

Commentary on *The Chilling Effect*

Roberta Lee

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*, a random meeting between two men throws the protagonist's life into spiraling chaos. It's a classic Hitchcock theme, explored in *Rear Window*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and many of his other films: an otherwise remarkably average person of distinctly average intelligence blunders into something dark, mysterious and deadly, a force of chaos. The puzzle they need to solve in order to stave off disaster becomes the new center of their no longer average lives, and becomes Hitchcock's story, as well.

When I began writing *The Chilling Effect*, I had that great Hitchcockian theme in mind, as well a corollary to it--the deep need we all feel to fit into society. Even a "force of chaos"--a psychopath--needs to blend in, and the fact that they so obviously (in hindsight) wear a disguise to do so makes the disguises we all wear that much more evident. The psychopath in my book actually manages to fit in *better* than the "normal" people, in large part because he's aware that he's playing a role and is willing to put conscious effect into perfecting his various costumes and the personality shifts that accompany them. Most of us don't apply ourselves as hard to the job of fitting in, partly because our various disguises and roles become increasingly habitual, and partly because we chose not to see the role-playing for what it is.

In *The Chilling Effect*, most of the characters have something basic about themselves that they want to hide, and a costume they wear in order to do so. This book's prequel, *The Liar's Guide*, looked at people with literal dual lives. *The Chilling Effect* takes as close a view of the more mundane ways in which we hide the parts of our day-to-day lives we suspect will be misunderstood, disliked or feared. As one character points out, "It's important to fit in."

The question I am asked most often is if the humor in *The Chilling Effect* and *The Liar's Guide* is intentional. It of course is. Both novels are satire; they both fall into the arena of comedy/drama. In *The Chilling Effect*, Debbie is writing a book about a woman who is writing a book about writing a book. Jack suffers from violence-drenched nightmares in which his girlfriend's late husband appears, but which annoy him because the ghost is inevitably better dressed than he is. Buttoned-up stockbroker Steven falls in love with a stripper, and pathologically independent, mommy-phobic Laura becomes a den mother. They all populate a clean, upscale, well-manicured suburb--that has a strip club in the middle of the town's historic district. Both books take place on a planet where Debbie's thin, poorly written book becomes not only a bestseller, but a Major Motion Picture; ghosts are protective of their cars; a psychopath is the star employee at whatever job he takes and Tommy starts a Life Enhancement Consultancy--corporate motto: "Your Life. Just Better"--in order to disguise his hidden life as a drug dealer.

Welcome to my (very alternative) version of beautiful Bucks County, Pennsylvania! Hope you enjoy your stay.