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The Penalty

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~~Not a Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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Here Mal Peet returns to South America and to football, the arenas of his first novel *Keeper*. But this is not a novel about what takes place on the pitch, rather about what goes on around the stadium, about a brutal past and a corrupt and poverty-stricken present.

The novel begins enigmatically, first with a soccer-obsessed youngster practising alone in the back country and then with another boy, centuries earlier in another continent, taken as a slave. The first becomes a star striker and then suddenly disappears. The second survives the Middle Passage, to be sustained by the gods of his African ancestors and, through cunning and spiritual power, to attain a position of influence not only among his fellow slaves but also with his white owner.

The two stories, one told in the first person as a slave narrative, the other in the third person as a crime novel, gradually converge in an investigation of the striker's disappearance. Paul Faustino, a sports journalist, is reluctantly drawn into the hidden and compelling world of Veneration (or voodoo), a hybrid of African ancestor worship and Catholicism, forged in slavery on the sugar plantations and still sustaining the black rural poor in the cities.

Peet successfully enters the minds of both displaced African slave and cynical reporter and both stories are carried forward at a pace with drama, emotional depth, and dark humour. The climax owes something to Quentin Tarantino and to *Hammer Horror*. Like *Veneration* itself, the novel is a strange and fascinating hybrid. I have just two related doubts about it: whether the genres fit convincingly; and whether the conventions of 'occult' fiction that are used to bring them together concede too much to the worn out association of voodoo with black magic. This novel will also appeal to older readers. CB

Running Order:

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