

We're All Dürt Würkers: Grady Hendrix's Heavy Metal Horror

By Sean Guynes

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GLOSS HIS NOVELS from Amazon blurbs and you might call Grady Hendrix a gimmick writer. He typically pairs a funny topic with a horror veneer (Ikea + evil prison warden ghost: *Horrorstör*, 1980s teen flick + possession: *My Best Friend's Exorcism*), and his books often include a range of engaging paratexts (a mock Ikea catalog, a faux high school yearbook). But calling Hendrix a gimmick writer does a huge disservice to one of contemporary fiction's most sensitive observers of the horrors that arise around — and sometimes because of — our efforts to grow closer with other humans. Through all the horror and tumult, in the humor and the nostalgia animating the psychological growth of his focal characters, Hendrix brings an encyclopedic awareness of the ways capital weighs down the labor force, crushing blue-collar workers in their daily efforts to keep ahead of the poverty line day after day.

Hendrix's newest novel, *We Sold Our Souls*, won't do much to rescue him from the gimmick writer gloss, but it puts the truth to the *Wall Street Journal's* description of the writer as a “national treasure” in their review of his previous novel, *My Best Friend's*

Exorcism. We Sold Our Souls explores heavy metal, its fantasy allegories, and the horrors those allegories reveal. It explores the experience of the economically oppressed — the crappy jobs folks work just so they can work another day, the dreams forgotten (because who has time for dreams between shifts?), the desire to make art that bares the raw emotion and pain of poverty and the anger with a world that seems not to care. It addresses the inauthenticity and carefully crafted emotional landscape of “sellout” artists, and the underbelly of a violent America. It’s about Black Iron Mountain and soul-sucking corpse beasties. It’s rad.

We Sold Our Souls tells the story of Kris Pulaski in the wake of touring with her 1990s heavy metal band Dürt Würk (after “dirt worker,” a nickname for graveyard diggers), starting 20 years after her best friend, band co-founder, and lead singer Terry Hunter stiffed her, Scottie Rocket (rhythm guitar), Bill (drums), and Tuck (bass) with contracts that gave Terry sole rights to the band’s discography. That contract transformed him into the Blind King, headliner of nu metal supergroup Koffin (think KISS meets Slipknot meets Linkin Park), now the world’s most famous band. Working a night clerk shift at a Best Western in one dying Rust Belt town at a time, ostracized from her former bandmates because of her actions on the poorly remembered “contract night” all those years ago, Kris lives the life of a nobody. But seeing billboards for Koffin’s farewell tour lights a fire under Kris to seek out what she and the band deserve.

What follows is a cross-country adventure through conspiracy theories, metalheads, and intense scenes of visceral horror, as Kris sets out to figure out what really happened on contract night. In the first third of the novel, she meets up with her former band members, a reunion that ultimately ends in Scottie Rocket’s suicide and the murder of his family by UPS deliverymen assassins. Kris falls into the arms of Tuck, who schemes with Bill to imprison her in an elite, cult-like rehab facility named the Well. The Well is built atop the bones of the Witch House, a derelict rental in the Kentucky wilderness where Dürt Würk used to

record, and which also served as the long-ago site of contract night.

The middle third depicts Kris's escape from the Well. Overcoming mind-numbing drugs, Kris beats up her captors with her guitar and discovers creepy monsters slurping out the souls of the rehab inmates, eventually remembering that the same beasts carried out this vile procedure on her and Dürt Würk all those years ago. She descends into the eponymous Well, crawling her way through pipes and caves and guano and bugs and darkness to escape rehab.

In the final third, we see Kris down and out in small-town America; she's missed Koffin's farewell tour, but the tour proved so successful that Koffin is hosting Hellstock '19, a 50th-anniversary celebration of Woodstock staged with heavy metal bands. Kris believes Terry is using Hellstock to sell more souls, the same way he sold Dürt Würk's souls on contract night. More cross-country hijinks ensue, including a mob of Koffin fans violently tearing apart Kris's friend JD at a rest stop. In the end, Kris reunites with Terry onstage and together with Tuck they play Dürt Würk's final album, *Troglodyte*. No concert-goer souls are sold, the performance and the album save the world, and Kris rises to become a heavy metal legend.

