



Mortality Bridge

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Decades ago a young rock and blues guitarist and junkie named Niko signed in blood on the dotted line and in return became the stuff of music legend. But when the love of his damned life grows mortally and mysteriously ill he realizes he's lost more than he bargained for--and that wasn't part of the Deal.

So Niko sets out on a harrowing journey from the streets of Los Angeles through the downtown subway tunnels and across the redlit plain of the most vividly realized Hell since Dante, to play the gig of his mortgaged life and win back the purloined soul of his lost love.

Mortality Bridge remixes Orpheus, Dante, Faust, the Crossroads legend, and more in a beautiful, brutal--and surprisingly funny--quest across a Hieronymous Bosch landscape of myth, music, and mayhem; and across an inner terrain of addiction, damnation, and redemption.

Mortality Bridge Details

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Author : Steven R. Boyett

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From Reader Review Mortality Bridge for online ebook

Corey Sanders says

There is a lot of good prose here, but not really enough story or new ideas to make it worth my time. We're talking about basically the Orpheus story. And it isn't even a surprise. The author keeps reminding you that it is the Orpheus story. It is a new take and style, but I want new ideas, not new styles.

Bob Delorme says

Picture Orpheus, Faustus, Dante, and Niven and Pournelle's "Inferno" as written by Stephen King's twisted younger brother and you'll be close to Mortality Bridge. The prose is strong enough that I keep highlighting paragraphs....and yet it's filled with a sense of disgust that will make you cringe. And every once in awhile you'll laugh out loud at the absurdity....You should read this book! It will stay with you long after you read the final page

Gar says

Entirely too much of the length is taking up by a sluggish travelogue through Hell. There are some good bits, but I think the whole affair would have been much better at half or less the length.

Here's the thing: it's a bit of common horror-movie wisdom that the scariest things are the ones you don't see, that are only suggested, that let the mind start filling in details more viscerally. When you show the monster and whatnot, it loses most of the impact. If you show it over and over, it can get either silly or tedious or both. In the book's case, there is so much verbiage dedicated to various damned tortures, which go on and on and on. It's exhausting and numbing. Which is part of the point, I suspect, but that point is a horse corpse beaten to a thin paste until all organic material has fully rejoined the carbon cycle and all the carbon that's been incorporated into new horses have likewise been beaten. At a certain point, the reaction to yet another damned soul being, I don't know, force fed feces as they're pulled apart with wooden spoons that are really splintery and coated in lemon juice becomes GET ON WITH IT.

Also, the theology behind it all is kind of a serious mess. Our hero is the reincarnation of Orpheus who has done this kind of doomed love-rescuing over and over again, but Hell is still eternal. Which could be an interesting bit of dissonance to explore, but it never really is; "you're Orpheus, dude!" is just sort of thrown out there and nothing interesting is done with. The whole thing's climax is breaking a mythic cycle, so the mythic cycle in question deserved the focus, not tedious torture exposition.

There are good bits, though, which is why overall I was mostly irritated by it. There's a great bit with our hero crossing a bridge of souls over Lethe consisting of the tangled bodies of everyone he's known in life, which is essentially the thematic climax of the novel and gets at what allowed him to break that mythic cycle. Also, it was a case of Hellish imagery that actually served a purpose other than numbing.

Overall, I think it's going to make me reread Surface Detail.

Gordon Sleigh says

Hmm, can't really make up my mind on this one. It wasn't poorly written, and I've greatly enjoyed Boyett's books in the past. While Ariel had some strange subtext in it it was a pleasurable read and Elegy Beach was similarly compelling. This one is... more generic in some ways and off-putting in others. I almost didn't make it through the second act purely based on the content, not the writing. Something I've never done before. Boyett wears his influences in the open, telegraphing them in fact, but this depiction of Hell and its horrors was almost needlessly sadistic through most of the second act. Yes, yes, I get it. Hell isn't an Ikea Ball Pit, but almost the entire second act was nothing but increasingly heinous descriptions of debasement like the author set a goal to outdo himself with each chapter. There's something to be said for more psychological/implied horror vs viscerally slathering it on the page. While it shows creativity in descriptive writing it ironically shows a lack of imagination in writing, IMO.

