

Fantasy & Science Fiction, May/June 2020

# BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

## CHARLES DE LINT

*Carbon*, Andrew Vachss,  
Haverhill House Publishing, 2019,  
\$29.95, hc

*Carbon* feels like you're falling into a fever dream. Vachss drops you into a future world and just gets on with the story, letting you figure out what the world is, and how it got to be the way it is, on your own. It's a touch confusing but it's also invigorating and the more you read, the more things make sense.

It's refreshing to not have a pile of exposition and explanation dumped on you, to have a writer who respects the reader enough to know that they'll understand things as they go rather than having everything handed to them.

*Carbon* is a standalone novel, so you don't have to have any familiarity with the rest of Vachss's large body of work and can jump right in. The titular character, Carbon, lives on the outside of every part of this otherworldly society. Pulled from incarceration, he's tasked by the government to find a killer, but the journey to do so takes him out of the relative civilization of the City and the Sector into the Pure Zone – a wild place where sorcery works, but tech doesn't. There he rescues a somewhat feral child, and his mission changes. He's still going to finish his job for the government, but his priority now is to protect the child and teach her the life lessons that he's acquired over the years.

My touchstone for *Carbon* is William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Not so much because it and *Carbon* share a similar story or setting, or even for the writing style. It's more how Gibson in his time created such an immersive world, a world that was innovative and dangerous and fresh, revealing it to us through the lens of a story that needed to be told in a way that we hadn't seen before. That's what Vachss has done here. The prose is spare – which in itself is an oddity for sf – but it lends an urgency and a real sense that we've entered a landscape and society we haven't experienced before. The style might be an acquired taste, but once you've allowed yourself to fall under its spell, it becomes highly addictive. Luckily he has a large body of work, which – while mostly outside the sf genre – is waiting for readers to explore if they love this as much as I do.

In interviews over the years, Vachss has said that he has only one story to tell and he'll keep telling it until it's no longer necessary. It can basically be pared down to: Speak truth, live truth, and always protect those who can't protect themselves. In this present climate, where thousands of children can be incarcerated in desert concentration camps with few voices raised in protest, that's a message that is more important than ever.

Highly recommended.