We Sold Our Souls provides a convoluted but intelligible journey through the back-and-forth of life in poor America, Kris going where she must to do what she can to survive and try to stop Terry. *Troglodyte* serves as the heart of the story and its critique of capitalism. Like many death metal albums of the genre's heyday, a fantasy story forms the underlying narrative: the tale of hero Troglodyte who rises up to throw off the chains of Black Iron Mountain's oppression. Kris, Scottie Rocket, and JD believe *Troglodyte* tells the story of the world, forming the blueprint for Kris's quest to defeat Terry and the soul-sucking monsters. Hendrix describes the album track-for-track throughout Kris's journey, detailing the sounds, the guitar runs, the drum beats, the vocals. For Kris, the lyrics become a mantra and battle cry; in the course of her journey, they lead the way, as she and JD

perform close readings of the lyrics that would leave any English professor giddy.

Between chapters, Hendrix provides paratexts — snippets of interviews with Dürt Würk, radio transcripts of discussions about *Troglodyte* — that drive home the album's legendary status in the heavy metal scene. After contract night, Terry destroyed all but a few copies that circulated among bootleggers. *Troglodyte* told the truth about the soul-suckers and Black Iron Mountain, the force to which all successful musicians and sellouts owe their millions. Kris brings the legend of Troglodyte to half-a-million metal fans. The lyrics are bad and the sound isn't great, but the music is profound; it's authentic, and bares truth as critique.

The novel and its fascination with heavy metal and the mythology of *Troglodyte* poke subtle fun at the heavy metal genre and its self-seriousness, but also embrace that seriousness as a platform for critique. As with most horror novels, the monsters and moments of fear and revulsion in *We Sold Our Souls* are both affective, provoking emotional responses, and also deeply allegorical. Hendrix's corpse-like soul-suckers, who gain access to souls through the fine-print stipulations in contracts, force black bile out of their unconscious victims and slowly lap it away with hideous tongues. They are creepy, the bread and butter of horror. The pages-long description of Kris's escape from the Well is the most terrifying thing I've ever read and shares much in common with a similar scene from his earlier novel *Horrorstör*. Hendrix knows his audience; being trapped, knowing death is coming and we can do nothing to stop it, creates more visceral terror than any monster, and he writes the terror expertly. The entrapment Kris feels, Black Iron Mountain literally pressing her down with no space to move, her body breaking and her lungs collapsing — this too is allegory, for capitalism, for bills, for living paycheck-to-paycheck, knowing the next paycheck might not come.

Hendrix's exploration of capitalism as horror in *We Sold Our Souls* restores to sight all that we are blind to, all that we blind

ourselves to (sometimes purposefully, to make it all bearable), as we sell our souls, not to some Christian devil but to Black Iron Mountain, that specter of capital that takes, takes, takes. Hendrix's description of Kris busking, purged of hope and lost in middle America after her escape from the Well, captures this deftly:

Every song was the same song. These were songs for people who were scared to open their mailboxes, whose phones calls never brought good news. These were songs for people standing at the crossroads waiting for the bus. People who bounced between debt collectors and dollar stores, collection agencies and housing offices, family court and emergency rooms, waiting for a check that never came, waiting for a court date, waiting for a call back, waiting for a break, crushed beneath the wheel.

The songs she plays are not the same — they range from heavy metal (Black Sabbath, Zeppelin) to the blues (Lead Belly) to protest anthems (Phil Ochs, Woody Guthrie) — but they share a purpose summarized in the album at the center of *We Sold Our Souls*. The mythology of Dürt Würk's *Troglodyte* rears its head again and again in similar passages that capture in eerie encyclopedic detail, so painfully familiar to those of us who are/were those people, the life of economic hardship in the United States.

Kris, her nameless busking partner, the dead homeless woman in the graveyard, the half million swarming at Hellstock '19: we are all Troglodyte waiting for Poincare's butterfly to remind us that this is not all there is. We have to crawl out, escape Black Iron Mountain, and open the door with the cerulean hue. Grady Hendrix reminds us in *We Sold Our Souls* that there's a way and a hope. Metal never dies.

We Sold Our Souls, Grady Hendrix (Quirk Books 978-1683690122, \$24.99, 336pp, hc) September 2018.

