



Scratch

Steve Himmer

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Martin Blaskett moves to a small town to oversee construction of a housing development, where he encounters a shape-shifting figure from local legend—Scratch. He is taken under the wing of his new neighbor, a retired hunting guide named Gil Rose, and befriends a local woman named Alison. Along the way, trouble ensues as Scratch feels threatened by changes to the landscape, luring locals out into the woods, including Alison's son. As the blame for a range of events falls at Martin's feet, he is beset by increasingly inhuman dreams, and comes to doubt his own innocence.

Scratch Details

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Author : Steve Himmer

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From Reader Review Scratch for online ebook

Helen McClory says

Eerie and assured, this novel kept me guessing right up until the end.

Leah Bayer says

Even when other animals lose their ability to plant fear in your hearts, when the howl of coyotes or the rumbling of bears makes your heart flutter with the nostalgia of ignorance, and you feel yourself drawn back to nature-as if you have ever been able to leave-the call-and-response of a pack in the hills sends you scampering back to your cars, onto the roads, out of the mountains toward home where you lock double-paned windows and pull down heavy shades and turn up the lights as bright as you can. Is there anything else left in the forest as frightening as wolves?

There's me, I suppose. There's still me.

4.5 stars

This book was such a pleasant surprise. I am easily sucked in by a good book cover and that is about 80% of the reason I picked up *Scratch*. That and the title. I barely even skimmed over the summary before I added it to my TBR. Usually this ends badly for me, but *Scratch* is a very happy exception.

It's a hard book to describe. On the surface it is about a construction planner named Martin who starts a project in a small town. It's a very isolated community, but he falls in love with it and wants to live in one of the houses he is building. But something about the town is... off. Martin begins having very strange dreams, the animals start acting bizarrely, and people are slowly disappearing.

It's a good setup, but the charm of this book lies in the narrator. Because it's told to us by the devil. Or rather, *a* devil. *Scratch* is a disembodied entity who lives in the forest Martin is building in, and he has complete control over the environment. Most of the book follows Martin directly but we get increasingly eerie asides as *Scratch* talks directly to the reader. It's used sparingly and very effectively. It's clear that *Scratch* has a plan for Martin (and the reader!), and watching it play out is an increasingly stressful experience.

This is a tense, psychologically-driven book. It's not a thriller per say because the pacing is slow and there is only a faint air of mystery, but if you like spooky woods and devils and mayhem I really can't recommend this enough.

Kate Racculia says

Adored this book--it's dark and strange, and beautifully written. Steve writes about wildness in all its lush, tactile wonder, and the myriad ways foolish mortals believe their lives are beyond nature's control.

Becky says

Has a few decent one-liners, and the imagery is pretty amazing, the story started out strong with great characters and then the ending just kind of got derailed and trite. Still worth the read though.

Karen says

I'll just be over here, trying to shed my coyote skin. Loved this.

Julianne (Outlandish Lit) says

[Actually 3.5]

Scratch had just about everything I want in a book. A forest with more going on in it than we know? Check. Mysterious disappearances? Check. Weird animal stuff? Check. A formless shapeshifting narrator who puts our main character in harm's way for the sake of the story he wants to create? Ok, maybe I didn't explicitly want that, but I got it. Scratch's concept is pretty brilliant. A shapeshifter (named Scratch) has lived in a forest in the middle of nowhere since...forever, basically. At first he didn't have a form at all, but then he tried turning himself into animals to live like them and, hey, it worked! Scratch is both a protector and a mischief maker, and we get the opportunity to hear this story from his point of view. This novel gives a whole lot of credit to animals, nature, and dreams, which I love.

Martin, the main character, is a hapless man who doesn't have a lot going on in his life apart from his house constructing/real estate career. He decides to build a collection of homes in a very small town and in the back of his head he has the idea that he will move there and get away from the city too. He interacts with very few people other than Gil, the hunter across the road who is a delight, and Alison, the woman he's hired to oversee the construction of the houses. One day, he follows a fox into the forest and he can't seem to stop himself. He gets horribly lost and ends up sleeping in the woods, only to be awoken by a bear attacking him. That's where it all begins. The animals acting strangely, the surreal dreams Martin has about the wild, and people in the town beginning to disappear. Martin is somehow connected to all of it, and of course Scratch, the local legend, has something to do with it.

This book is only very slightly creepy. It was slow going at some points, and we spend perhaps too much time in Martin's head thinking about his past (living with a neglectful single mother) and the borderline stereotypical issues that past brings up. I wouldn't have minded had the book gotten a little bit weirder than it did, but that's obviously just a personal preference. I really enjoyed the concept and the idea of the ending, but it lacked a little in execution and consequence. There was nothing bad about this book, but the plot could have packed a little more of a punch for where the characters all end up.

Full Review: Outlandish Lit

Sarah says

Recommended for: Nature lovers, readers of creepy, surreal, horror, or mysterious books, books perfect for October.

It's difficult to review or even summarize this book without giving important plot points away, which I think means the book served its purpose well, so my review will be brief.

