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Four young friends, troubled by personal problems, find their wishes horrifyingly granted and twenty-five years later, still haunted by the tragic consequences of their wishes, try to break their pacts with the Devil.

Obsession Details

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Author : Ramsey Campbell

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From Reader Review Obsession for online ebook

Tom A. says

A great and slow burning Faustian idea trapped in a meandering and uninvolved story.

I want to declare that I love slow burn/quiet horror. It is a type of horror that is derided nowadays for being too slow and uninteresting, with works in this subgenre often ending up unread, unwatched, or just remaining unknown. Suffice to say, if you work in this genre, it's an uphill battle to financial success.

But none of that is a problem when you are Ramsey Campbell, an author touted by many as the successor to M.R. James. Since the dawn of his career, Campbell has indulged in this type of unassuming horror: non-straightforward tales filled with tons of insinuations of unutterable horrors, characters who lose their grip on reality, and/or inexplicable endings that makes the reader ponder whether the whole thing was a result of said unutterable horrors or the result of a character losing his grip on reality. (Campbell does mention that he counts as one of his influences Alain Resnais, who directed the classic headscratcher *Last Year at Marienbad* (1960))

This brings us to his tale of Faustian Horror, *Obsession*. Campbell was influenced by the scene in *Rocky III* (1982) wherein Rocky accepts a favor from Creed to help Rocky regain the "eye of the tiger" without knowing the price to pay for such a favor. Campbell crafts a plot that uses this unnoticed conundrum, but with the added ambiguity of not knowing who or what you are asking the favor from. In this case, four friends with pressing family and social problems (Peter, Jimmy, Steve and Robin) decide -out of innocent fun- to fill out a set of forms sent anonymously to Peter. The four identical forms contain the following statements:

1. WHATEVER YOU MOST NEED I DO.
2. WHAT I MOST NEED IS
3. Without a signature this form is invalid
4. Your price is something which you do not value and which you may not regain.

The four friends then transcribe their most immediate and pressing needs and before they have a chance to reconsider, the pages are blown away by the wind and fall into the sea. After that their wishes are eerily granted, but one of them gets to regret his wish for a long time.

Flash forward 25 years later and the gang of four all have different jobs and are now confronted with bigger personal and professional problems. But Peter (now a social worker hounded by the violent brother of one of the women under his care) sees things in a different light. Haunted occasionally by the ghost of his dead grandmother (a consequence of his wish?), he believes that the time to pay the price for their childish wishes is now. After Jimmy's wife suffers a fatal accident by following the supposed voice of a child calling for help in an abandoned theatre, Peter might not be wrong after all...

The premise of the story is pure gold. Campbell combines a fresh take on the Faustian theme with Magical Realism, with the mysterious forms being the primary fantastical element as opposed to the grittiness of the character's lives in their dead-end seaside town. It is such a strong element that despite their initial disappearance they continue to be the driving force that moves the story forward.

Having said that, I would like to say that while I enjoyed and was excited by the initial concept and ideas of

Campbell, their execution was entirely lacking and underwhelming, as it was a chore to read through the rest of the book. I am fine with and actually prefer the quiet horror trope of suggesting rather than showing and dealing with latent evil as opposed to a more tangible threat, but I barely read any of that in *Obsession*. I was 64% done with the book and all I have read were the never-ending lamentations of the various characters on their sorry state of life. Instead of piling up and building on the dread, we are treated to what seems to be lost scenes from BBC family dramas or from those Ken Loach middle-class life-is-so-hard films. The worst part of it all is that because of the constant bemoaning of the characters of their personal problems, I would often think of them as boring caricatures and mouthpieces for Campbell's pet peeves (uptight and restrictive upbringing of children, mentally ill family members etc.) rather than well fleshed out characters.

I can criticize Campbell because I have read better things from him. "Midnight Sun" had an incredible and slow buildup that led to a satisfying ending. Campbell's short story "Through the Walls" was a masterclass in quiet horror, with every scene pregnant with suggestive horror that works despite the leisurely pace. Compared to those works, *Obsession* is too mild and tame, even by Campbell's standards.

Despite all that, I can say that it does pick up near the end of book, with its nontraditional way of resolving the conflict at hand. Even if it was meandering, the work surprised me with its unpredictability, a quality lacking from most films and books in the genre. I also appreciated Campbell's sense of restraint when it comes to the horrific scenes. Too often writers would milk the scene to the hilt, describing the thing or monster, killing any sense of mystery and dread. In here Campbell does the opposite with having it being sensed, then letting it disappear. The scene that best embodies this is the one where Peter realizes that his horrible wish is about to be fulfilled and there is nothing he can do about it.

If you are an absolute fan of these type of story, then you will enjoy this. But if you are not willing to endure having great horror ideas slammed inside bland domestic drama, then stay away.

Quentin Wallace says

This was my second book from Ramsey Campbell, and honestly I'm still not sure how I feel about the author. *Obsession* starts out interesting enough, then it gets really slow. Then it speeds back up. Overall it wasn't bad. There are ghosts in the story, but you aren't quite sure if they are real or in the character's head. (Seems to lean more towards real, but it still makes you wonder.) Also, I felt as though some things were left unexplained that I would much rather have had a clear cut explanation. It is an interesting character study as the main characters all have wide and varied issues which are fascinating at times. Overall though, I was still left with a "blah" feeling once I finished.

I have mixed feelings about the book. I did enjoy it, so I suppose I would recommend it. If you enjoy twisted character studies, this is the book for you.

