

Parasites Like Us: A Novel. ADAM JOHNSON. Viking, 2003. 368 pp. \$24.95.

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Archaeologists frequently find their profession the subject of popular fiction, as exemplified in the work of mystery writers like Agatha Christie, Beverly Connor, and Elizabeth Peters, or science fiction writers like Jack McDevitt, Chad Oliver, and Kim Stanley Robinson. Adam Johnson's debut novel follows in this tradition, in a generally well-written "end of the world" story about an anthropologically trained archaeologist whose excavations at a Paleoindian burial site unleash a plague, with devastating results for humanity.

The protagonist of the story, Dr. Hank Hannah, is an anthropologist at the University of Southwestern South Dakota, a few years past his prime, and whose professional career is slowly coasting downhill. Despite youthful professional renown, reflected in a book entitled *The Depletionists* which argued that Clovis hunters played a major role in the extinction of Pleistocene megafauna, subsequent fame has eluded him. The chance discovery by one of his students of a Clovis burial site with remarkable associated artifacts has the potential to propel him back into the spotlight.

Parasites Like Us is both engaging and irritating at the same time. It has a number of thoughtful observations about human nature, and the practice of archaeology and anthropology. A satire on academic life, much of the novel is set on college campuses, and deals with what students go through in order to graduate, or faculty to achieve or maintain professional acclaim.

The text is so blatantly over the top in literary pretension that the style, which grew on me the more I read, resembles the early work of writers like Kurt Vonnegut or Joseph Heller. At the same time, this is not a comedy... the fall of civilization that is portrayed is as unrelentingly grim as anything in modern fiction.

The technical arguments woven into the plot are well known to New World archaeologists, such as whether unrestrained Clovis hunting brought about the terminal Pleistocene extinctions (hence the title of the protagonist's book), or whether fluted points were used specifically for the killing of large game. The book is something of a parable for the modern world, in that the title derives from the author's view that the most successful species do not annihilate their neighbors but, like parasites, exploit them while leaving some in place.

Unfortunately, while I liked this book, it also irritated me, and not solely because it is, in places, a satirical portrayal of my chosen profession. The author is often right on in his presentation of archaeological facts and, indeed, in his understanding of how modern archaeological research is conducted. Unfortunately, he is also occasionally dead wrong, and the errors of fact and interpretation that are present detract from the storyline, and could have been avoided by a bit more background research. Clovis populations did not possess pottery or domesticate corn, for example, much less create an empire or carve their fluted points. Nor are the flutes thought to facilitate blood flow as much as to facilitate hafting and demonstrate technical expertise. Boars (i.e., wild pigs) were introduced by European settlers and explorers, and are not survivors of the terminal Pleistocene extinctions, at least not in the New World. More disturbing, the archaeologists in the story

exhibit levels of technical incompetence and unethical behavior that are simply not credible. Excavating a gravesite on tribal land without obtaining formal permission is one such stretch, as is the removal of unique artifacts from the site with minimal effort to document their provenience. No archaeologist would be quite so ignorant. If these are examples of errors deliberately introduced to create a satirical tone (which they indeed could well be), they do not work for me. Doing archaeology well is a serious endeavor, with little room for compromise. Archaeology is a lot of fun, but it is also a

field that has little tolerance for the incompetent.

Technical problems notwithstanding, this is a pretty good piece of anthropological science fiction. The view of our profession that ultimately emerges is sympathetic and optimistic, however many bumps it takes getting there. The writing style is both sufficiently literary and outré that I will look for more works by this author. Should they emphasize archaeological matters, I hope he will feel free to call upon members of our profession for advice and fact checking. He will likely find a sympathetic audience.