Book Review by Mary Beams

BOOKS DIGITAL AND BOUND

Steve at the Library has an interesting group of books: self- published ebooks which became so popular they decided to publish them as bound books. I am reading one now, Not Dead in the Heart of Dixie, by R.M. Kralik.

 At first I tried the bound book and found its need for copy-editng, plus its large size and economical printing distracted from the story.  I decided to quit reading it and returned it to the library. As soon as I dropped the book in the return slot, I regretted it. Apparently the story had gotten into me and I missed it after all, so I got the book on Kindle, where it is much more at home.

 It’s basically a survivalist manifesto; the particular apocalypse involves zombies. The first-person journal, told by a 50 year old very capable woman, describes how her family and the other survivors they collect manage to acquire resources, and fend off the hordes of zombies and the marauding gangs, as they fortify their compound. It’s a huge book and I’m about halfway through it after many days of pretty steady reading.

 Part of its charm is the narrator’s sweetness regarding her own clan and her resourcefulness in providing for everyone. She is a pioneer in this new world, and she brings formidable skills to their survival; just not the skill of a Shakespeare or Dickens in the telling of it. But she does have a hypnotic pattern to her journal entries: “we did that, we are doing this, we will do this; we ate that, we will cook this”. After her to do lists and “shopping” lists for foraging she narrates whatever attacks the group encountered that day. Her squeamishness regarding her own family’s hygiene and language goes out the window when she describes the truly horrible zombie attacks and the brutality of the evil humans. Then they go to bed. Then they get up the next day.

 The amount of work they do is exhausting, as it would be in such a situation. As a reader I’ve become exhausted, too. I tried several times to stop reading (you don’t “put the book down” on Kindle as much as go to the index and choose another book to read), but then I have to peek at the next entry, and pretty soon I am hooked again. The other night I read it pretty intensely, then turned out the light and tried to sleep, not very successfully. For the first time in years I felt anxious about who might be lurking when I woke up.

 The next morning Mary, who has the room above mine at our house, asked if I’d been “reading that zombie book late at night?”

 “Yes, why?”

 “Well stop it. I dreamed all night that things were chasing and eating me.”

 So now the book is relegated to the daytime, if I have any time to read it. I may not ever finish it. But it has taught me many interesting things about the experience of reading, what a book actually is, and how the energy of the written word fills and affects one’s day.

 Size matters. Digital big books are better than huge bound printed books. Tiny bound books are more satisfying than short digital books.

 Self-published books are disturbing to read if one is used to impeccably-published books with absolutely no mistakes or mixed metaphors. I suspect as time goes on and more people self-publish, these standards will become a thing of the past. “It’s” and “its” have already become interchangeable without the rules of grammar governing the interchanges. Most people “nowaday’s” throw in an apostrophe before the “s” in any plural. (which spell check catches, thank goodness).

 My English teacher in high school was truly old-school. She taught my father 30 years before me, and our class was drilled in proper English. It was a good foundation. I don’t remember all of it accurately, just enough to bother me when I see the standards dropping so low, “nowaday’s.” Good grammar is invisible, bad grammar makes you stumble as you read and communication gets gummed up.

 Despite its flaws, NOT DEAD IN THE HEART OF DIXIE has something unique – a hypnotic rhythm that can only develop and pull you in if you read lots of it. It’s worth the effort of sticking with it.

MARY BEAMS

 PS – Now, many days later, I have finished the book. I am glad I read it. And if there is an apocalypse I will be looking R.M. Kralik up to see if she could use a baker.