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DOG EAT DOG

By Jerry Jay Carroll

Ace Trade Paperback; 304 pages.

In his third novel, Jerry Jay Carroll clearly establishes his as a name we can count on for zany, engrossing fun.

It's still a dog's life for Bogey Ingersoll in this zippy sequel to Carroll's 1996 *Top Dog*. Having spent virtually all of the earlier book as a conscience-torn hound, the former Attila of Wall Street finally joined the forces of The Bright Giver (a.k.a., God) in their apocalyptic battle against Zalzathar, right-hand evil wizard of The Dark One.

But Satan is no gracious loser. Bogey, the once ruthless tycoon whose philosophy was, "If the lion lies down with the sheep, he should get up only when the bones have been picked clean," is now restored to human form. He's moved from heartless New York to kind California, and while he's rich enough to think an \$80 million investment "mad money," he also stops to smell flowers with his still canine-sharp nose. He uses his money charitably, and he keeps four dozen dogs on his front lawn awaiting loving homes.

Kinder, yes, but he's no sitting lap dog defenseless against the forces of evil. When Zalzathar comes back determined to take over the world by making sinister megabillionaire Bernie Soderberg President of the United States, he's got to go through Bogey.

Carroll once again wrings enormous tension out of a looking-glass world. And he's once again a textbook case of multiple personality. *Top Dog* was Tolkien meets Kafka. The 1998 *Inhuman Beings* was Raymond Chandler meets Rod Serling. This third fantasy instills a sense of Stephen King meets Spinoza, a scary page-turner that occasionally pauses long enough to ask: just whose metaphysical fingers hold the shears of destiny?

Where *Top Dog* thrust Bogey into a fantasy world, this time that world invades ours. When Bogey steps out one foggy night and sniffs the putrid scent of Pig Faces, he races off to regain his grip in the office of lovely widowed psychiatrist Alex Epperly. She's quite taken by Bogey, or would be if she didn't think him flakier than a buttermilk biscuit. Yet, the longer she accompanies Bogey in his quest to stop Zalzathar and Soderberg, encountering along the way incubuses, fatal black cats, strange deadly viruses and "zones of transition" where the newly dead can hang around listening to disco or Sinatra before moving on, the more she sees he's our world's last hope.

But when the love interest comes from the unlikeliest couple imaginable, a clever writer doesn't linger there. Carroll dwells instead in the always entertaining mind of Bogey. Though sweetened up now, Bogey's still jaded enough to carve into jewelry.

He'll use the press to help battle Soderberg, but still he knows, "Give them an inch and next you know they're reading your mail and looking in your refrigerator."

For every Dark move, Bogey finds a countermove. As Soderberg's poll numbers rise, Bogey manipulates the media to drag the numbers down. When Soderberg enlists public sympathy by announcing he'll marry Bogey's nubile ex-wife, Bogey wises her up. Even when Satan himself joins battle disguised as a restaurant manager with a James Bond villain's voice, he leaves Bogey only stirred, not shaken.

And Bogey has help. *Top Dog*'s virtuous archangel Helither pops in midway through to even the scales and add notes of theological speculation. Helither suggests ours is a deist universe where God set things in motion, but "He was not hands-on, like Satan," and evil could win as easily as good. As for why evil exists in a world created by a benevolent power, Helither's guess is no better than Job's.

As always, Carroll's literary gifts far exceed his genre form. His plot is so shaky that we must never stop long to reflect or it would fall apart, but you can say that of *Othello*. His taut pacing never lets us stop long. Events unfold rapidly, too rapidly at the end, and they unfold in vivid prose. A sea-fog drifts thick, "like a London fog when they burned coal." A bright, cold morning is "one of those days that are like biting into a crisp apple."

As wacky as his engrossing plot might be, we may be slower to dismiss Carroll's premise: Evil bolstered by scads of money, could that really win the Presidency in our United States? Nah.