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Four passengers meet on a train journey through Eastern Europe during the First World War, and face a mystery that must be solved if they are to survive...Bizarre creatures, satanic rites, terrified passengers and the romance of travelling by train, all feature in this **classically styled horror**.

Imagine there was a supernatural chiller that Hammer Films never made. A grand epic produced at the studio's peak, which played like a cross between the **Dracula** and **Frankenstein** films and **Dr Terror's House Of Horrors...**

Four passengers meet on a train journey through Eastern Europe during the First World War, and face a mystery that must be solved if they are to survive. As the 'Arkangel' races through the war-torn countryside, they must find out:

What is in the casket that everyone is so afraid of?

What is the tragic secret of the veiled Red Countess who travels with them?

Why is their fellow passenger the army brigadier so feared by his own men?

And what exactly is the devilish secret of the Arkangel itself?

Bizarre creatures, satanic rites, terrified passengers and the romance of travelling by train, all in a classically styled horror novel.

Hell Train Details

Date : Published December 27th 2011 by Solaris (first published December 23rd 2011)

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Author : Christopher Fowler

Format : Mass Market Paperback 319 pages

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From Reader Review Hell Train for online ebook

Andrew says

Wow its been far too long since I have read Christopher fowler and even longer since I have read one his full bodied in your face horrors books (dont get me wrong I love Bryant and May) so this has been a real pleasure - probably too much so - to read Hell train.

Similar to Calabash there is a story in a story - what it is, well read the book since I wont give anything away but what I can say is that it has Mr Fowlers trade mark style and pace and something that I realised I have missed. Now in many ways you can predict what is coming but without labouring the train metaphor too much - sometimes its not the destination but the trip that is the fascinating part and that is certainly the case here.

I know that peoples views of this book are varied and they are entitled to them but what I will say is that they should take a step back and read more of Christopher Fowlers portfolio - he has written in different styles and in different genres and as a result he can mix and transfer between them so of course the story is not going to be formulaic or stereotyped and that is what always keeps me coming back to his work (the twist in Psychoville still makes me smile) and for some it does not sit well for others it makes turning the page a must.

I am not a writer so I will put my hand up in ignorance and admit it but I am sure that writers have several books in progress while one is being published - however I do feel that dark fantasy and horror have been missing from Mr Fowlers titles for far too long and I am glad they are making a come back. I still remember the day I finished Roofworld and started on Rune. So all I can say is that for Christopher Fowler fans out there this is certainly a must and for those who are not fans - give it time and read more of his work and see if you are not impressed.

C. says

Synopsis:

An American screenwriter is up for a job at Hammer Studio in 1960s England and to prove his talent he must write a new script for the studio. The movie must showcase the studios actors, notably Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing, must have the requisite amount of horror, gore, and tantalizingly revealed young women, and must be finished in a week. What follows is the script, starting with its own prologue of a girl in Chelmsk finding an old board game in the attic called "Hell Train." The game depicts a train starting off in her small town which travels from stops with four passengers on a journey through their sins. The story then follows the four passengers and the tests they must face aboard the "Arkangel," a demonic train on a one-way trip to Hell. Each passenger faces mysteries and horrors created to bring out their worst traits. Along the way, the mystery of the train and its unholy passengers is revealed. How can they get off the train and where will it end? But the ultimate question is "Can the train be stopped?"

Review

The Story:

Early on while reading this story, it seemed like there was an awful lot going on in this story that didn't always fit together. First we start with a fascinating look at Hammer Studio in the 60s, just as their decline

from the top of the horror film industry is beginning. Then on to this strange interlude with the girl and the board game. Then the game becomes the actual story, set during WWI in Eastern Europe and following an English married couple, a con-artist Londoner, and a peasant girl facing an imminent marriage and the invasion of her town by soldiers. By chance (or is that Fate?) all four end up onboard the "Arkangel," a train that at first seems normal, albeit unlikely, and then slowly reveals itself as demonic. This story is occasionally interrupted by chapters returning to the scriptwriter. The ending, however, begins to tie it all together, where the little girl with the game board is integral to the people on the train and the scriptwriter uncovers his own little mystery.