I first fell in love with Grady Hendrix's critical work with his laugh-till-you-cry-recaps of each godawful episode of *Under the Dome* for *Tor.com*. Those summaries were the only reason I persevered with the show (and I still couldn't make it to the bitter end). I was on-board for his ambitious Stephen King reread (also for *Tor.com*), reviewing and providing historical context for each book. Each week I eagerly anticipated his latest Freaky Friday column, (*Tor.com* again) a hilarious love letter to the trashy, out-of-print horror novels published in the '70s and '80s. I admit I was slow to embrace Hendrix's fiction; I've yet to read his debut novel, **Horrorstor**. When I did take a dip, with his 2016 follow-up, **My Best Friend's Exorcism**, I rated it as one of my favourite reads for that year. All of this seems to be leading to the inevitable "but..." about his latest novel, **We Sold Our Souls**. Fear not, Hendrix smashes it out of the park.

The book opens with a young Kris Pulaski discovering she has an affinity for the guitar. We then fast forward 33 years to find Pulaski, now in her mid-forties, working the reception desk at her local Best Western, earning less than minimum wage to watch one of her customers urinate all over the floor. This was not the life she had envisaged for herself when she picked up that guitar, when she bonded over Black Sabbath with Terry Hunt, or when the two of them formed a metal band called Dürt Würk. However, on the night they were all meant to sign contracts with a big label, Kris, maybe drunk, maybe on drugs, drives herself and the band members (except for Terry) off the road in their beaten up van. Everyone survives, but the accident, which leaves the drummer, Bill, in a wheelchair, breaks Dürt Würk apart, with most of the blame levelled at Kris.

In the meantime, Terry goes it alone, forms a new group called Koffin and hits the big time. That is all well and good except he – or at least his lawyers – compel Kris to sign an arrangement that forbids her from ever publicly playing a Dürt Würk song again. More insidious though is that Kris can't remember details of the night they were all meant to sign with the label. It's not just the accident that's wiped her memory; there's evidence of missing time and the possibility she may have unwittingly sold her soul to Terry, to the Blind King, to the unspeakable denizens of Black Iron Mountain.

We Sold Our Souls is Grady Hendrix's self-aware take on the horror/heavy metal subgenre made notorious by splatterpunk in the late '80s. You might remember it from such seminal works as **The Scream** by Craig Spector & John Skipp and **The Kill Riff** by David J. Schow. **We Sold Our Souls** is in direct conversation with those novels, in particular, regarding the treatment of women. When Hendrix covers splatterpunk in **Paperbacks from Hell** (a terrific, lavish book that charts the rise and fall of the horror genre), he points out that "the first female character in **The Scream** is introduced to readers as we're invited to look up her skirt." **We Sold Our Souls** addresses this by featuring two strong female perspectives. As mentioned, there's Kris, who, despite grappling with poverty, depression, and killers masquerading as UPS couriers, embarks on a dangerous road-trip to confront Terry and the evil of Black Iron Mountain. There's Melanie, who leaves her dead-end job and her dead-end boyfriend to see Koffin in concert on their last-ever tour. They are both believable, likeable, driven women, who, refreshingly, are never sexualised or required to play the role of victim.

While the novel is violent, Hendrix tones down the gratuitous splatter for something a great deal more effective and disturbing. The opening chapters capture the rot and decay of rust-belt Pennsylvania, not just the rundown Best Western

but the “abandoned houses [that] vomited green vines all over themselves.... Raccoons slept in collapsed basements and generations of possums bred in unoccupied master bedrooms.” It’s an America one step closer to a dystopia where hopelessness has become a disease, where every week there’s a new insane conspiracy theory and where everyone and everything is surveilled. Added to this is the music, Kris’s melodramatic lyrics, steeped in a Cthulhu-type mythology that heightens the novel’s dark, suffocating atmosphere. The horror of **We Sold Our Souls** isn’t so much the creatures who feast on creativity – they’re the least effective aspect of the book – but that Hendrix’s America – the despair, the anger, the acts of shocking brutality – seems all too familiar.

