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THRILLER

The Killing Kind by Chris Holm
Mulholland Books
ISBN 978-0-316-25953-8
Pub. Date: September 15, 2015
320 pages

"The Killing Kind is a special blend of knock 'em, sock 'em and intelligence"

BOOK REVIEW: When the Hunters Get Hunted

BY ADAM ROSEN



What would happen if a gorilla took on a water buffalo? Or a subway train played tug-of-war with a jet? I can't say, but surely it'd be fun to know. A marginally less hypothetical but no less titillating barstool speculation sets up Chris Holm's clever new thriller, *The Killing Kind*, which explores how things might play out if a bunch of seasoned hitmen were turned loose on one another.

The main killer after our sympathy and narrative attention is Michael Hendricks, a damaged thirty-something who learned his trade the legal way: in the army. A long reminiscence early in the book brings us up to speed. Having shown enormous promise in the ability to snuff the life out of humans, Hendricks was sent to Afghanistan where he joined a black-ops unit specializing in false-flag political assassinations. In the name of national security, he's dispatched on late-night raids that involve slitting the throats of village leaders and finishing off their families.

A roadside bomb outside Kandahar killed everyone in Hendricks's unit except for him and the group's brilliant code-breaker, Lester. Though his legs were destroyed in the

blast, Lester was able to crawl to safety, but Hendricks, knocked nearly into oblivion, lay unconscious for days. "Near feral, operating on instinct," he stumbled toward to Pakistan, dodging both Afghani insurgents and American troops. As his faculties slowly return, Hendricks decides to remain "disappeared" — not only from the army, but also from the love of his life, his fiancée Evie. "It was for the best," he decides. "He never could have faced her knowing what he'd become — a monster, a ghost." In Pakistan, he takes on a new identity and contemplates his next act.

Peculiar though it may seem, becoming a murderer for hire is actually Hendricks's attempt to atone for his misdeeds. Disillusioned by his time in Afghanistan, Hendricks decides to live by his own concocted warrior code: he'll only take out other hitmen, reasoning that "once you agree to kill an innocent, you deserve whatever's coming to you... riding the world of people who murder people for a living was some kind of public service." This kind of altruism isn't completely without its benefits. Before he agrees to kill a hitter, he approaches their target and demands 10 times the bounty on the target's head. Still, this new path offers Hendricks an opportunity for a kind of redemption. With his unique moral framework in place, Hendricks "couldn't help but try to make things right, one murder at a time."

When the story returns to the present, Hendricks has become a seasoned killer of killers-for-hire. Like any hardworking striver, his occupation takes him all across our great land, including to Miami, where he's hired to intervene on behalf of a local real estate developer whose lawful racket has been threatening the mob's illicit one.

In fact, Hendricks has the mob to thank for the booming success of his second career. With the help of Lester, whom he reconnects with after his secret arrival back in the States, Hendricks discovers how to intercept the mob's murder contracts. Consequently, for the past three years every contract the mob has put out has been detected by Hendricks. Targets who refuse to pay up, or whom Hendricks considers deserving (e.g. a domestic abuser nightclub owner) are left to their fate, but Hendricks winds up saving a lot of lives. (And, of course, taking a lot of them.) The mob, unsurprisingly, is none too pleased. In desperation they send for a super-hitter named Alexander Engelmann, a dandy but deadly sophisticate with a summer manor and a pile of Moleskines. Engelmann's charge is to find the ghost killer, whoever he is, and eliminate him.

The mob contacts Engelmann right around the time of Hendricks's Miami caper, and he heads to America to seek his very substantial fortune — and sets off the conflict. Engelmann's strategy is to draw Hendricks out by trailing the mob's murderers-for-hire, and he finds his bait in Leon Leonwood, a bizarrely named but convincingly psychopathic enforcer from South Boston who is sent to a Kansas City casino to take out an informant. Oh, and the FBI, which has been slowly — very slowly — piecing together Hendricks's string of killings, begins closing in on him, too. (There's also the subplot involving Hendricks's ex-lover, but it takes up so little space and dramatic energy it's mostly forgettable.)

Tying up all of these loose ends might've been overwhelming, but Holm is a gifted weaver. The story jumps between characters and time zones without confusion, and the tension bomb ignited by the characters' rendezvous in Kansas City couldn't have been so powerful had the various backstories not been so well synced. Feel your pulse echoing against the page as the killing machines walk past each other, unknowingly, inside the casino. If you miss your bus stop, I'll understand.

If there's a weakness, it's the dialogue. Too many of the characters sound alike, as if their speech was lifted from a James Cagney retrospective; I stopped counting all of the elided Gs and liberally sprinkled "aint's" and "whaddayas" early on. Engelmann, however, is a refreshing exception; his Euro-villain delivery is perfectly over-the-top understatement. He feels like a bad guy to remember, a man of wealth and taste who adores blazers and disdains "gauche" Americanisms like tipping. His refined wit — and verbal restraint — becomes increasingly attractive when some of the other



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characters won't stop talking.

Otherwise, however, Holm is an expert craftsman. *The Killing Kind* is a special blend of knock 'em, sock 'em and intelligence, and his descriptions of his characters' thoughts and various contemplations on the crappy way humans behave are an example of artful economy. After one violent scene, ratings-seeking news choppers descend "like blowflies over carrion when they caught wind on their scanner of yet another juicy morsel for their never-ending misery buffet."

At any rate, the specter of the showdown between the hitmen and the cops is too suspenseful to be dragged down much, and the occasional distraction of wooden dialogue or 1950s-era tough-guy talk eventually fades into the background.

The vet returning from battle has a long history in American storytelling, and *The Killing Kind* could be considered a contemporary entrant in the diverse genre. With the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan winding down (for the time being, at least), prepare for more fiction about millennials whose war experiences are used to define them. *The Killing Kind's* ambitions plainly lie with entertainment, but I think it could still be considered a soft meditation on the costs of our adventures abroad. Hendricks isn't psychologically obliterated, like, say, Vietnam vet Travis Bickle, and he seems at least at peace with his new life. But there's a point to be made about the absurd way he adjusts back into civilian life.

Message or not, *The Killing Kind* is proof that in the proper hands even the most outrageous bar debates can be successfully converted into a tantalizing story. The concept of multiple hitmen playing cat and mouse with each other in the shadow of Wal-Mart and rental car agencies is pure fantasy — and pure fun. It's not as outlandish as a rumble between a gorilla and water buffalo, but it's definitely an idea that kills.

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