Once I finished the book and began thinking back to the early chapters, more facets became clear. Such as how instructions given to the scriptwriter show up through the story. Or how faithful to old horror movies the story is. And that I could see the characters Lee and Cushing would relish playing. What at first seemed a strange cobbling of different tales became a collection that tells a deeper story about the golden age of horror films. And I love it when books become better each time I think about them.

The Writing:

I knew the writing would be good, because I'm a fan of Fowler's Bryant and May PCU series and I enjoy his writing a great deal. I was not disappointed. I was drawn into each aspect of the story, even when questioning their relevance, and Fowler does a great job building suspense and then exploding it across the page in a horrific showdown of good and evil.

Recommendation:

I don't typically read horror as a genre, though some books I enjoy cross over into that genre. I picked up "Hell Train" because I've enjoyed Fowler's other books, and because it was set in WWI, which is a period I've studied. What I was happily surprised to find was a book that went beyond horror and WWI and into the business of movie-making in the 1960s. Having a husband and several friends who are connoisseurs of horror movies, I've seen a number of old Hammer films, and it was fun to envision actors from those films in the roles of characters in the book. I loved the homage paid to the old age of horror, which is still one of my favorite periods of films. And I love that I continue to see depth in the book when I think about it even a week after having finished reading it.

For horror enthusiasts, especially those who love the old B-movies, I heartily recommend this movie. To anyone with an interest in the film industry of old, this is a fun read. Even WWI enthusiasts will find the setting unique. And if you like trains, well, the train is one of the most fearful characters in this book. Think Maximum Overdrive on rails. Pun intended.

Kristin (MyBookishWays Reviews) says

You may also read my review here: [http://www.mybookishways.com/2012/02/...](http://www.mybookishways.com/2012/02/)

The year is 1966, and a screenwriter from the states travels to Hammer studios in the UK, where he is given 5 days to come up with a new horror script for consideration. So begins the story of the Arkangel, a big, dark, beast of a train that travels through Eastern Europe during the horrors of WWI, collecting souls for harvest. Four rather unlucky passengers will meet on the Arkangel and will be put to the test; a test that will dictate the fate of their lives, and their souls.

Hell Train was a change of pace for me, and I'm so glad I picked it up. The story begins with a young girl

finding a game in her family home containing a mechanical train and game pieces representing the passengers. In spite of her trepidation, she places the passengers on the train and winds it up. We then join our four main characters on the Arkangel. There is Isabella, a beautiful girl from Chelmsk, eager to get away from her arranged marriage and the increasing darkness of her village, Nicholas, a handsome rogue with a shadowy past, and a vicar and his scheming wife. They will encounter a number of horrors aboard the Arkangel, including a casket with a very nasty inhabitant, killer beetles, a lady in red who is as dangerous as she is beautiful, zombie soldiers, and much more. They'll be forced to confront the darkest parts of their hearts and face their deepest fears if they're to survive the Arkangel's descent into Hell.

Christopher Fowler is a pro, and it certainly shows in Hell Train. It's very well plotted, moves along at a breakneck pace (fitting for a book about a Hell Train, yes?), and his references to classic horror and horror greats, such as Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee will make any horror fan smile. Don't be fooled by the somewhat campy cover (which I love, by the way). Hell Train covers some serious and disturbing territory, but the author manages to do so without sacrificing (sorry about the pun) the fun that was ever present in classic horror. There are some gruesome scenes, as well, but you'll have fun cringing (and you will cringe), and rooting for the heroes to escape with their souls intact. Hell Train is a helluva fun ride and not to be missed by horror fans. Even if you don't consider yourself a horror fan, give this one a try. You just may be surprised!

Colin Leslie says

The recent revival of Hammer Films (The Woman In Black, The Resident, Wake Wood) has been very welcome but for most folk it's still the output from its heyday in the 1960's that fascinates. So Christopher Fowler's novel Hell Train, set in that world of swinging sixties Hammer, should be a delight for fans but does it live up to expectations?

Ostensibly a novel about a Hammer film script that was never made, the book is actually made up of two interwoven narratives. The story of the script's creation, set in the Hammer studios at Bray, introduces us to many of the key Hammer figures both on-screen and behind the scenes and although clearly fictional there is some lovingly accurate portrayals of the people and places that brought those fantastic films to our screens.

