is not like the anxiety one actually encounters in one's daily life. And in moments of great danger one does not feel fear as such – in my experience it is either a rage that compels one to action, or something quite different, which compels one to inaction (often, taking cover behind a wall).

John Milas, whose publications have appeared before in Wrath-Bearing Tree, has a new book out that captures a small portion of that pure fear, and taps into it as effectively as any story I've ever read. *The Militia House* follows a marine lance corporal and his unit during the tail end of an uncomfortable deployment to Afghanistan. As they take over responsibilities for a helicopter landing zone run by the British, a remote building just outside the base draws their attention. The British discourage the marines from exploring it but they insist, and have a very bad time inside. Bizarre things start

happening to them – or is it all in their minds? As reality itself begins to fray, ultimately, it doesn't matter.

Another horror story that considers the line between sanity and insanity is *In the Mouth of Madness*, a John Carpenter film starring Sam Neill, and I thought of that while reading the book. The protagonist has a blog that's gotten him in trouble with his commander – the power of writing to change a deployment, to get people fired, is a quiet but insistent thread in the background. Again, if the protagonist has the power to destroy others' lives with words, with his perspective of the war, isn't it likely that he can author his own destruction through imagination (madness), too?

And what are haunted house stories if not stories about the mind, with the "house" and its various rooms forming memories, concealing some terrible insight about the self that a protagonist cannot face? In another film starring Neill, *Event Horizon*, the haunted house is a spaceship – and the revelation by Neill's character every bit as awful as that of any film of its genre.

The book functions effectively as an allegory about regret, and shame, and if not PTSD, the conflicting emotions that arise from military service overseas. Milas is a veteran of Afghanistan who deployed with the U.S. Marine Corps, and writes with authority about the place and the inconveniences particular to those deployments. In that sense, it is in addition to a reflection about the war, a kind of meditation on the challenges faced by young leaders; responsibility for the lives of others, and being "good" in the eyes of authority.

Milas's protagonist and marines return to The Militia House later in the book. They cannot keep away from it. What happens is both upsetting and also surprising, and I don't want to spoil the ending, because it's worth reading the book to learn what happens. I encourage people to do so, and enjoy the well-

composed story as well as it's lively (if – well, this is horror! – plausibly frustrating characters). If you've ever suffered from nightmares, and you enjoy interrogating why, you probably like horror as a genre... and if you like horror as a genre, you'll like *The Militia House*.