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Black Easter is a Nebula Award-nominated fantasy novel by James Blish in which an arms dealer hires a black magician to unleash all the Demons of Hell on earth for a single day. It was first published in 1968. The sequel is The Day After Judgment. Together, those two very short novels form the third part of the thematic "After Such Knowledge" trilogy (title from T.S. Eliot's "Gerontion," "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?") with A Case of Conscience & Dr. Mirabilis. Black Easter was serialised as Faust aleph-null in If magazine.

Black Easter Details

Date : Published June 1982 by Avon Books (first published 1968)

ISBN : 9780380595686

Author : James Blish

Format : Mass Market Paperback 170 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Science Fiction, Horror, Fiction

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From Reader Review Black Easter for online ebook

Kevin says

Contemporary fantasy (even at its best, as in the Golden Compass) tends to emphasize again and again just how spectacular everything going on is. In some books it seems as though everything is imbued with a magical power, an otherworldly glow or a guarded history, and everywhere there are secrets upon secrets to be unearthed. Also, there are probably sexy vampires. It's fiction for the short attention span, which begs the reader "Keep reading! Keep reading!"

Blish's treatment of magic here is to give it a prosaic quality, to entwine it in the fabric of recognizable reality (Herbert does something similar in "Dune"). The magician Theron Ware sees what he does as a job, one requiring much study before one can master it and from that mastery profit. It has principles, as though it were a science or a code of law. When a client, in a fit of pique brought on by too much wealth and comfort, offers him a huge sum to unleash a host of demons from hell, Ware agrees, and soon finds that there are deadly gaps in his knowledge of the black art.

This book is a quick read, with a nice shocker of an ending. There is a sequel, "The Day after Judgment", which is almost as good.

Brad says

WARNING: This review contains the BIG spoiler, but no others, so you may not want to read this if you haven't read Black Easter yet.

Damn! God is dead. And James Blish is his killer.

I've been meaning to read a Blish novel for years, having read and liked a short story of his -- *How Beautiful With Banners* -- in a Sci-Fi class years ago, but Blish isn't carried in the book stores within my sphere of contact, and he's never been the first author I think of when I have money to spend online.

I lucked out, though, and found an old, thrashed copy of Black Easter in a used bookstore down the street from where I work. I tossed it in my glove box (because it is always a good idea to have a back up book handy in case of emergencies) and forgot about it.

My emergency came up last week when, before I left for work, I couldn't find the book I was reading, so I needed something to read at lunch. I dug Black Easter out and was quickly knocked on my ass.

I am not usually a fan of fiction that explicitly discusses good and evil. I usually find their philosophy pedestrian and reductive. Too black and white. But Black Easter isn't a pedestrian book, nor is Blish a pedestrian author. I had no idea how talented the man was, but I know now.

Black Easter is a book about black & white magic that is full of demons and ends with the release of Armageddon. Yet it remains Science Fiction. How is that possible? It's possible because Blish offers us the theological science that called magic, which, in its ancient forms (you pick the "-emy" or "-mancy") was the root of all secular sciences. The magicians who practice this theoscience take their work as seriously as a nuclear physicist would, and their practices are as rigorous, their laboratories as specialized, their tools and books as important, their minds as honed as any image we have of today's scientists.

And, like so many who apply the sciences, the black & white magicians play with forces beyond their control, doing things because they can rather than because they should. They use and abuse knowledge, and as the myths of Prometheus and the Garden of Eden have tried to teach us, this knowledge is the root of all evil. So evil exists in Blish's Armageddon world, and it is released with a force on the world that ends everything we know mere hours. And good exists. Too benevolent, too bound by honour, too naive to stop the evil. But even those in the book who practice good, those white magicians we'd expect to be pure and beloved of God, are steeped in evil. They are in concert with demons. They are damned. And their paralysis, brought on by goodness, is tainted with evil.

There isn't much gray in Blish's Black Easter, but the black and the white are everywhere, in everyone, and while they may react like oil and vinegar when in contact, while they may not bleed into each other, they make for a deliciously creepy and stunningly realistic take on black magic and Armageddon.

I had no hopes for the book. I read it because it was Blish and I was hard up, but I was blown away. This is the best book about contemporary magic use I have ever read, and far and away the best expression of Armageddon.

I'm tracking down *A Case of Conscience* and reading it as soon as I can because Blish deserves to be read.