But it's the Hell Train script itself which takes up the bulk of the book. Set in wartime (First World War) eastern Europe the plot introduces a cast of characters thrown together by circumstance to seek refuge on the Arkangel, the last train out of town before the invading forces arrive. Only problem is none of them know the train's final destination although the title may give the reader a clue. It's an action packed trip as the passengers face various trials, often with very unpleasant consequences. The portrayal of the threat of devastating war is nicely balanced against the even greater, supernatural threats faced by the passengers giving the whole book an ominous air.

The main characters are interesting, most with their own flaws which form the basis of the tests as they are pitted against the supernatural forces guiding the train. The Eastern European background is a clever nod to the anonymous villages which crop up in many Hammer films, complete with ageing inn owner, his innocent daughter and a cast of suspicious locals. It's an example of the clever nods to the original films that work very well in the book. It's easy to imagine Michael Ripper as a villager in the opening scenes or one of the many Hammer beauties (mmm....Caroline Munro) as his "innocent" daughter.

A couple of things didn't work so well for me. One, the gore is often turned up to eleven and while Hammer

films had a reputation for (Kensington) gore it looks pretty tame these days, the scenes in this book would not be out-of-place in one of the Saw films. That might be explained by the script supposedly being written to give the censors something to cut but for me it slightly contradicts the feeling of authenticity. The second issue is length, not the length of the book but the length of the scenes from the film. Hammer films benefited greatly from brevity but the scenes in this book do feel like they go on too long, again breaking that spell of Hammer authenticity.

Plus points are definitely the clever nods to the workings of Hammer and the resurrection of some of the key figures involved at the time but a couple of minus points for the film script itself which appeared to be written with a modern audience in mind rather than the recreation of the lost Hammer classic it purports to be. Never the less an enjoyable trip back to a classic period for horror and a very enjoyable book in its own right, one that Hammer fans will thoroughly enjoy.

Rating 4 out of 5

Jeannie and Louis Rigid says

The year was 1966 and a screenwriter, Shane Carter arrives in Great Britain to attempt to snag a job with the greatest Horror filmmaker of it's day and age, Hammer Films. Shane notices the decay of the studio, but, this is hard times for the industry all over the world.

Almost too easily Shane is hired to write an epic in less than five days. For inspiration, Shane searches the library where he is set up and finds an old game board "The Hell Train."

The story takes off from that stage to one of the passengers upon the train. Fact mixes with Fantasy. Good versus evil emanates the pages as you read onwards.

This was a good old-fashioned horror story. It managed to make me feel uneasy and yet I had to continue reading to find the ending out. Find out the mystery of the Arkangel Train for yourself, but, perhaps in the daytime?

Helen says

I have no idea why I didn't read this when I got it. I started it and it just didn't seem interesting but when I found and picked it up this week I discovered I had been missing out on a truly horrific tale that matches well with the flame red and black cover. However... are you supposed to laugh in the middle of a horror story? There was Isabella, having freed a beetle that bored into people, through them and through walls or anything else in its path, trying to lure said beetle into the engine of the train when up comes Nicholas. Their conversation and events around that had me laughing out loud.

The idea of a horror or ghost train is totally foreign to me, having never seen one, but it's easy to accept the concept as well as the idea that Hammer is proposing to make this story into a film There are three levels, though: the Hammer studio where the writer is working, a little girl finding a board game in the attic and opening it in spite of a label warning her not to, and the train with the scenes and characters from the game. The twists and turns require careful attention and there are a couple of places where stopping and thinking

about the rules and deals in the book would be a good idea, although I allowed the train to just barrel along, offering more and more violence and blood as we carried on. Funnily enough, although there really was a great deal of blood and horrific events, I wasn't frightened the way I might have been years ago. They say that children have to be mildly frightened fairly often in order to develop endocrines or something that they will need. I must have been frightened enough.

Mark says

Hell Train

Author: Christopher Fowler

Publisher: Solaris / Rebellion Publishing

Published In: Oxford, UK

Date: 2012

Pgs: 319

REVIEW MAY CONTAIN SPOILERS

Summary:

Conceived as an unfilmed Hammer film that bridges Dracula, Frankenstein, and Dr. Terror.

