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*Flowertown* Essay

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What Happened to Those Wholesome, Hateful Villains Who Stood For Something?

Back when I was little, and watched Saturday morning cartoons, the villains were not entirely different from the villains we have today. Except for the fact that they stood for something. Every single one fought for an ideal. Whether it was their rule of the world, their enslavement of the world, or simply their destruction of the world, it didn’t matter. Because when the hero saved the day, we all walked away feeling good, escaping from the coldness that is reality. Nowadays, almost every antagonist is motivated by money. *Flowertown* is a perfect example of this. After the Feno Corporation spilled a toxic chemical in rural Iowa, they proceeded to quarantine the victims for two more years than they should have to test medicines that would be sold on the market. And after all that, the Feno Corporation tried to blow Flowertown (and its inhabitants) sky high. They attempted mass murder not because they thought they were saving humanity, but to save their stock price. A good villain should be one that we can empathize with, not one that kills mass amounts of people so they can afford a sauna in their custom yacht. Villains whose main motivation is money are weak, because the average reader cannot connect with them.

Besides the extra two years of quarantine and mass murder, many other atrocities occur in Flowertown for the sake of the bottom line. The most egregious of these is the “advertising campaign” for Feno Corporation’s new vaccine. While attempting to get a government contract for their vaccine to protect against the spilled chemical, the Feno Corporation takes dead bodies out of Flowertown and places them across the country and claims them as escapees of Flowertown. This has the intended effect of drumming up fear within the general population that an outbreak is a very real possibility. “’This!’ She banged on the map. ‘This is not an accident. They didn’t place those bodies randomly. And they’re not researching anything. They don’t need bodies for that. This isn’t an investigation.’ She turned around looked at the bewildered faces before her. ‘It’s a campaign’” (294). They are trying to create prejudice against citizens of Flowertown to validate their business, much like how slave traders spread racism in order to validate the owing of slaves. And very few beings are less human than slave traders.

While *Flowertown* is a perfect example of this new type of villain, it is not the first to use it, and not even close to the most mainstream. In *Iron Man 3* the villain, the Mandarin, is initially thought to be a psychotic terrorist, it is later revealed that he is a cover up for a businessman who’s new regenerative tissue technology has some serious flaws, namely that it causes its users to explode. This reveal brings the drama and the stakes down for the movie as it is no longer about good versus evil, but rather good versus jerk. In contrast, *Blade Runner* has a villain that anyone can sympathize with. Roy Batty is a replicant (an artificial human) who’s five year lifespan is about to expire. In trying to find his creator to find a way to live, he murders multiple people only to find out he cannot live any longer, however in his final moments he saves the human sent to kill him, thus proving his humanity. His connection with the audience creates a better story and leaves the audience with something. Meanwhile, the Feno Corporation and the mandarin leave the audience with nothing, making their respective stories die quickly.

While the trend of creating villains no one (except for maybe Martin Shkrelli) can relate to is not entirely new, its increase is troubling, as stories with staying power are becoming rarer and rarer. While I did enjoy *Flowertown*, it did not stick with me as something like *Blade Runner* did. The faceless Feno Corporation failed to do anything interesting or emotional, and thus held the book back, much like just about all of the other modern books out there are doing.