Regardless, it's a fairly rote story otherwise. Clearly (And admittedly) a melange of Orpheus meets the Crossroads there wasn't a lot of surprise here. Musician makes a deal for his soul, his wife's soul is damned by proxy, he wades into hell to retrieve it. You can pretty much imagine the entire story accurately just from that description and, if you have a weak stomach for horror/gore/suffering, I suggest you leave it at that.

Melinda says

Superbly Written Quest through a Literary-based Hell

WARNING!

This story is not for the faint of heart, or the faint of spirit.

It is a book you will either love or you will hate...but I adore it.

It is an intense combination of gut-wrenching introspection, heroic determination and brutal carnage with a slice of hope on the side.

I only ask that you give it a chance and not DNF as a knee-jerk reaction to the violence.

It was worth every gory, emotional, desperate, hopeful and torturous moment. A love story set in Los Angeles and Hell? Bring it on. Steven Boyett is one twisted dude. All you have to do is look at his author photo. That double-pointed black goatee speaks volumes. Even with the visual nod to the ultimate evil, the man did considerable research through the world's collection of myth, epic poetry and legend, yet made the story his own. This book is incredible.

Basic plot synopsis: Niko, an American of Greek origin, an amazing blues guitarist, junkie, lost the love of his life, hits rock bottom after personal tragedy, makes deal with the Devil. Cleans himself up, gets famous, gets his girl back, girl dies, Niko goes to Hell to get her back. Will play in exchange for her soul.

From this barebones synopsis it may sound like Boyett warmed up the Orpheus myth with a bit of

Crossroads in the microwave and retold it in a modern setting.

That would be INCORRECT. There are aspects of Orpheus and Crossroads in this story, but it is so much MORE. Boyett created his own mythology out of a plethora of the old ones and stamped Boyett all over them. New, fresh, edgy and dark, this is not your mama's mythology.

Niko is an emotionally charged character. Much like Robert Johnson, at one point, he literally loses everything in his life and the tragedy colors his music. Niko may now be rich and famous, but he is troubled, humble and damned. The only two things that he loves are his girlfriend Jemma and his music. He will literally go to Hell and back for her, and this Hell was designed by Robert Rodriguez on acid. What more could you ask for?

There are surprising moments of camaraderie, aid from unseen allies, short stark moments of beauty and humanity amidst the torment. There is even humor. The riff on Siamese cats is LYAO...

There is also driving-by-the-seat-of-your-pants adventure, heartbreak, car chases, a few classic characters, a few moderns, the best classic car, and I can't talk about anything else or spoilers will fly out.

There are three messages that ring loud and clear above it all:

Love is the strongest power in the universe.

Take responsibility, be humble and ask forgiveness

Free will is the most precious gift imaginable, and the most underrated.

In reviews, readers throw around references to Orpheus, Dante's Inferno, Virgil's Aenead, Bosch's Underworld paintings, Robert Johnson's Crossroads, but they should also include the cult of Hades, Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, the Egyptian myth of judgment, paintings of the underworld by Bruegel, the Sumerian epic poem Gilgamesh, the Twelve Labors of Heracles, Persephone, Auguste Rodin's Orpheus and Eurydice, the epic poem The Harrowing of Christ and many others. Don't expect to find these classics in recognizable form. For example, you won't find Dante's perfectly demarcated circles of Hell with a single type of suffering for a single sin, but there will be different sections of an infinite Hell for a single sin torment, including some from the Inferno and a sighting of Virgil with his lamp. Boyett has taken, in his words, a knife, to the abundance of source material and made it his own in some uniquely extraordinary ways. His choice of torments for specific sins is ferally imaginative, downright ghastly and all his own.