Eastern Europe, the First World War. A train traveling a war-torn countryside. The Arkangel comes. A casket full of fear. A mysterious red clad Countess. The Brigadier who commands through fear. Satanic rites and creatures of the bizarre, the train has left the station, hope you survive the ride.

Genre:

Fiction

Haunted

Horror

Monster

Mythology

Occult

Pulp

Thrillers

Vampires

Werewolf

Witches

Why this book:

A Hammer film unmade. Got me.

Favorite Character:

The Red Countess starts out as a cliche, but she's a bad ass.

Least Favorite Character:

Nicholas Castleford is an arrogant prig, con man; he is all that's worst in the Britain of that WW1 era. As his backstory fills in, Nicolas is even more of the quintessential turn-of-the-century English cad.

Miranda, the vicar's wife, is a very unlikable characters and well deserving of whatever fate is going to reach out of the darkness and devour her.

The difference in the two is that Nicolas seems repentant for his past life and Miranda seems on the verge of doubling down on all that is worst in her psyche.

Character I Most Identified With:

The Writer. Believe we're all supposed to latch onto the writer and hang our hat on his accomplishment and his disappointment.

The Feel:

Opens with two quotes from Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee. Respectively, "There is little chance for a person to exercise the imagination today in this complex, programmed society, we have." And, "For a while, we really were family." Fowler is reaching for that Hammer movie feel and I'm aboard.

I can see the Hammer Film-esque story and motif, not so much the classic horror promised on the book jacket. Though that hangs on whether and what you consider classic horror.

Poe-ish elements do build into the story as we move along.

This is very much a Hammer-ish Twilight Zone.

Great mix of everything in this story. All that's really missing is the creepy clown. The Showman twinges a few of the same feelers, but doesn't go full Pennywise.

Favorite Scene / Quote:

Is the coffin scratching only in Thomas's head? He doesn't react to the red eye staring back at him through the keyhole. He's already Igor-ed.

When the Prince comes out, he goes big time monstrous. Thomas's claustrophobic nightmare came alive is oogie inducing.

The Boy is tragic and a much better test for Nicholas than the Brigadier was.

Isabella's confrontation with her uncle, the Controller. His expounding on their having always been sacrifices in their village even before the Arkangel, and their family's involvement in all those actions.

The last game bit climax of the story within the story, but not the overarching story, is classic horror, very Hammer-esque. Love it. Poor Isabella. Well done cyclic bit of storytelling there.

Pacing:

Well paced, short chapters. A good fast read.

Plot Holes/Out of Character:

If the paradigm doesn't shift, the "each chapter introduces another character" trope will become ungainly.

The characters wanton disregard of their current circumstances and suspension of disbelief is trying. Especially in light of their constant reference to their life circumstances outside of the scope of the novel.

Hmm Moments:

Between the tavern sign showing a monstrous train running over the dismembered nude body and the description given by the urchin at the train station for the train running at midnight reminds of Blaine the Mono is Stephen King's Dark Tower series.

The Specimen escaping the collector's cage and going on his rampage. Eeewww. Bug that eat people, considering everything else in this story, this skeeves me out.

And, finally, the Conductor stacks the deck. Zombies.

WTF Moments:

The Tortured Virgin Inn and its train running over a victim sign wouldn't have made it passed the Censor in the story inside the story inside the story. Convolute sounding, but, at least early on in the book, it works. May be overleveled.

Is the cliched innkeeper's daughter the eponymous virgin from the inn's name and sign? She is described as looking just like the victim on the sign. That's downright grubby. Nicolas when he enters the tavern does comment, internally, on her resemblance to the train's victim on the sign.

Meh / PFFT Moments:

The chauffeur swerves in with a huge backstory that overwhelms what is going on around him, and, then,

topples from the train.

Expected Nicholas's test to end in redemption, and it seemed to, but it goes pretty ambiguous when he leaves the Arkangel.

The origin of the Arkangel is half good and half cliche that pastiche its 1880s era founding with the Holocaust trains of Germany feels stretched when the time frames are considered.

The Conductor's zombie assault comes up short in the potential horror aspects of it. Nicholas is wounded and could be dying. Isabela has lost the majority of her clothes and is largely clothed in just her resolve to save Nicholas and herself. The zombie factor set against those two set pieces could have ramped up the tension, but it comes across as just one more thing to overcome in a long line of circumstances to overcome.

