

CEMETERY DANCE

ISSUE #56

\$5.00

GLEN HIRSHBERG SPECIAL

PETER ATKINS

JEREMY ROBERT JOHNSON

SCOTT NICHOLSON

STEPHEN MARK RAINEY

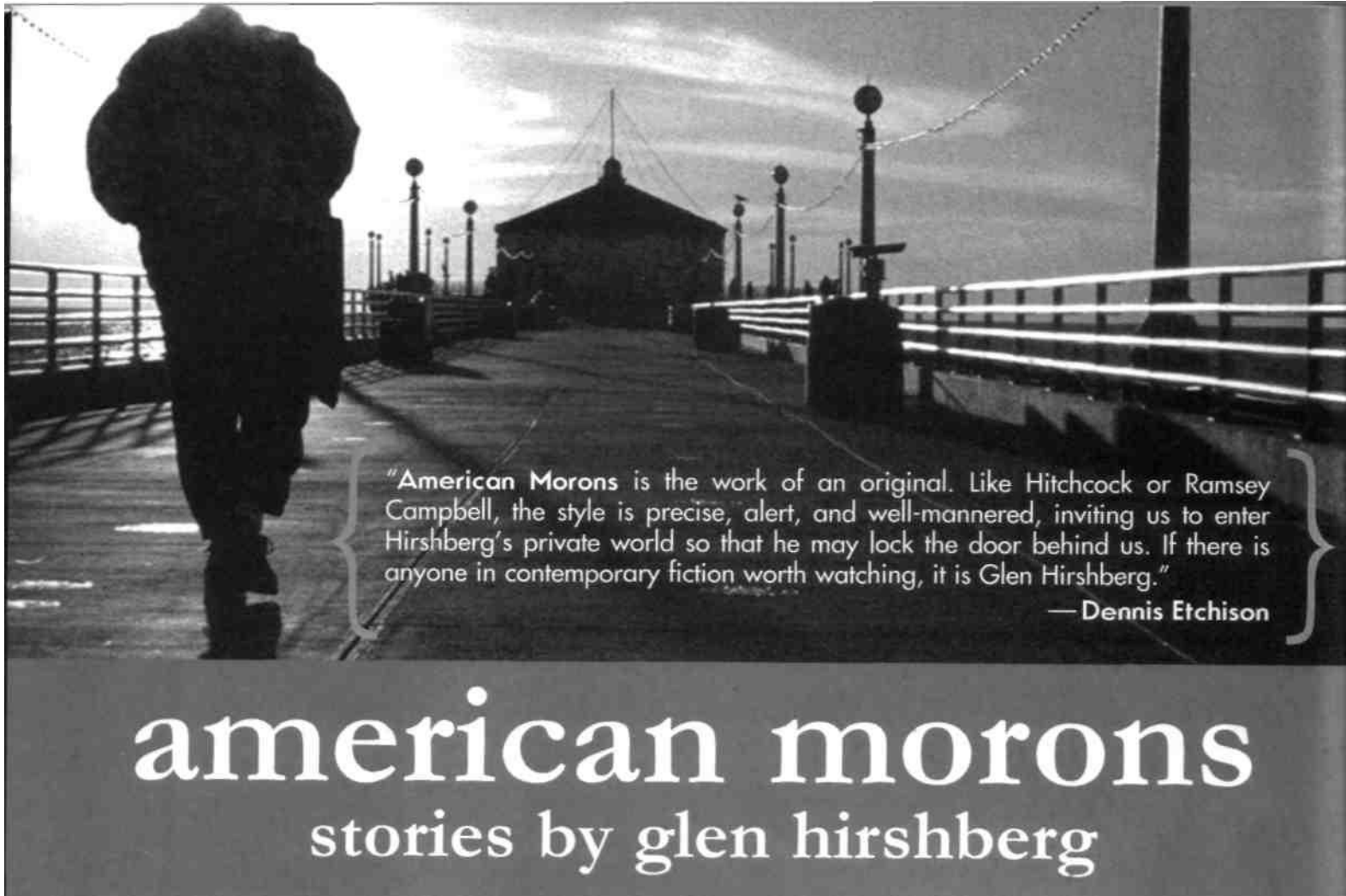


\$5.00 US / \$7.00 CAN



5 6 >

7 25274 78335 9



"**American Morons** is the work of an original. Like Hitchcock or Ramsey Campbell, the style is precise, alert, and well-mannered, inviting us to enter Hirshberg's private world so that he may lock the door behind us. If there is anyone in contemporary fiction worth watching, it is Glen Hirshberg."

— Dennis Etchison

american morons

stories by glen hirshberg

"With **American Morons**, Glen Hirshberg confidently shoulders his way through the generational pack to claim his rightful place on the summit. These stories are smart, challenging, ripe with feeling, expansive in every way."

— Peter Straub

"Hirshberg's skill at drawing horrors out of commonplace situations peopled with credibly drawn characters distinguishes these subtle tales of the uncanny as some of the most effective and chilling in contemporary weird fiction."

