

Black Shadow Detective Agency: Demon for Hire

Count S. A. Olson

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Black Shadow Detective Agency is a fun and grisly fantasy novel whose demon detective pays loving homage to the noir and horror situations he inhabits.

Count S. A. Olson's fantasy novel *Black Shadow Detective Agency* conjures up a memorable demon detective for hire.

The first book in a series, this pulp-inspired work follows a half-demon detective, Jason Black, as he investigates supernatural crimes, knowing that it takes a monster to bring other monsters to justice. Black is the type of gumshoe who swills bourbon and takes on outlier cases, as when he accepts a child as a client in return for a nickel after learning that the girl's father was abducted by a cult. With his crow familiar Shadow, who sometimes catches clues that his master misses, he investigates three cases herein—mysteries that pit him against fellow demons, werewolves, vampires, and Nazis. The cases often result in extreme violence, with liters of blood spilled, bones broken, and teeth knocked out.

The action takes place in a supernatural version of the Twin Cities: here, Minneapolis earns the nickname "Murderapolis," sorcerers double as lawyers, and Black makes calls to Countess Blood Wolf and Scar Face Sarah. The setting is populated by succubi, shadow men, and magic, weaving in the otherworldly as commonplace. The book excels at such world building, slipping in snippets of background information with ease, as when it reveals why enchanted silver bullets work against a variety of mystical creatures or notes that Black hasn't "worn armor since his last stint in a Hell-bound army during the Knights' War."

Black, who is sometimes prone to blustering, also exhibits world-weary cynicism and a biting wit. He notes that his crow "couldn't organize a spreadsheet for the life of him." As he handles clues from books of the occult, faces the use of dragon's blood in rituals, and witnesses the deployment of blood magic in curses, he introduces the layers of his investigations in the rich context of the book's broader mythology.

The prose is stylish and staccato in its rhythm, and its conversations are direct and lively: Black threatens an addict's access to black tar; he tells a person being dragged off by goblins to give his best regards to her torturers; he asks his secretary to "stop by the pharmacy and pick up a couple of bottles of cold medicine," and she replies that's she'll "go over to Grand Street Liquors for [him]." Here and elsewhere, the book riffs on genre tropes in a playful way, subverting expectations. Further, Black is seen reading dime-store pulp novels, passing time with Mickey Spillane during a stakeout. Each of his three cases is resolved in a comparatively tidy format; still, the book generates excitement for the next series installment.

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JOSEPH S. PETE (April 22, 2023)

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