Why isn't there a screenplay?

Don't believe the story would work as a movie, too many moving parts. A rewrite to script form might save it, but you'd probably need to lose the story within a story, within a story, within a story matrix that abounds.

Last Page Sound:

They screwed the writer. Set him up to write the best story that he could and...then, passed on the script, his "greatest" work, and, thereby, blocked him from taking it to their rival. Damn. That's slick. And as the writer suspects, the Devil's bargain of his own.

Author Assessment:

I'd read more by Fowler in a heartbeat.

Editorial Assessment:

Well put together.

Knee Jerk Reaction:

instant classic

Disposition of Book:

Denton Public Library,

Denton, TX

Dewey Decimal System:

F

FOW

Would recommend to:
friends, family, colleagues, genre fans

Gary says

This is an homage to Hammer Horror films and the studio itself and it's undoubtedly clever in it's construction and delivery of a screenplay writer writing a new script for Hammer while we read his story as it is written, with the occasional drop back into reality to keep the plot line of a studio in decline running along. It's not Christopher Fowler's best work by a long way (and he has written some fantastic books) but it's fast and fun, especially if you grew up with the Hammer films - there are plenty of references to the actors and the classic films - but I wouldn't race out and buy a copy - borrow one if you can...

Mark says

“Imagine there was a supernatural chiller that Hammer Films never made...” This takes that enticing prospect and builds on the conceit brilliantly, with Shane Carter - a screenwriter in 1966 who has been working with Roger Corman - taking on the challenge from Hammer to write a screenplay in five days. What he produces - and we read - is a horror tale set during the First World War. Nicholas is an adventurer, an upper class Englishman who encounters Isabella in a small Eastern European town that is about to fall to enemy soldiers. Along with another English couple, Nicholas, a vicar and his wife Miranda, they board the Arkangel, a terrifying train that might be taking them directly to Hell, alongside a mysterious casket, a veiled Red Countess, an insane army brigadier and worse. Fowler is a great writer and perfectly captures the Hammer mood getting this off to a good start - in 1966 (though I would have liked to have seen more of that time-period) and in Eastern Europe - before the action moves onto the hellish, perfectly realised train. The characterisation is great, with the roles clearly defined, the location and atmosphere is pitch perfect and the gore is cheerfully splashed around (Michael Careeras says, early on, that the screenplays are always more violent to give the censor something to get his teeth into), though the pace (whilst perfect to replicate Hammer) was a bit too slow for me at times. Good fun and - pacing caveat aside - well worth a read.

Bettie? says

spotted on wanda's update
to hunt down as it's
horror season
duck season
wabbit season
red deer season
elk season

Paul says

Imagine there was a supernatural chiller that Hammer Films never made. A grand epic produced at the studio's peak, which played like a cross between the Dracula and Frankenstein films and Dr Terror's House of Horrors...

Four passengers meet on a train journey through Eastern Europe during the First World War, and face a mystery that must be solved if they are to survive. As the Arkangel races through war-torn country side, they must find out:

What is in the casket that everyone is so afraid of? What is the tragic secret of the veiled Red Countess who travels with them? Why is their fellow passenger the army brigadier so feared by his own men? And what exactly is the devilish secret of the Arkangel itself?

Back in 1989 I was an impressionable fifteen year old and I had just started to develop a passion for reading and a never-ending love for cinema. One of the first books I read, through what I thought at the time were adult eyes, was *Roofworld* by Christopher Fowler.

Meanwhile my introduction to horror cinema, via a wonderful horror obsessed grandmother, was the works of Hammer. Little did I realise some twenty-three years later these two seemingly unconnected events would find their way back into my life.

Hell Train starts with an intriguing premise. American screenwriter Shane Carter has left Hollywood and come to the UK during the 'swinging sixties', when Hammer Films are at the zenith of their popularity. He is given the opportunity to write a script for the studio. It is the story of the Hell Train, The Arkangel, he writes and this forms the main body of the novel.

