

Explorations in fear

Durango's Blake Crouch releases 'Abandon'

by Joe Foster

Abandon by Blake Crouch. Minotaur Books, 2009. 401 pages.

Joe Foster popped the trunk of his car, hauled the daypack off the backseat, and stepped out into the parking lot. Still early, a few minutes past 6 a.m., and the sun not yet up.

Blake's Jeep sat 20 feet away near the trailhead for Engineer Mountain, but there was no sign of the Durango author.

"Blake? You here, man?"

No answer.

Joe slammed his car door and shouldered his pack and started toward the trailhead, still worried about reaction to his fake review of Blake Crouch's new book, *Abandon*, and wondering if the whispered rumors of Blake's cannibalism were actually jokes; the guy writes some pretty violent stuff, after all. The review had actually been a practical joke, a sorry attempt at humor. The real review was sitting safely in Will's inbox, glowing with admiration and waiting for Thursday. He knows I'm a fan, though, Joe reassured himself. Writers can be so damned sensitive... and who doesn't wait at the trailhead, for crying out loud?

Suddenly, Blake emerged out of the tall stand of monument plants.

Joe jumped. "Dude, don't do that. You scared me. What were you doing in there?"

"Nature called."

"Oh. Well, you ready?"

They started up the trail through the meadow, the wildflowers peaking, though perhaps for their last time since they stood under a heavy frost.

Maybe he hasn't read the review yet, Joe thought. I did just e-mail it last night.

"So you wanted to do an interview on the hike up?" Blake asked. "To go along with your, um ... review?"

"Yeah, is that cool?"

"I guess."

"Let me just get my tape recorder."

They left the meadow.

The trail climbed through the spruce.

Much darker here.

"Really glad there's no one else on the trail yet," Blake said.

"All right, first off, I want to tell you how much I really enjoyed the book.

It's pretty different from the previous two, but there's still an undercurrent of menace and a sometimes shocking amount of violence. The thing I find fascinating is that you are able to make that violence compelling, if not even beautiful. Hey, are you sure we should be going off-trail here?"

Blake kept walking, dodging trees, picking up the pace. "Yeah, it's cool. There's something I want to show you. That's an interesting question about violence. What's beautiful about it, I'm not sure. It's certainly what we humans do best and most naturally. Have you ever witnessed real violence, Joe?" They came out above timberline, the bulk of the mountain looming up ahead.

"Actually, no. Fights behind 7-11 in middle school, the occasional car accident. But I've lived pretty sheltered from such things. I'm not a violent person, myself, but I do enjoy a good movie gunfight, preferably with explosions and some slow-mo. Maybe the ability to enjoy watching or reading violence stems from this distance from it?"

"That's something I think about a lot, actually. No, this way. Over toward the edge. I think reading about

and watching violence in some way equips us to deal with our ubiquitous and tasteless media. Thanks to it, we can't escape watching the horrors that happen to other people ... on highways, in bedrooms, in wartime. Don't we need some level of desensitization to not go mad with fear? And I don't mean a Harris/Klebold level, but at least learn to whistle as we walk past the graveyard."

"OK, I'm actually kind of afraid of heights, so I'm just gonna hang back here, thanks," Joe said. "This might be a chicken or the egg question, then. Maybe the media has desensitized us so much that violence in movies and books just doesn't shock as it should. I've seen countless bodies on the news, but have never been in a situation in which I've actually seen a deceased person in my own real life. Do you ever hope to shock people out of this desensitized stupor when you write a scene? Is that a conscious goal?"

"Sometimes," Blake answered. "When it's presented thoughtfully and from a new perspective, and when the reader is made to see it fresh with unusual details, violence can be pretty visceral and terrifying and create an intense emotional reaction. So that's kind of what I go for. Come here. Really. I want to show you something."

Joe approached, hesitantly.

Blake seemed to actually have one of his boots poking over the edge. The drop was at least a couple hundred feet.

"Well, I think you do it well, man," Joe said. "Not just saying that. So what am I looking at here?"

"You really think I brought you up here to shove you off the ledge?"

"Might have crossed my mind."

Blake laughed, "I take a lot of flak for violence in my writing. Quentin Tarantino said something interesting when someone was giving him shit on the subject, and I'm paraphrasing - 'Liking violence on screen, or on the page, isn't the same thing as liking violence in real life.' I mean, it sounds simplistic, but it's kind of brilliant."

"So you aren't going to push me off?"

Blake smiled and snatched the tape recorder out of Joe's hand. "Of course I am."

(Prior to his untimely demise, Joe Foster was the book buyer at Maria's Bookshop.) ■

