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Review: When boys are gods, they can be hell on wheels

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"The world needs to be destroyed again. These humans are ruining everything," is not something the average 12-year-old boy is apt to say.

However, Xavi is not your everyday tween. He is, in fact, the Hindu god Shiva aka The Destroyer of Worlds, returned to earth on an apocalyptic mission. His partner on this job, another young boy who goes by the name Jesse, is Jesus Christ.

“I know you're fond of them,” Xavi tells Jesse, “but they've got serious design flaws.”

“BICYCLES OF THE GODS: A DIVINE COMEDY”

By Michael Simms
Madville Publishing (\$19.95)

And so we're off on the adventure to end all adventures in this debut novel.

Michael Simms is a much-admired local poet who founded Autumn House Press in 1998. He stepped down from his duties as editor-in-chief in 2016 to concentrate on his new venture, Vox Populi, an online journal dedicated to politics and the arts.

“The Bicycles of the Gods,” a reference to Xavi and Jesse’s preferred mode of transportation, is a serious comedy, or perhaps it is a drama with gags. Ultimately it is a profound meditation on politics and religion in contemporary America that keeps company with “Another Roadside Attraction” by Tom Robbins and works by Neil Gaiman such as “Good Omens” (written with Terry Pratchett) and “American Gods.” In other words, it is very funny, but also understands that a good joke is perhaps the best way to deliver a hard truth to an audience,

Every 10,000 years, it turns out, God wipes the world clean and starts over. The last time this was scheduled to happen, roughly 2,000 years ago, his son had a change of heart and the requisite demolition got delayed. Until now, that is. Xavi and Jesse have been sent to earth to begin the liquidation in Los Angeles and from there go city by city. Once again, though, Jesse is not onboard with his father's plan.

“I’m not cut out for the Avenging Angel role,” Jesse complains. “I really don't want to be a punishing god like my father.”

Jesse sets out to upend his dad’s agenda, drawing on the aid of a motley crew of characters — his mother, Maria, the archangel Michael, the

patriarch Abraham — and some new friends who are much more secular in their comportment. There's Stefan, a homeless vet who has exiled himself to a kind of hermit existence and spends his time writing poems, and Patrick/Trish, a trans sex worker. There's also a motorcycle gang of nuns who call themselves The Sisters of the Holy Piston.

As in the prequel to Simms novel — aka the Bible — Jesse is drawn to and concerned with the marginalized. While God in this book is a successful CEO who lords over a fancy boardroom and is adorned in trim suits, his son prefers the company of outcasts who are just trying to be decent people.

This version of Jesus, whose primary miracle is making tuna fish sandwiches appear, can be naive. Jesse, who is a person of color, as is Xavi, says at one point, “I wonder where racism came from?” However, in an argument with God, he offers his father an incredibly poignant rebuke, “You turned my torture into a marketing opportunity for your brand.”

Lucifer has a role to play in the world's end, too. As Jesse's Uncle Luke, he is a snake-oil salesman in politician's clothes. “I alone can fix this country! You are the real Americans!” he assures an unruly mob before siccing them on his nephew.

Simms has created a wild, syncretic ride refashioning old stories in a contemporary light. Will Jesse succeed? Will the world end? Spoilers: As the poet George Herbert wrote, “”But Love and Grace took Glory by the hand / and built a braver palace than before.”

Kristofer Collins is the books editor for Pittsburgh Magazine and the co-host of the Hemingway's Summer Poetry Series. His latest poetry collection, “Roundabout Trace,” was published earlier this year.

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