Metal Never Dies: *We Sold Our Souls* by Grady Hendrix

Leah Schnelbach

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Where to even begin? I *loved* this book. If you've ever loved any genre of music you should read it, and if you love horror you should read it, and if you're obsessed with the plight of the American working-class you should really, *really* read it.

Grady Hendrix's latest extravaganza of horror is wild and fun, genuinely terrifying in places, and also somehow heartfelt. It's like *The Stand* and *Our Band Could Be Your Life* had the best baby (*Our Stand Could Be Your Life?*) and somebody slapped a Viking helmet on it and taught it to shred a guitar.

I should probably state at the outset that I am not a metalhead. I *appreciate* metal. I love Lord of the Rings and I like D&D and I'm a fan of Norse mythology, and as a person who tried to play guitar for about five minutes, I stand in awe of people who can make their hands move up and down a fret that fast. Having said that, it just isn't my scene. I like grunge, glam, and goth. Give me Joy Division! Give me *Marquee Moon*! Give me Sleater-Kinney's first album! But I also feel a very strong affinity for the metalhead. Kids in leather jackets and denim jackets, patches

all over, shredded jeans, potential band logos drawn on every notebook and textbook, sitting in cars and basements where they can turn their music up enough to feel it. Most of all, I feel the protective impulse I have for any group of kids who gather together to celebrate their particular nerdery, only to have asshole adults and bullies sneer at them and threaten them. (Satanic Panic was very real, and it fucked up a lot of lives.) So even if I'm not into their music, personally, I consider myself metal-friendly. A *met-ally*, if you will.

Hendrix digs into the subgenre and along the way gives us bits of knowledge about a lot of different types of metal. Kris is into Sabbath, initially, and understands that under all those white British boys there was a river of Blues, but over the course of the book we meet drummers who are into the mathematical constructs under the music, people who love Slayer, people who love Tool, people who refuse to admit they used to like Crüe, people who are into heavy Viking metal, like Bathory and Amon Amarth, and people who prefer the radio-friendly nu-metal of Korn and Slipknot.

We Sold Our Souls is an inversion of the typical rock story. We meet Kris Pulaski as teenager just picking up a guitar and picking out her first chords. Then we skip ahead to see her at the other end of her career, burned out, broke, post-lawsuit and rock'n'roll excess, living in a borrowed house and working at a Best Western. When her former bandmate/best friend/nemesis Terry Hunt goes out on a farewell tour, she decides it's time to get their old band back together, confront Terry, and finally learn why he betrayed her all those years ago. Her journey takes her all the way to the biggest music festival in history, looping across half of Pennsylvania and Northern Kentucky and all the way to Vegas, as she gathers her ex-Dürt Würk bandmates—guitarist Scottie Rocket, bassist Tuck, and drummer Bill—and tries to convince each of them that something weird and unnatural happened on the night Terry quit. She meets with resistance both human and supernatural on her quest.

Through this framework, Hendrix looks at the aftermath of a rock career. Kris was pretty successful—until she wasn't—and Hendrix shows us all the compromises people made for that success. He gives us a very interesting portrait of a modern artist, and interrogates the ways our current society makes it impossible to create art. And then, in a great, horrific way, he peels back the curtain and finds that *sinister forces* might be working against those artists.

This is, make no mistake, a horror novel. There is a chapter that was so intense I had to put the book down for a while. There is supernatural shit afoot, and Hendrix's descriptions are so evocative some of it showed up in my nightmares. There is a *lot* of violence and gore, and those of you who remember the haunted IKEA-esque furniture of *Horrorstör* will not be disappointed.

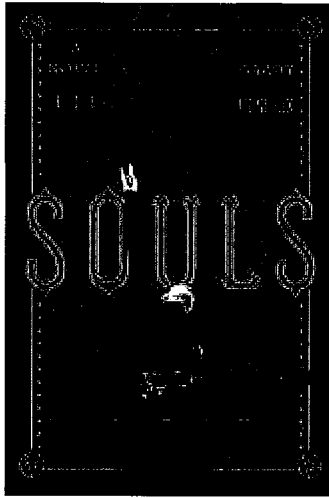
But having said that, none of it felt gratuitous—Hendrix sets his stakes extremely high, and then the consequences have to be dealt with.