Boyett takes imagery to a new level, and frankly there were two times where I wished he wasn't quite so spectacular, as I keep seeing these images as I write this review. Keep reading! The text is salted with bits of light. Just wait until you get to the aqua-eyed, stone demon that flies on filagreed wings. Now that is goodness squared.

Niko's trip through hell cannot be described without spoilers. Just buy the damned book. You'll be thanking me later (unless you abhor violence, then stop immediately).

If you appreciate the classics, are a sucker for true love and can handle the violence without tuning it out or skipping it, you have a wonderful experience just ahead. It was deeply emotional and more uplifting than any of the descriptions or reviews hinted.

Highly Recommended!

Pedro says

I couldn't finish it. Too much description for my taste

Tyler Snortum-phelps says

Loved this crazy, intense re-telling of Orpheus, with Dante and others thrown in. Almost fun enough to be escapist, but with a nice healthy dark, thoughtful edge.

Kelly says

Depressing. Disgusting. Brilliant.

When trying to think of words to describe *Mortality Bridge*, I keep coming back to variations on those three. Steven R. Boyett has written an unforgettable tale of one man's journey to Hell, and I wish I liked it better than I did. Ordinarily I enjoy descents to the underworld, but we all have our limits, and with *Mortality Bridge*, I think I've found some of mine.

The story centers on Niko, a rock musician. He was a strung-out, washed-up failure when an agent of the Devil approached him with a deal. Niko accepted — and got famous, got sober, and got his girlfriend Jemma back. But now Jemma is dying of a mysterious illness, which Niko didn't bargain for. He bones up on mythology and the occult, learning everything he can about "hadeography" (the geography of Hell), and then follows Jemma into the underworld to bring her back. The publisher's blurb mentions Dante, Faust, Orpheus, the blues legend of the Crossroads, and Hieronymus Bosch as influences, and indeed that's all there, blended by Boyett into a cohesive whole.

The writing is filled with vivid sensory detail; the reader sees and hears and smells everything right along with Niko. Clipped sentence fragments, lengthy sentences strung together with "ands" or commas, and impromptu compound words help create a stream-of-consciousness effect in places. Here's a passage that exemplifies the style and the subject matter:

"On the other side of the rock outcropping the lake of blood cannot be seen again. Only the evercrawling line, the names called from the bottomless list, the neverending plain. See them shuffling in their slaughterhouse line, crawling out there on the plain like mewling wounded babies, scraping under granite blocks like entombed cadavers falsely dead, gathered sheeplike at the Ledge. How many have lived and died since humanity began? One hundred billion? How many of that number tortured in this loathsome place? Sandgrains on a bloodwashed beach. Souls every one, all doomed, all damned, all lost. Judged and found wanting and consigned and then forgotten by what dread remorseless will. You cannot save them. Cannot even save yourself. For without even believing in a soul you bartered it away decades ago and cast its lot with every pathetic pilgrim you will see in this forsaken place. As always you have bartered. As your story says you always will.

But Jemma. Perhaps not doomed. Not damned. Not lost."

The hard part was finding a passage suitable for the PG-rated website I originally wrote this for. *Mortality Bridge* is **extremely** explicit in its descriptions of Hell's torments. Boyett's descriptive skill is both blessing and curse. If you follow Niko into Hell, you're in for pages and pages of people being impaled, crushed, disemboweled, flayed, burned, and other nasty things, all in gory detail. This may be Hell, or it may be a construction of Niko's mind — we're never 100% sure — but either way, it's not a pleasant place to be.

Of course, it's Hell, so one can hardly expect a leisurely stroll in the park. But as I mentioned above, I generally enjoy underworld stories yet was pushed to my limits by this one. The depictions of tortures had me near nausea or tears, and sometimes both, for much of the time I was reading *Mortality Bridge*. Even some of the scenes I think were intended as comic relief, I found immeasurably sad instead.