Brett says

Horror

Kevin Lucia says

Continuing Samhain Horror's line of re-printed Ramsey Campbell novels is "Obsession", a novel hinging on one of the most classic of all cautionary themes, be careful what you wish for...you may just get it. In this novel, half-hearted, juvenile wishes are granted in horrible, unimaginable ways, but - as always in these tales - there's a price to pay. A terrible one, which is visited years down the road, after the wishes have long been forgotten.

A group of friends are faced with a fantastic, impossible scenario: wishing away their adolescent problems. Peter's grandmother has recently moved in, changing he and his family's way of life. Jimmy's father is forever throwing money away at the horse races, even as their little family-run cafe is failing. Steve - a budding communist - faces persecution at school from a teacher because of his beliefs. And Robin's single mother must constantly deal with sexual harassment in the workplace.

These are problems of life. And like all problems, there are no easy answers. Or are there? Because one day, Peter receives in the mail a form and a very simple letter reading the following:

Whatever you most need, I do. The price is something that you do not value and which you may regain.

Thinking the whole matter a hoax, the four friends fill out their forms and make their wishes on a bluff overlooking the coast. However, at an inopportune - and eerie - moment, the forms are all torn from their grasps by the wind and blown out to sea, and they are quick to chalk the whole thing up to exactly what they'd imagined it to be: a prank.

But the wishes come true. In some ways horrible, in others unexpected, but looming behind them all is the second stipulation of the letter: the price. But of course they are children, flexible and adaptable and very willing to forget, which is exactly what they do. Forget, separate, grow up and live their own lives. And, really - could the price be so bad? Especially considering that it would be something that they "do not value"?

However, twenty-five years later, they realize a terrifying truth: that what they value NOW very likely was something they did NOT value when they made the pact. So what they'd have no fear of losing as adolescents...may now be the most important things to them.

As always, Campbell mines feelings and emotions from the deep well of the human condition. And, especially in this work, his supernatural touch is very light. It's there, in the letters and some hauntings, but so much of this novel is about the characters themselves: how their lives may or may not have turned out how they wanted, (Peter's dull, bland life), how they deal with tragedy, (Jimmy's wife's death), adversity, (Steve's marital problems) and illness (Robin's mother slipping deeper into dementia and Alzheimer's). The real horror in this novel is life and mistakes and failure and desperation, which very much lift it above normal horror fare.

Alejandro says

One of my first Horror novels!

WHERE IN THE WORLD IS THIS BOOK?!

I had some trouble to locate this particular novel on GR due that when I read this book, I did it on a translated-to-Spanish edition and the publishing house who managed that edition, they decided to become creative with the title, and in Spanish, this book was marketed as "Cartas Malditas" (Cursed Letters), so from Cartas Malditas to Obsession, it was quite a "lost in translation" leap!

BUT when you read the novel, you have to admit that it's not so farfetched option for a title, but when they changed it so much a title of a book, it can become a mess to pinpoint the book, specially if the author is one so prolific as Ramsey Campbell.

CURSED LETTERS... ER... I MEAN OBSESSION!

I loved this book.

I am kinda shocked that it was rated here so low, because I really think that it's an exceptional horror novel, at least in my humble personal opinion, true, it was one of my first Horror novels (back then in 1991), but I still think that if I'd re-read it again, it would still remain as a great reading experience again.

The premise is kinda cliché, a group of friends get the chance to make a wish and you can bet that those wishes will be fulfilled but the outcome will be something unexpected and terrible.

Since wishes always come with a price.

But, it's just the very reason to read a novel like these one.

You may know the type of story and you may have a pretty good idea of how it will developed, however you still want to read it.

Because this kind of Horror novels is so much creepy fun!

I think that the grand master Ramsey Campbell designed a great cast of characters.

Each one with a very particular personal background and he gave them believable motivations for the wishes that they asked.

If you like horror novels and/or you are fan of Campbell, you should give to this book a chance...

...who knows?

Maybe you get...

...obsessed with it!

Pam Baddeley says

The premise of this novel is simple: a group of four teenagers, all with what seem insurmountable problems in their home life, fill out and sign forms which have been sent anonymously to one of them - from someone who claims to be able to solve their most pressing problems in return for something they do not value. Then those forms are snatched by the wind and blown out to sea, and soon afterwards events occur which seem to be in direct relation to the problem they each described. The trouble is, in some cases that solution is fairly horrible - especially in the case of Peter's slightly senile grandmother.

Move forward 25 years to the, in some cases, unsatisfactory adult life each of them has built and the problems start coming home to roost - because the things they didn't care about at the time, such as reputation or success in business, start to be destroyed. There is a creepy atmosphere to all this, although the only overt supernatural element is the return of Peter's grandmother who is bent on revenge. The most horrific part of the story is probably the portrayal of senile dementia/Alzheimers in the character of the mother who sets about systematically destroying her daughter's reputation as a doctor and even trying to get her put into jail for drug dealing (which she is not doing). The story does succeed in creating sympathy for at least three of the four, although I found some difficulty relating to Peter who is the most damaged of the grown characters. For that and the occasionally too over the top aspects I would rate this story as 4 star.

L. Chambers-Wright says

I have a soft spot for Ramsey Campbell and have liked *Obsession* for years. The novel twists and turns, the pages fly by and you aren't certain precisely who is behind the ominous letter. The conclusion was shocking.

Sistermagpie says

This was a book that was sometimes an irritating read--not because it was badly written but because you're stuck with characters who are being tormented so you're tormented with them. But it's definitely compelling--I know that because twice I was surprised to look up and discover I was almost at my stop on the subway.

Basically: four kids make a wish on a mysterious form. Each one wants to get rid of someone in their life. The price, according to the form, is something they don't value, and something they can get back. Only years later does the payment seem to come due--at which point their values have, of course, greatly changed.