Manny says

I don't usually go for novels about black magic, which I tend to find boring and kind of stupid, but this one is pretty good. Blish isn't being campy, or playing it for laughs. The assumption made here is that black magic exists and really works, allowing you to summon demons from Hell and make them do your bidding. The author must have done a lot of background reading, and the atmosphere feels authentic. I particularly liked the descriptions of the demons, who are both chillingly evil and bizarrely other-worldly.

The plot is a variant on the Faust myth (the book's subtitle is in fact "Faust Aleph-Null"). Theron Ware is an accomplished black magician. He's several hundred years old, having sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for more or less eternal life, and his passion is scientific knowledge. A nice touch is the way he's still stuck in the medieval mind-set he acquired during his formative years; there's a fun scene where he's copying out the latest discoveries on quasars into his huge illuminated manuscript, using a goose-quill pen. But he's impatient with the slow rate of progress, and thinks that, if he could only get some serious money, he'd be able to speed things up.

Ware is contacted by a billionaire arms dealer, Baines, and they start cooking up a deal. Baines is plausibly skeptical at first, and wants to carry out a couple of tests, to satisfy himself that Ware is on the level. The test runs are cleverly thought out, and convey both the fundamental seriousness of the enterprise and the utter immorality of both parties. Baines then gets down to business, and makes his proposal. He will give Ware a large part of his enormous fortune, if the magician can summon most of the demons from Hell, and let them loose on Earth for one night.

The action is being followed by Father Garelli, a white magician working for the Church. According to the complicated rules governing dealings between Heaven and Hell, Garelli is invited to participate in the demonic summonings as an observer, but may not intervene to stop them. Blish succeeds well in describing Garelli's feelings of helpless rage as the plan comes together, and Armageddon draws ever nearer; one readily thinks of real-world parallels. I won't give away the ending, but suffice to say that it's both logically

and emotionally consistent, and that you don't feel cheated by the elaborate build-up. This is a genuinely scary book.

prcardi says

Storyline: 3/5

Characters: 3/5

Writing Style: 4/5

World: 4/5

Have you ever wanted to.....

Experience the fantastic as an observer forbidden the relevant background knowledge?

View the earthly nexus between heaven and hell?

Meet detached, punctilious Evil?

Read about angelic fall?

Start a story before it begins?

Finish that story before it fully ends?

Piece together the allegory never made explicit?

Practice sorcery of the Christian tradition, via writings of the 13th to 18th centuries?

Then read James Blish's Black Easter. A novella that reads like one small part of a much greater tome, a story which describes a world that is simultaneously inconceivable yet effectively conceived. Meet the Devil that lurks in the metaphysical world, the physical world, in you. Meet angels that are not deliverers. Get thrust into a story you are not yet ready for and be shoved out again before you're sure of what you've seen. Know that it all means something, something about human nature, inevitability, the end of all things; but also know that the lesson remains obscured or perhaps that it was all a simple fantasy after all. Worry over the difference between fact and fiction, your mind unsettled by the end.

Stephen says

6.0 stars. I just reread this book (February 6, 2010) and I liked it even better than the first time I read it (when I gave it 4.5 to 5.0 stars). While always problematic to say that a book is the "first" to do something (especially when you haven't read every book ever written), this appears to be the first book in which the art of magic is portrayed as a rigorous, almost scientific endeavor fraught with peril and potentially very unpleasant. Add to that a great plot and one of the best endings I have ever read (i.e., the final 3 words of the

novel) and you have a classic by a very under-rated author. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED!!!**

Nominee: Nebula Award for Best Science Fiction Novel (1969)

Scott Ferry says

A wonderful story for Easter! Should be required reading for all children. God is Dead and things are not always what they seem.

DoctorM says

The only book with necromancy I've ever seen that tries to be faithful to medieval visions of how sorcery should work--- which appeals to the historian in me.

And...the only book that asks the question all those End of Days/Apocalypse novels and films never do: What if the Apocalypse comes and things just don't go the way the Tim LaHaye types think it will?

Oh, yes. Dark and clever and very, very different. Worth reading, along with its sequel, "The Day After Judgment".

Jack Tripper says

I don't usually dig skulls on my vintage horror covers (especially photo versions), as they're so overdone, but this is one of the few exceptions to that rule. This will be my first Blish read, other than a couple sf shorts back in the day.

Jon says

The book ends with three English words and a mathematical symbol commonly known as Aleph-naught. Or, in Rabbinic/Judaic folk lore, a reference to the reward given to the Aleph by starting the Ten Commandments and also begins the three words that Make up God's mystical name in Exodus: I Am That I Am

The revelation (pardon the pun sans spoilers) presents a compelling argument for the theological hypothesis raised by Blish.