I am more and more proud of independent publishing the more I read, and this novel is no exception. Himmer does a lot with the legend of Scratch and expertly so, weaving magical realism, supernatural wilderness, and the thrill of a nature horror novel together to create this captivating story. Thought it got a little slow for me at times, this was the perfect read for the transition into October and colder weather, and the imagery was so precise and descriptive. Though Martin is not particularly the most likeable character, through Himmer's stunning prose I felt like I was in the forest too, experiencing all the uncomfortable sensations Martin is going through.

This is an intriguing, beautiful tale of the mysteries of nature—particularly the forest—and mankind's role amongst the creatures who make the woods their home. Part literary, part noir, part horror, Scratch is gripping tale of perfection that will thin the line between man and beast and leave you wanting more. If any of my words above caught your attention, go pick up this book!

Many thanks to the publisher for the review copy from the publisher Curbside Splendor via Edelweiss in exchange for an honest review.

Kevin Fanning says

This book is about the feeling you get standing at the edge of a forest. The sense that there is something dark and magic and secret happening somewhere deep inside the trees. This book is about what happens when you step forward and cross the tree line to look for the dark and magic thing that is calling you, and about the things that secretly follow you back home when you leave.

Steve has always been the best at writing about the way we interact with nature, and what our attitude about our surroundings says about us. But this book is special because he uses magic to show who really holds the power in that relationship. This is not man vs nature. This is nature vs man. And nature was here before us, and nature will be here long after us.

Steve says

I wrote this, so I'm not going to rate it. There are lots of wild animals in it.

Bentley ★ Bookbastion.net says

I received a free copy of this from Edelweiss in exchange for a fair and honest review.

Based on the premise, I should have loved this book. It's got dark forests, local legends surrounding a mysterious and deadly creature known only to locals as "Scratch" and a main character who becomes caught up in rapidly unfolding events that make him question his own sanity. Sounds great on paper, or at least in the four sentence plot summary that drew me to it. Unfortunately, it really falls apart in its execution in a number of ways.

For starters:

- **POV:** I'm not considering this a spoiler since you're told on the very first page... Scratch, the mysterious creature from the woods, is the omniscient 3rd person narrator following the main character Martin around for the entire book. It makes just as much sense as it sounds like it would, which is none at all. Logistics aside, (such as how Scratch would not be noticed around houses, restaurants, police stations, and all the other places Martin visits) there are incredibly frustrating moments where Scratch will just start randomly telling the reader about moments in Martin's childhood that he would have absolutely no way of knowing about. The POV just doesn't work here, and it ruins the suspense/creep factor of a mysterious creature in the woods by making him an invisible, omniscient narrator that sees and hears all.

-**Action:** This book is so painfully slow. The first 20 percent of the book, absolutely nothing happens except for Martin wandering around in the woods outside of his home as the author meanders into meaningless and self-indulgent prose, or memories that have no pertinence to the story being told. It's clear that Himmer intends this story to be construed as literary horror, along the lines of Poe, but it's hollow and lifeless storytelling here. It feels like this was a short story, stretched to hundreds of pages longer than it needed to be with empty inclusions such as this:

"It's a dream, of course it's a dream, and what else would it be? Dreams bring you closer to the world the rest of us live in than anything else."

That literally makes no sense at all, and it's only included to pad the page count and try and sell itself as introspective and deep, meanwhile the storytelling suffers because the more the author delves into moments like this, the slower the action. Take for example, this moment which happens many pages after the previous and is again, about yet another character's dreams that Scratch just spent pages telling the reader about:

"We could go on about Gil's bloody dreams and the war he brought home, the map of some other place and its memories he laid over this land years ago, layered among all the maps and other memories spread out by one generation after another. But this story is not his."

That is an awfully long way of telling the reader you just conned them into reading pages that have no bearing on anything that has happened, or are going to happen later. The storytelling essentially slows to a crawl and what should be an engaging and fast paced story about a monster eating people in the woods becomes a total chore to try and slog through.

Almost nothing happens, and absolutely nothing is resolved. Basically, plot happens to the characters, rather than the characters influencing plot, and it takes forever for any of those rare moments to happen. A few characters go missing, but their disappearances are never resolved. Nor do we see how their disappearance affects people that live in the town because ultimately Himmer decided none of that mattered. He wanted to tell a very specific tale and get the character of Martin from Point A to a really incredibly obvious Point B which occurs at the end of the story. It takes forever to get there, and all other plot threads in the story are abandoned in favor of drawing out that voyage.

I very nearly DNF'ed this book numerous times. The only reason I finished it was because I received a free

copy from the publisher. I kept waiting for a moment of payoff near the end that would make the experience of reading it worth it, but it never came. This one gets a hard-pass recommendation from me.

Noah says

Very good. If you like New England and the Woods and Mythology/Fantasy... this is for you.

Teresa says

* e-Arc provided by publisher via Edelweiss *

Victor Giron says

Word
