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TOP DOG

By Jerry Jay Carroll

Ace Trade Original/Berkley; 366 pp.

If Kafka and Tolkien shared an office on Wall Street, this is the novel they might have written.

Like Kafka's "Metamorphosis," it opens with a man suddenly transformed into an animal. W. Bogart Ingersol finds himself running along, but beneath him he sees not feet but paws. His tongue is smacking his face. He's become a huge dog. Yet, as in the famous passage in the "Chuang-tzu," we cannot tell if Ingersol is dreaming himself to be a dog or if he is a dog now dreaming himself to have been Ingersol.

And like Tolkien, first-novelist Carroll creates an exotic, fascinating world where Ingersol soon finds himself engulfed in an epic struggle. As he runs along--talking with badgers here, biting through the neck of a wolf there--Ingersol learns bit by bit that the forces of The Dark One are mounting an apocalyptic assault upon the Two Legs, who worship The Bright Giver.

And it doesn't look good for the Two Legs. Under the evil wizard Zalzathar, the baneful bad guys count among their number trolls, witches, fierce killers out of the sky called Uulebeets, putrid carnivores called Pig Faces, huge monsters called Gutters, and mysterious spirits of doom called Mogwert, who like killing but love pain even more. Fortunately, none of them, even the wizard, is terribly bright.

You'd think Ingersol's would be an easy choice: support the Two Legs, led by the good wizard Helither and helped by sweet little fairies and Woodmen who feel a lot like Tolkien's Ents.

But the amoral Ingersol in dog's clothing has little interest in good vs. evil, doesn't even think the terms meaningful. What counts is the bottom line. He'd been a Wall Street shark and wears his callousness with pride. "Pity is unknown on Wall Street," he boasts, "and should be. If the lion lies down with the sheep, he should get up only when the bones have been picked clean. You want pity, move someplace where there's socialism."

Every few pages, Ingersol makes sure we remember he's heartless: "Friends I don't need. Self-sufficiency is my credo." Beside his cumulative litany, the Contract with America begins to sound like the Little Flowers of St. Francis. He brags about the thousands he's thrown out of work and about the women he buys to entertain him while riding in the limo home to his wife. His remorselessness, in fact, becomes overkill, perhaps because his insensitivity is like Henry IV's sweets: a little more than a little is by much too much.

Nor do we feel sorry for Ingersol's wife Felicity, a condescending patrician whose education "in her formative years in Switzerland made her believe work was something people did when they couldn't think of a more amusing way to pass time."

And so Ingersoll moves back and forth between good guys and bad guys, playing spy and counterspy, all the while wondering if he'll return to Wall Street and Felicity, and if the world waiting for him there is worth returning to, until finally, as expected, worlds collide.

The abundantly talented Carroll falls prey to an easy temptation--in writing his first novel, he tries to write his first four or five novels. He leaves us unsure if this is a parable, heroic quest, satire, thriller or fantasy, putting his fingers in so many pies that he can't take quite a big enough gob out of any. He hits an occasional dissonant note when he tries to play on the epic and comic scales at once, and his ending gets a tad baroque. He provides some strained hyperbole ("If a pin dropped, it would sound like Saturday night at the bowling alley") and even his brightest character, the good wizard, cannot rise above simplistic metaphysics ("[If God's omnipotent] how come He doesn't just kick ass?" Helither shrugged. "Sometimes I wonder if it's because his struggle with the Dark One is a way of making time pass.")

But if Carroll's overambitiousness winds up spreading his powers a bit thin, they are still formidable powers. His tight, colorful prose proves zesty and absorbing. His characters ring oddly true. And his plot has touches of that Tolkienesque irresistibility, that thing that keeps you up past bedtime turning pages to learn what happens next.