I don't want to give away too much plot detail but suffice to say that the four main protagonists fall nicely into the well-established stereotypes you would expect to find in many Hammer films. Just remember that *Hell Train* is meant as a homage and everything will make perfect sense. There is the innocent wide-eyed female villager, the womanising army deserter, a weak willed vicar and his over-bearing wife. Each character has their own secrets and flaws and these are revealed as the story unfolds. This is where a novel gets the opportunity to excel over the visual medium of film. Readers get a deeper glimpse into the motivations of the characters. We get to learn more of their back story and their reasons for boarding the train the first place.

Interspersed throughout the main narrative we get a few occasional jumps back to Shane as he continues to write. I have to admit the first time this happened I was so engrossed in the goings on aboard the Arkangel this caught me completely off guard. Kudos to Christopher Fowler, I had all but forgotten that this was a story taking place within the confines of another story. It was also an unexpected and pleasant surprise to have the likes of Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee appear in cameo. The suggestion of their proposed roles in the *Hell Train* movie was a particularly nice touch.

Hell Train is a visceral love letter to Hammer Films. If you have ever been entranced by any one of Hammer's classic movie outings, then you will adore this novel. Personally the thing I remember most about my exposure to Hammer's films was their constant use of bright vivid colours, especially the bloody reds.

There is plenty of that here. It's rare that you read a book that feels like it has successfully captured that feeling in its imagery. Hell Train feels like it has been written in glorious full screen technicolour.

The storytelling in Hell Train perfectly recreates the atmosphere of sixties horror cinema. With reverential nods not just to Hammer, but also to the portmanteau style film making of Amicus, every page contains horrific delights to discover. Characters are dispatched with the manic glee you would find in any one of the films. I'll happily admit that within minutes of finishing reading the book I found myself on the Hammer Films website, keen to refresh my memory of their magnificent output and learn more about their contribution to the British film industry.

I've been waiting to read Hell Train since I first heard about it at the tail end of 2010. Now I can confirm, what I already suspected, that the wait was well worth it. This was a great novel to kick off 2012 with. Christopher Fowler continues to deliver expertly crafted, gripping work. Now all we need to do is convince someone over at Hammer that the film version of Hell Train really needs to be made. We'll get Christopher Fowler to write the script and direct. It'll be great.

Still have book vouchers left over from Christmas? Hell Train is published by Solaris Books and is available from 5th January 2012.

Paulo "paper books always" Carvalho says

An Hammer production movie script meets Night Train & Strangers on a Train. This is what I say. I always enjoy watching Hammer films so when I read the synopsis of this book I had to read it. The first read of the year 2012. I had never read anything by this author and after reading this book I will try again I guess (If I have the time).

This story is a story within a story. The story is about a writer who has come from America to write a script for Hammer Production but the great chunk of the book is about the script itself that he wrote in a couple of days. I must say it was a nice tale and I good see it as a movie script. If Hammer productions had the money to do it. We get to see Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing and that's always a joy.

The tale itself is set on the brink of WWI and four passangers embark on a train on their way to hell. They must confront their worst fears and battle it's residents.

Of course the writer wrote this as a tribute to Hammer films so you've got several stereotypes that are presented on the movies. The fatale female or the problematic vicar are two examples. Even the monsters are there. The writer even says that there is no problem with the budget because most of the set would be taken from other movies (like it was done in real hammer films).

In the end you will be satisfied with the book if you used to see the Hammer films. If you didn't you will want to see them. Nice book, nice characterization, nice plot. A good read.

Tim Pendry says

Christopher Fowler is not always a consistent writer but what he does do very well is gut existential horror,

the sort that really suggests the possibility of loss and despair.

This novel spends its first third being a tolerable pastiche of the Hammer genre (deliberately so) but it really takes off around page 100.

What can be said straightaway is that he has made a real effort to understand the Hammer Horror studio, its history, its business and its 'memes'. The picture he draws matches precisely that offered in the history of the studio that we reviewed two and a half years ago.

[For that history, go to: <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...> - "A Thing Of Unspeakable Horror: The History Of Hammer Films"]

Key characters ARE Peter Cushing, Frances Matthews and Christopher Lee. We see the actors in their roles as we read. As for the heroine, she is less identifiable as an actress but perfectly identifiable as a Hammer heroine, albeit one permitted to have many more lines and a presence.

There is even the inn in a town threatened by an unspeakable evil where our heroine is the bar maid, courted by yokels far less interesting than our hero – although there is a nice twist to that cliché at the end (of which nothing may be said here).

