

Zudd: No Bargain in Debasement

Alan Grossberg

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Reviewed by Tyler R. Tichelaar for Reader Views (8/08)

Catherine Harlow has a sexual appetite, and she also is ambitious in other ways, but sometimes sex gets in her way from making rational decisions. Catherine is intelligent and she has a great job, but what has come to control her life is her frustration that she has never been able to have an orgasm. In her quest for this pleasure, she loses control over her sexual appetites and her reason, making her unable to have a normal relationship with a man.

Catherine soon becomes involved with several different men, including her much older, multi-millionaire boss, Harrison Foote III, Tom, a Welshman who is the most decent of her lovers but unable to give her an orgasm, and Homer Zudd, who lives in the basement and has strange sado-masochistic passions. All of these men want Catherine and she is apparently willing to give herself to all of them in her quest for sexual gratification.

While the novel is named for Homer Zudd, Catherine is really the main character. What I found compelling and fascinating was that Catherine could rationally find reasons to be with all men. Her indecisiveness and her sexual hunger provided an interesting portrayal into someone who seemed sexually addicted and unable always to control herself. While the men in the novel were all smitten with Catherine, only Zudd ever seemed really out of control—and even he did not lose control in his passion since he had his own reasons to want Catherine that went beyond sex.

In some ways, Zudd seemed a bit stereotypical—the crazy person who lived in the basement—but Zudd's craziness I found to be fascinating. He believes he can use Catherine to help him breed a superhuman race. It was almost like a madman scheme from a comic book, yet I found him convincing as a character.

Without giving away the plot, I will say the novel culminates in some violence, which when the book was first written in 1976 was perhaps more shocking than it is today. The novel is set in New York, and destruction of the city is threatened in the novel, and the city is also violent and immoral. What may have been unthinkable back in 1976 is today too likely after the events of 9/11. I think Alan Grossberg will probably hit a real chord with this novel.

While some women may find Catherine's character belittling to women, the truth of the matter is that there are sexual addicts out there who make bad decisions because they cannot handle their cravings. I read the book and Catherine's relationship with Zudd especially as an example of what can happen when a person does not control her or his desires. The borderline into insanity or an inability from stopping oneself from what is wrong or just not healthy is not that hard to cross.

I think anyone who enjoys a lot of action and erotic love scenes, with a little sado-masochism on the side—in other words, a mature and not easily offended reader—will enjoy “Zudd” by Alan Grossberg. I personally found the character portrayals well-developed, which for me was the strong point of the novel. Female readers may find Catherine offensive, but I think male readers will simply find the novel entertaining.