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Review of Johannes Cabal the Necromancer by Jonathan L. Howard

Kevin Clouter

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Johannes Cabal the Necromancer.
By Jonathan L. Howard.

July 2009. 288p. Doubleday, \$24.95
(9780385528085).

In his debut novel, Howard reimagines the familiar Faustian story of dealing with the devil. More specifically, the scientist Johannes Cabal commits himself to retrieving 100 souls in exchange for his own. Howard's background as a game designer is unsurprising, as the novel unfolds episodically as a series of challenges. Indeed, raising the dead has long been a popular theme in fantasy role-playing. Howard offers little background, and one can almost picture Cabal on the screen, accomplishing each task before moving to the next en route to his eventual meeting with Satan. Although the scenes are varied and energetically drawn—a

fantastical carnival and vampire are prominently involved—the dialogue is more precious than humorous. Several characters aspire to be little beyond grotesque caricatures. Howard can be delightfully original, as when he describes a “tree that might have been an elm before being regularly watered with LSD,” but the novel ultimately distinguishes itself through its tone, which is consciously melodramatic, dark but never dismal. —*Kevin Cloutier*

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