One way to handle a review of this book would be to express admiration, with example after example, of the way that Fowler has memorialised almost every aspect of the era, even the rival portmanteau style of Hammer's rival Amicus (with a nod to Corman as well).

But this would be self-indulgent. Worse, I would be showing off my own knowledge of the tradition as a British horror geek. Just to let you know that, if you know your British horror, and especially your British horror of the 1970s, you will get great pleasure from his weaving of themes.

If you do not know the tradition, don't worry. You may find the first 100 pages just a little bit hackneyed but what follows will certainly engage you fully. Once, for the first time in decades, I actually felt the presence of evil just behind my right shoulder and my spine really did shiver.

We don't do spoilers here. The plot line is in the GoodReads introduction but suffice it to say that our protagonists, three English travelers and a 'rescued' peasant wench, have to go through a test. If they fail, they lose their souls – none in the past have been known to do other than fail.

Each of the tests is a variation on a well known tale of terror - not just from Hammer films: hommage is paid to Hoffman, Bosch, Corman, Wheatley and Lovecraft amongst others. You could bring out a highly annotated special edition that would be a course in itself on horror memetics.

There is one section that is quite remarkable for bringing fictional horror into line with reality. The story is set in an indeterminate wartime period that does not hold water historically but which somehow holds water artistically.

It is a landscape made fit for ghoul-vampires, deadly diseases, zombies en route to eternal perdition. We are in Carpathia as you might expect and, by a strange route, the horrors of trench warfare intrude. I have to be careful here because of the rule on spoilers.

But I defy anyone not to find that the fantastical horror based on mythic creatures is as nothing to the story of

the maiden trip of the Hell Train ... we know what Fowler is getting at here. It reminds us that horror is not a fiction in the world but a periodic reality of staggering evil.

This would be a great work but Fowler can be a little stolid in his writing when he is not engaged in the business of scaring the hell out of us.

Characterization was not a strong suit for Hammer with its stock figures but Fowler still errs an edge too far in following that tradition.

We know he can write very well but we also know that he can dumb himself down for his reading public. He is not the only contemporary writer doing this. Perhaps something is happening in the mass market that requires a 'tumpty-tum', 'this-then-this' style of narrative. Who knows?

Still, the framework story, which he keeps firmly within the real world and which he refuses to allow to be infected by his fantasy, is very well written. This book shows him on the edge of greatness and is highly recommended for horror buffs, whether cinematic or literary.

Neil Robarge says

I thought the story of the abandoned tale was hard for me to follow. I am only 13 years old and this book is meant for adults, but I still think it should've been easier to follow the story. What I got from this book is that the main story of the book is a horror movie that Hammer Horror Films abandoned because they didn't think that it was worth the money. The only part of this book that I could really follow was the part where Nicholas meets Isabella in a small rotten town, where women are treated as servants. Other than that, I couldn't really piece the rest of the story together.

Ade Couper says

Now , this is lovely!

Christopher Fowler (@peculiar on twitter...!) is a brilliant writer , & , like me , he's obviously got Hammer Horror as 1 of his guilty pleasures...so , welcome to Hell Train!

The main plot is simple - 4 characters (Nicholas , a deserting soldier , Tom & Miranda , a vicar & his wife , & Isabella , a local peasant girl) are trapped at a railway station in Carpathia in WW1 - there's only 1 train out , & guess where it's going.....

There is a veritable gallery of grotesques on Board , including The Conductor , The Stoker , The Red Countess , Mr Feeley , & The Controller , all of whom want our heroes to end up at the train's final destination .

There's also a very clever arc around the story , telling the tale of how the writer of the movie left Roger Corman's studio & ended up writing the tale (I suppose you could call it postmodern , but I call it fun....).

Well-told , & you can imagine it on screen . For the record , my cast would be :

Nicholas - Shane Briant
Isabella - Angela Douglas
Tom - Francis Matthews
Miranda - Barbara Shelley
The Conductor - Christopher Lee
Professor Io - Freddie Jones
Mr Feeley / The Undertaker - Peter Cushing
Stoker - Patrick Troughton
The Controller - Robert Morley
The Ghoul - Oliver Reed .

Excellent . Buy It . Now.