It's more painful to read than, say, Dante's *Inferno*. I like Dante's *Inferno*. But there, it's possible to distance yourself a little, to retreat from the literal details of the torture and look at the poem through a philosophical lens. That's harder here. Dante had an internally consistent logic regarding how each sin was punished and which sins were considered "worse" than others and so on. Boyett does assign "poetic justice" punishments to his sinners in places, but other people we never do learn what they're in Hell for; and the idea that sins get worse as you go deeper into Hell has been discarded. We meet the Nazis well before we meet the gluttons. This shuffling is good for dramatic effect — since it means that even if you've read Dante, you don't know what's coming next — but it makes Boyett's Hell a more chaotic, random one, and therefore sadder, at least to me.

There are some moments of transcendent joy and beauty and compassion, though few and far between. It was these that kept me going — that, and sympathy for Niko. I was tempted at times to give up and skip to the end, but decided that if Niko could persevere through Hell to find out whether he would win Jemma back, the least I could do was stick with him and read it. That, and I was intrigued by the intellectual puzzle of trying to guess what was going on in the "real" world that corresponded to certain events in Hell.

There's a part of me that wants to reread *Mortality Bridge* and analyze it more closely, but I'm not sure I want to spend any more time with Boyett's imagery. That said, I can't deny that *Mortality Bridge* is a very well-written book that made me feel intense emotion. I recommend it, but only to the strong of stomach.

Fantasy Literature's Steven Boyett page

February Four says

Unfortunately just not my style in terms of prose. I started skimming when the carrier picked Niko up around page 73, unfortunately. It's a pity, because this book came very highly recommended, but I just can't stick with it anymore.

Katherine says

Unoriginal, and uninspired. This was a chore for me to read, the only reason I made myself finish it was because it was a bookclub selection, so I felt obligated to. This was a much more interesting book when it

was Dante's Inferno.

Jen3n says

This is a really good book. It's very well written, emotionally evocative, highly intelligent, vividly descriptive, generally well-rounded, and poetically beautiful in a lot of ways.

It's also scary and really, really gross. Seriously: Hell, as seen through the eyes of the protagonist, Niko, is disgusting.

I flew through this book in a couple of days. I was hooked. I was reading it at home while reading another book at work and found myself over the weekend not missing the work-book at all, even though it's quite good as well.

It is, without going into any real detail (because you can get that from the cover-flap or the basic book description on the GoodReads page) this book is a combination of Dante's Inferno and the story of Orpheus. Of course, rather than a retelling of the later, it's part of the gist that this IS the story of Orpheus, just in another body. He's been doing this over and over and over and over for thousands of years, just in different bodies and with slightly different circumstances.

The second half of the book is basically a car chase. You would think that 200-ish pages of a single car chase would get old, but it doesn't. It, like the rest of the book, is very good.

The ending is a sort of cliffhanger, though I can't tell you why there MUST be a second book without a sort of a spoiler, but I'll just say that Dante wrote two other books to go along with Inferno and leave it at that.

Recommended, if you are into this sort of thing and can handle really vivid and horrible descriptions of Hell.

Mitchell says

Fairly pretty book about yet another descent into literal hell. Quite a bit more annoying than Niven and Pournelle's Inferno (and sequel). Well written but not enjoyable.

Andres says

I had a blast with Boyett's latest novel. A rockin' descent into Hades for love and redemption. The Hellish imagery is fantastic! The demonic creatures brought to life are truly memorable.

Overall the book is a fun ride into a not fun at all nightmare in Hell. There are some truly heart rendering moments along with some amazing action and some very memorable if not totally likeable demons.

A must have for fans of touring Hell, losing and fighting for Love, car chases, demonic sidekicks, mashed up mythology and Rock n' Roll.

Thanks Steve for another great story!

Alan says

You don't go *through* Hell. You go in, as quickly as you can—that part's easy, deliberately so. Then, if you're lucky, you get a chance to try to get back out again, retracing your steps as much as possible... better the devils you know, after all. At least, that's the way Orpheus did it... and that's the way Niko is going to do it, too (Nikkoleides Popoudopoulos, the greatest rocker you've never heard of, that is—kind of like the Nazgûl in George R.R. Martin's *The Armageddon Rag*), when Jemma, the love of Niko's life, gets caught up in the deal he made with the Devil way back when.

