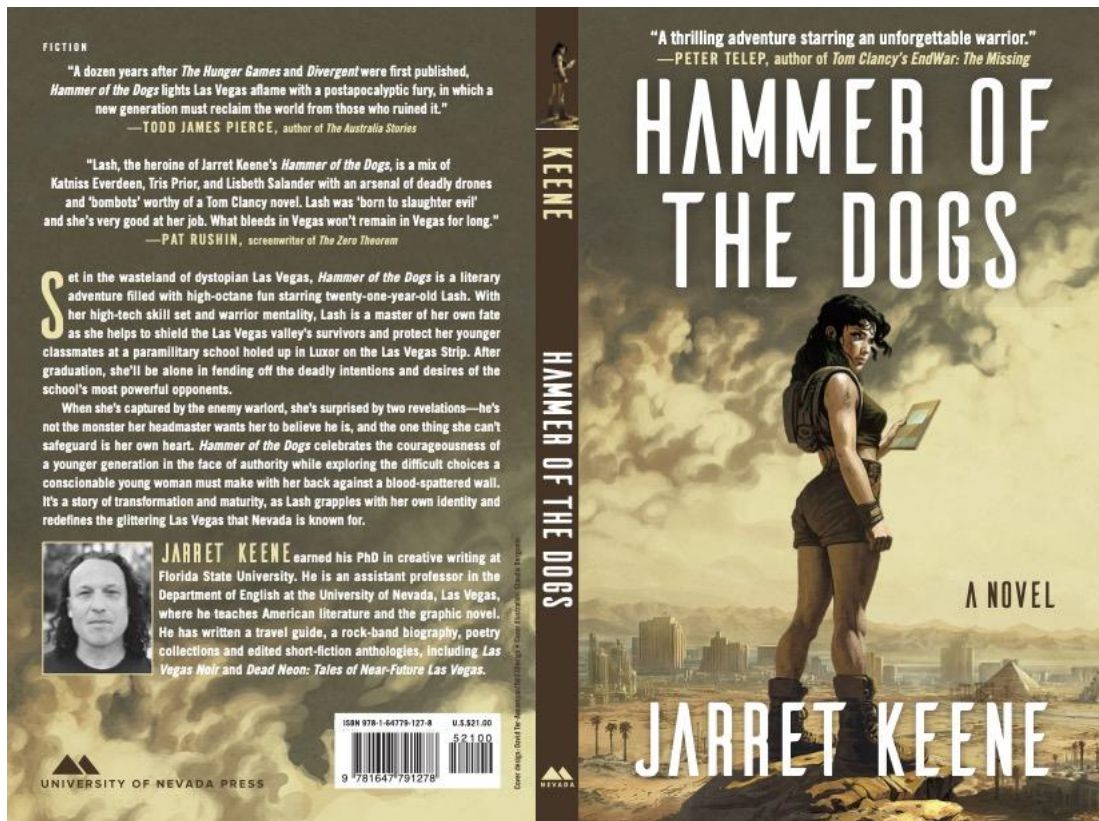


BOOK REVIEW: *Hammer of the Dogs*  
by Stephen B. Armstrong



Set in Las Vegas following a nuclear attack that has transformed Glitter Gulch into Nightmare Alley, Jarret Keene's first novel, *Hammer of the Dogs*, resonates like a fabulous comic book.

The lead character in this swiftly paced whacked-out techno thriller is an orphaned twenty-ish woman named Lash, who's been raised in the remains of the pyramid-shaped Luxor hotel on the Las Vegas Strip by a weird computer-worshipping cult called the Academy. Under the tutelage of the group's fanatical leader, the Professor, a dead ringer for "a skinned and emaciated owl," Lash builds and flies military-grade drone warcraft to search for and destroy the Academy's enemies.

A longtime Sin City journalist and these days an English professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Keene writes about the world's most famous gambling mecca with a marksman's acuity and a flair for the harsh and strange: "What made Las Vegas unique was the vast skeleton of the Strip," observes the novel's unnamed quasi-maniac narrator, with "mammoth hotel-casino husks standing like ancient ruins in the sand, rendering the former tourist-treated boomtown older than it was. Las Vegas Boulevard, once a thrumming corridor of revelry, now stretched empty, a ghost-ridden cesarean-section scar."

Gone from the nuclear-strafted Strip are the well-loved throb of the electric signs above the sidewalks and the welter of restaurants that once lured customers with come-hither deals on shrimp cocktails and prime rib dinners. Indeed, Lash faces food scarcity often, and to a pitiable degree, having to eat the most repulsive items to stave off starvation. In one jolting scene, the young drone warrior and her Academy pals feast on a dead rat. “After applying a blowtorch to the hairs, they waited for the rat to cool before cleaning it with steel wool in a plastic tub of water....They salted the meat and took it back to Lash’s room to fry thoroughly in a tin heated by grain alcohol and wood spirits—lazy Sterno. They garnished the meat with long expired packages of airplane peanuts.”

Keene dedicates his novel to Jack “The King of Comics” Kirby, the artist-writer whose gargantuan imagination began such biological misfits as the X-Men and the Fantastic Four, as well as a spate of gripping characters who live both as people and as machines, like Iron Man, on the side of the angels, and the frightening mecha-autocrat, Doctor Doom. Likewise, Lash is something more than human herself, both biologically and mechanically, due to sentient electronic parts that have been surgically installed into her brain, which imbue her with exceptional powers she learns to harness, becoming by novel’s end a sort of superhero, though a deeply conflicted murderous one.

Suitably, grotesque villains for Lash to battle, each intriguingly evil, each furnished with an arsenal of malevolent gadgets, pack *Hammer of the Dogs*. One of these genii sinistres is Westphalia, an elderly dowager with a phalanx of wired-to-kill pink-flamingo automatons. Another is Lash’s mentor, the Professor, who reveals himself to be a people killer of the Jim-Jones sort, driven by a mad belief that artificial intelligence will eventually displace God as the universe’s prime operator. The third scoundrel in this legion of doom is a scary John-Galt wannabe named Richter. Lash’s sometime lover, Richter maintains an AI-enhanced fleet of lethal bots and drones in the glass-wrapped CityCenter hotel complex. In order for Vegas to rise again, Richter contends that there must be unregulated reinvestment of capital into its economy, even if the source is international oligarchs and gangsters.

An objection to *Hammer of the Dogs* might be made by more sensitive readers to the constancy of violence charging through its pages. Yet the brutality Lash experiences and exerts is always of an outlandish, campy sort that courts the ludicrous without crossing over into it entirely. The author’s disinclination to saddle his plot with exhaustive world-building and specious philosophizing, the bane of so much contemporary sci-fi and fantasy, further augments the novel’s narrative dynamism and entertainment value. Keene’s anything-but-muted affection for Reagan-era exploitation movies like *Tron* and *Gremlins* finds expression often, too, along with Lash’s frequent musings on the glories of ’80s heavy-metal acts like Judas Priest, Alice

Cooper and Ronnie James Dio. This tendency to shine a favorable light on the artifacts of late-twentieth-century pop culture introduces a salubrious dose of irreverence to the novel’s otherwise dire renderings, at the same time offering for our contemplation the comforting possibility that even when civilization meets its end, in this instance by bang, not whimper, the moment won’t be entirely bereft of pleasure