



The Smell of Evil

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A sinister baron and his wife inflict unimaginable tortures on their young niece to compel her to sign over her fortune. - In the aftermath of World War II, a German woman's garden is lush and beautiful, for an appalling reason. - Missionaries in Africa get a gruesome surprise when their converts take a biblical text too literally. - A child's fantasy becomes a deadly game with a macabre ending for his adult playmate. The thirteen stories in *The Smell of Evil* (1965) reveal Sir Charles Birkin (1907-1985) at his diabolical best. Largely eschewing ghost stories and tales of the supernatural, Birkin pioneered a different type of modern horror fiction, describing in exquisitely polished prose the sufferings of ordinary, decent people who encounter inexplicable cruelty and evil in their everyday lives. An important and neglected figure in 20th century British horror fiction, Birkin returns to shock a new generation of readers in this edition, the first in more than 30 years, which features a new introduction by John Llewellyn Probert.

The Smell of Evil Details

Date : Published June 1965 by Tandem Books

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Author : Charles Birkin

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Laura says

Another of Valancourt's reissues of hard-to-find horror. I should be pleased about that, but somehow all I can manage is a yawn. Birkin's crisply written contes cruels seemed to influence almost everyone who contributed to Herbert van Thal's anthologies for Pan, and he excelled in devising nasty happenings and plotlines. Unfortunately, it is all too clear that what frightens him (women, lesbians, the disabled, members of other races who haven't been to Eton) are not necessarily what frightens a modern reader. His characters are stuffed dummies waiting to be tortured - despite those lazy comparisons with Poe made by some of his critics, you'll be very disappointed if you're looking for 'The Cask of Amontillado II'. Birkin's psychology is crude, and his stories don't merit a second reading. What they do offer is a somewhat callow nastiness and lashings of cheap irony. That's probably why I enjoyed them when I was thirteen. What a lovely girl I was. So young. So innocent. To quote Victoria Wood, 'I never knew you could wake up feeling bored.'

Jesse says

I found Charles Birkin's collection of contes cruels a bit hit or miss. I appreciated his detailed style, his tight plotting, his wide range of characters and settings, and his black sense of humor, and I even appreciated the extreme misanthropy which he is so well known for. When all of these elements come together and he's firing on all cylinders, as in the title story, "The Lesson", "Green Fingers", and "Dance Little Lady," I found him to be a very tense but literate writer, able to set up despairingly bleak Rube Goldberg devices of human depravity with a cunning understanding of the darker aspects of human nature. What left me feeling cold was the often very predictable twists of some of his stories, and the sometimes problematic treatment of minority groups. But while I could deal with those, I think a lot of the time his unavailing stuffiness could get in the way of the story, dulling its emotional impact. Not to mention that sometimes, though they may have interesting setups, as in "The Cornered Beast," they simply don't go anywhere interesting, and left me feeling quite cold. Overall, while I did enjoy his stories more often than not, I wouldn't call them essential. Read at your own risk.

Rob Twinem says

An enjoyable book of short horror stories by Charles Birkin with one story of sheer brilliance. Hilde Berger is flattered and enjoys the attentions of Herr Major Karl Schultz but her real love is the garden as it flourishes and blooms and each year she wins many accolades and awards at the local flower show... "The garden, too, which was spacious, covering as it did more than an acre, was a credit to her industry. The closely weeded gravel walks enclosed oblong or triangular beds of roses, while during the summer months a hedge of sweet peas at the end of the main path of shaven grass shut off the vegetable section from view. On this July day both roses and sweet peas were at their peak." The good Major always arrives with his lorry and trusty "kapo" the latter ensuring that the garden always looks well and that the displays are immaculate. There is however a price to be paid and the realization when presented is both a joy and a horror to an unsuspecting reader.

Evan says

Another excellent collection from Birkin.

Tiffany Anne says

This collection was a bit of a yawn. It didn't go as far as I was hoping. There was only one story I really enjoyed and the rest I've already forgotten.

Jack Tripper says

Here's the cover of the 1969 Award Books mass-market I have (187 pages). I can only read Birkin in small doses, as his (usually non-supernatural) contes cruel can be horrifying and hard to stomach.