I read this short novel in less than a day, a matter of hours, but I fear it will haunt my thoughts for many weeks to come. A strange, surreal journey to say the least.

And upon further research, find yet another book (The Damnation of Theron Ware: Or Illumination by

Harold Frederic) I should read because:

The name "Theron Ware" was later used by author James Blish for his "villain" in the novel Black Easter. In this novel Ware brings about the death of God and the triumph of Satan. The book was adapted into a play in 1979 by a Troy University theatre professor and produced by the school's drama department.

-- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Damn...

LQ (to the max!) says

Awesome! Loved it!

B. Jay says

I read this at the same time as Frank Herbert's 'the Heavenmakers' and it was interesting to compare Herbert's worst book against Blish's best. Where Herbert was known for sweeping sagas of great depth in detail and philosophy, Blish had his most commercial success in being the first to novelize Star Trek stories. And the first adaptations he did of the original Star Trek episodes were JUST AWFUL. But in Black Easter Blish truly surprised me with a rich story full of great characters and a plot that truly kept you guessing, all steeped in a very authentic (and researched) world of historical magic in the 'modern' world. The theme and commentary of good versus evil set in a nuclear age setting has been very thoughtfully commented on in a way that is very prevalent online for an out-of-print and hard-to-find book (Hugo winner though it may be). Readers who find magic silly in any form will be turned off by the cartoonish presence of demons and wizards as advertised so clearly on the cover, but those who are drawn to arcane incantations and perhaps a marginally veiled reincarnation of Aleister Crowley should move this book to the top of their reading list. Book reviews and more at: <http://theqog.blogspot.com/>

Frank says

Read in the 70s

Matt Gonzalez Kirkland says

extreeemely fun book, tore through it in like 8 hours. love all the catholic bullshit, vivid world, best/most grounded and intense/believable use of 'magic' in fiction I've read in ages (which I find highly entertaining, your mileage may vary).

Tony says

This, and it's sequel / companion DAY AFTER JUDGEMENT, are a pair of hilariously-dark, end-of-the-world novellas that astonish and delight in equal measure.

Drawing extensively from actual magical rituals, the "always-delivers" Mr Blish imagines an international arms dealer employing a real wizard to unleash all the demons from Hell onto Earth for one night of Revelations-style armageddo-fun while a Vatican rep watches on, observer-style, because the Cosmic rules (the contract between God and Satan) prevent him from intervening.

Undeniably downbeat at the end, these two volumes skip through descriptions of magical ritual, demonic emergence and play and the arrival of the City of Dis with wit and aplomb.

And it's gripping.

And it's a little bit scary.

And it'd make a FAR better movie than Arnie's risable END OF DAYS

These books are also loosely grouped, by Mr Blish himself, in a trilogy of volumes called AFTER SUCH KNOWLEDGE (A Case of Conscience and Doctor Mirabilis)

If you've not discovered Mr B before, seek all of these out on EBAY (dirt cheap!) and revel in the sheer variety and depth of his prose.

Always recommended!

Lisa (Harmonybites) says

What *Dracula* and King's *Salem's Lot* is to vampires, *Black Easter* is to demons. These days, vampires, witches and wizards are lovable creatures in fiction. There are even neo-Pagans today who embrace a belief in ceremonial magic as benign. Blish says in his *Author's Note* that every one of the "novels, poems and plays about magic and witchcraft" he's read treat it as "romantic or playful." He sought to write a treatment that "neither romanticizes magic nor treats it as a game." His book is dedicated to C.S. Lewis and even includes an extensive quotation from his *Screwtape Letters* heading one of the chapters.

So although I'm not sure I'd classify this as out and out Christian fiction, this does come out of that world view and takes the demonic seriously--that's what does make it unusual and at times fascinating. It's obvious not just from his note but the vividness of his details and even the quotes heading chapters Blish did extensive research--actually reading grimoires and manuscripts on ceremonial magic. Blish is best known as a science fiction author, and he gives his magicians a grounding that really makes it feel as rigorous as any science--and it's obviously an allegory for amoral science and its destructive power. The world building in that regard is first class, which is why I'm not rating it lower.

The characters not so much--and the plot feels a bit thin. I never found it scary, nor was scared for the characters, and the ending, which I thought predictable, didn't have much impact upon me. Also, I had read

this before--albeit over a decade ago--but it didn't make enough of an impression to really be memorable--thus why I'm not rating it higher.