In fact, stakes, consequences, and responsibilities are a huge amount of the subtext here. Not just real world consequences like a shitty apartment or a pile of debt, but Hendrix digs into the idea that all of our tiny little mindless decisions are essentially a choice to sell out—and I don't want to spoil stuff by saying what we're selling out *to*—but it becomes a running theme in the book that corporate, soul-sucking life is literally sucking the soul out of life:

Now people sell their souls for nothing. They do it for a new iPhone or to have one night with their hot next-door neighbor. There is no fanfare, no parchment signed at midnight. Sometimes it's just the language you click in an end-user license agreement. Most people don't even notice, and even if they did, they wouldn't care. They only want *things*... [H]ave you noticed how soulless this world has become? How empty and prefabricated? Soulless lives are hollow. We fill the earth with soulless cities, pollute ourselves with soulless albums.

Also as in *Horrorstör*, class issues are woven into the book from beginning to end. Kris is the middle child and only daughter in a working-class Eastern Pennsylvania family. When she's a kid in the early '90s, her parents are able to have a house, cars, and three kids, two of whom go to college. One of them vaults himself up to the middle class and becomes a lawyer, while the other one goes into the military and becomes a cop. Her parents can afford to give Kris guitar lessons when she asks. We get the sense that things are tight but workable. But by the time we check back in with her in the present day, Kris' childhood home is in a nearly-abandoned neighborhood, surrounded by houses that are falling down, and the few neighbors she has left have been shattered by opioid use and economic freefall. Kris works full time at the Best Western, but is still driving her Dad's 20-year-old car, and the idea of having to leave that childhood home and move into an apartment is debilitating—how the hell is she going to scrape together a deposit?

Back here, abandoned houses vomited green vines all over themselves. Yards gnawed away at the sidewalks. Raccoons slept in collapsed basements and generations of possums bred in unoccupied master bedrooms. Closer to Bovino, Hispanic families were moving into the old two-story row homes and hanging Puerto Rican flags in their windows, but farther in they called it the Saint Street Swamp because if you were in this deep, you were never getting out. The only people living on St. Nestor and St. Kirill were either too old to move, or Kris.



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This continues throughout the book, as we meet character after character who is just barely getting by in America—and I soon noticed that the only ones who had nice middle-class homes and two cars in the driveway were the ones who'd made various deals with various devils. Melanie, a metal fan whose animation degree is gathering dust, works double shifts at a place called Pappy's, where she's as likely to get slapped on the ass by frat boys as she is to get a decent tip. Her world is McDonalds and Starbucks and Sheetz gas stations, and a boyfriend who complains endlessly that the Boomers ruined his future, but whose biggest plans only extend as far as the next marathon gaming session. Melanie and Kris form a counterpoint throughout the book, Melanie as an audience member, and Kris as the one on stage, to tell us a story that hovers at the edge of the book: the story of women in rock. Kris refuses to let her gender define her: she wears jeans and a leather jacket, and says repeatedly "A girl with a guitar never has to apologize for anything." Her guitar becomes her weapon, her magic wand, the phallic key that forces the boys to shut up and pay attention—but the implication is that while she only feels at home onstage, she's also only *safe* onstage. Melanie, meanwhile, shows us the other side of this equation. She lives her life as a girl in genre that seen as male and aggro, and as another pretty face in the crowd she has no defense at all from the men who take crowdsurfing as an invitation to grope.

The importance and power of music is celebrated under everything else. Under the horror and the working-class realism, the touchstone is that all the real characters in this novel, all the people you genuinely care about? Music is their heartbeat. It gets them through terrible shifts and through the deaths of their parents. It takes them onstage. It gives them hope and meaning. It's easy to get snarky about metal, and Hendrix is a hilarious writer, but he always

always takes the music seriously. Just as *Horrostör* was a book about work that was also a book about a nightmarish big box store, and just as *My Best Friend's Exorcism* was a book about demonic possession that was also about the power of female friendship, this book is about music and found family just as much as its about an eldritch horror lurking beneath the facade of modern American life. And it rocks.

We Sold Our Souls is available from Quirk Books.

Read an excerpt from the novel here.

Photograph by Marcus Obal.

For all that she's not a metalhead, Tool is one of **Leah Schnelbach's** favorite live acts. Come throw the horns up with her on **Twitter!**