This modern-day mashup of Orpheus, Dante's *Inferno* and rock-and-roll follows Niko into the very bowels of Hell... which is not a very pleasant place to be. As with most fiction ostensibly about the afterlife, we spend a lot more time downstairs than in the penthouse. One of the biggest beefs I have with this novel, in fact, is how long, detailed and involved the descriptions of the tortures of Hades are—for at least the first half of the book, it reads more like a travelogue for a destination you really don't want to visit than like a novel. This is something I've noticed recently in other contexts as well (e.g., Iain M. Banks' novel *Surface Detail*; Richard Kadrey's *Sandman Slim* books), but it goes back at least as far as Dante: human beings are far better at inventing ways to inflict misery than at describing (much less creating) joy.

Remixes of Heaven and Hell aside, the confluence of rock music with sf is also not exactly virgin territory—in addition to the aforementioned Martin novel, there's also Lewis Shiner's underrated *Glimpses*, Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks* and Norman Spinrad's *Little Heroes*... just to name a couple of good examples off the cuff. In such company, Boyett's novel doesn't really stand out; chapter headings pay homage to Dylan, Hendrix and other such icons, but Martin did that too, and apart from those the music, including Niko's own, seems mostly talked *about*, rather than evoked.

But the second half of *Mortality Bridge* picks up rather dramatically. I can even pinpoint the exact place where I started to believe that the book was going to redeem itself, and maybe even Niko: when we run into Dante Alighieri and find out just what his punishment in Hell must certainly be. I laughed out loud at that one (see, I'm just like the rest of us... I appreciate a good damnation, probably more than the happiest of unrealistic happy endings).

I won't tell you just what Dante's punishment was, nor whether Niko escapes from Hades with his version of Eurydice intact... but I will tell you that there are moments of grace in *Mortality Bridge* that eventually make up for the travail Boyett puts you through.

Tasha Robinson says

In every book I've read that channels Dante's *Inferno* (books like Chuck Palahniuk's *Damned* and Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's *Inferno*), there comes a point where I'm tired of the endless detailed, heavy-handed, gross-out descriptions of the worst hell has to offer — the graphic torture, the endless sadism, the helpless misery, the fear and bafflement of people who don't know why they're being endlessly mutilated and

don't have any idea how to make it stop. This retelling of the Orpheus myth in a new era dives deep into that well, and it becomes especially exhausting because there's just *so* much emphasis on the idea that there are innocents in hell — good people, kind people, young children — but it never offers any explanation of this cosmology, of what hell is, what it's for, and whether there's a way to escape.

The protagonist, Niko, is a junkie rock star who sold his soul to hell in exchange for stardom and an escape from his vices, but he paid when hell took the love of his life. So he bones up on his myths, grabs his trusty Dobro, and heads to hell to get her back. The book does an excellent job of conjuring up his mindset, his character, the selfishness and short-sightedness that drive him, and eventually the dogged determination that propels him through hell after her. There were just so many points where I was exhausted with the grueling trip, the constantly escalating cruelty, and the sense of helplessness *Mortality Bridge* lays on the entire world. I'm glad I stuck with it — the ending is an extended breathless process of wondering whether Niko, Orpheus' latest avatar, will make Orpheus' mistake, and if so, how. And the book ends in a fascinating place.

But I really felt the lack of reasons or reasoning throughout the book. In this worldview, the cosmos is cruel and random — and yet there are apparently options for a small handful of people who know the right cheat codes and have the right talents? I ended up pretty dissociated from Niko's quest by the end of the book, no matter how thrilling it is, just because saving one beloved soul from hell seemed so meaningless, in the wake of the suffering millions he had to ignore or even actively harm on his quest. In the end, I'm clear on what this book is saying about love and music, but not what it's saying about the world — which it spends a lot more time on laying out, in unremittingly gruesome detail.
