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New 'Hannibal' lacks urgency, plot interest

HANNIBAL from page 5

book. What Harris does not do well is the give this narrative a reason to drive toward anything. Unlike "Silence" which held at stake the life of a young woman, (considering the violence in both, it's trivial, yes, but still riveting) "Hannibal" is a manhunt for a hunter of men, ironic, true enough, but hardly invigorating. We're smart enough to know that Verger will eventually make a mistake.

As for Verger, his persona seems comically evil, as Harris apparently saw the need to create a character who actually deserved Lecter's torture. Verger's mean all right, which would strike a truer note if more insight were given into his development as a monstrous child.

Starling hangs through much of the story with little to do but fear for her future as an FBI agent. She has gained some powerful enemies along the way: a Department of Justice official who got her cold shoulder and Verger himself. But, basically, Starling exists as a saner companion to Lecter, less his foil here than his protector.

Eventually, Lecter returns state-side, the confrontation between he and Verger does happen, as expected. What is not expected is the poor manner in which Harris handles an obviously important matter. It took or two or three re-readings to nail the image, and even then, so many people are

involved and so little description is given, the major scene is lost.

But it is hardly the book's end, which must be read to be believed. After the final page, it's hard not to break out in a smile, not unlike the ending to "Silence." Here, though, almost no door has been left open to a sequel, and it will be fascinating to see if a movie (which, frankly, brought more attention and more adulation to the last book than the book ever could have) decides to dump this closing in favor for an alternate one. So foolish is Harris' choice for an end.

It is not his biggest sin, though, which remains a failure to establish tension. Harris banks for us to care for Starling so much that it becomes a necessity she keep her FBI job. That necessity for Harris reveals a larger need to keep Starling relatively angelic for purposes that sustains only a mild sense of irony at the end.

Harris is by no means not a talent. His style is clear and succinct; his mastery of detail, both main and auxiliary, remains among the best in his craft. The evolution of Lecter is the book's biggest delight, as it plays to Harris' strength. Any novel in which such a multi-layered, enjoyable character exists can not be all bad. Had he cast Lecter in role that required more of him than as fugitive, "Hannibal" would have been more engrossing.

But Harris forces us to root for Lecter with his creation of horror all around. I prefer choosing to root for the evil doctor; it's much more fun.

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