— Publishers Weekly, Starred Review

"Glen Hirshberg's stories are haunting, absolutely, but not only because of the content—the stories themselves haunt, they stick around, they linger, inhabiting a little corner of the reader's brain and resurfacing to evoke mystery or sadness or longing."

—Aimee Bender

"An excellent collection in every way. Hirshberg is among the best short story writers in, out of, or around, the genre of the fantastic. His fiction is marked by clarity, depth and a restraint and subtlety that make the horror and the wonder seem absolutely possible."

— Jeffrey Ford

American Morons follows Hirshberg's International Horror Guild award-winning collection, **The Two Sams**, which made **Publishers Weekly** and **Locus Magazine** best-of-the-year lists.

\$24 U.S. trade hardcover, Now available

EARTHLING PUBLICATIONS

P.O. Box 413 Northborough,
MA 01532 (USA)

www.earthlingpub.com

earthlingpub@yahoo.com

Michael A. Arnzen presents...

THE GORELETTER

A Bram Stoker Award

Winning Newsletter


"The Goreletter is
the most inventive,
most entertaining,
and **SICKEST**
author newsletter
out there.

Mike Arnzen is not well."

-- Jeff Strand

Subscribe **FREE:**

gorelets.com



CEMETERY DANCE MAGAZINE
ISSUE 56

Publisher/Executive Editor

Richard Chizmar

Editor

Robert Morrish

Managing Editor

Mindy Jarusek

Advertising Director

Brian Freeman

Associate Editor

Norman Prentiss

Interior Design

Robert Morrish

Cover Design

Gail Cross

Contributing Editors

Paula Guran

Rick Kleffel

Michael Marano

Thomas F. Monteleone

John Pelan

Bev Vincent

Interior Illustrations

Steve Gilberts (pgs. 12 & 24)

Joseph Larkin (pgs. 64 & 76)

Keith Minnion (pg. 48)

Will Renfro (p. 86)

Chad Savage (pg. 38)

Cover Artist

Stacy Drum

ISSN 1047-7675

Copyright © 2006 by Cemetery Dance Publications. Individual works are copyright © 2006 by their creators. All rights reserved.

All inquiries should be addressed to: Cemetery Dance, P. O. Box 623, Forest Hill, MD 21050. No response without SASE. Advertising rates available. Discount rates available for bulk and standing retail orders. Please note: the opinions expressed herein are not necessarily those of the publisher.

Subscribers, send address changes to the address above. Periodical mail is not forwarded; it is either returned or destroyed. If you move, you must send us your new address in order to continue receiving CD.

FICTION


TRANSITWAY	13
—Glen Hirshberg	
SISTERS OF BAIKAL (NOVEL EXCERPT)	25
—Glen Hirshberg	
THE CUBIST'S ATTORNEY	39
—Peter Atkins	
THE DELILAH PARTY	49
—David Nickle	
A FLOOD OF HARRIERS	65
—Jeremy Robert Johnson	
OTHER GODS	77
—Stephen Mark Rainey	
DOG PERSON	87
—Scott Nicholson	

NON-FICTION

A CONVERSATION WITH GLEN HIRSHBERG	4
—Rick Kleffel	
ROLL, DARK	20
—Glen Hirshberg	
GLEN HIRSHBERG BIBLIOGRAPHY	28
—Glen Hirshberg and Rick Kleffel	
FEATURE REVIEW: AMERICAN MORONS	30
—Rick Kleffel	
NEW VOICES: JEREMY ROBERT JOHNSON	60
—Steve Vernon	
A CONVERSATION WITH EARL HAMNER, JR.	92
—William P. Simmons	

THE USUAL SUSPECTS

WORDS FROM THE EDITORS	3
—Robert Morrish & Richard Chizmar	
STEPHEN KING NEWS: FROM THE DEAD ZONE	32
—Bev Vincent	
THE MOTHERS AND FATHERS ITALIAN ASSOCIATION	44
—Thomas F. Monteleone	
WAVES OF FEAR	56
—Paula Guran	
MEDIA DROME	70
—Michael Marano	
COLLECTING MODERN HORROR	84
—John Pelan	
CD REVIEWS	96
—Various	



GREETINGS and welcome to issue #56 of *Cemetery Dance*. I'd like to start this Editorial by taking a look back...to last issue's Editorial, in which I said: "Taken as a whole, this issue's fiction contents strike me as the most varied we've ever had, at least since I've been on board (which dates me way back to issue #35)."

I was thus greatly gratified to receive the following feedback from reader Mitch Earleywine: "Hi there! My hearty thanks to everyone who worked on CD's latest issue. I've never had a magazine give me such a range of emotions in a single issue. I thought everything from 'Ugh! That's so gross. Let me read it again,' (in reference to "Grapefruit Spoons") to 'Aw! Isn't that sweet,' ("Hanako from Miyazaki"). Please keep 'em coming."

Thanks for the feedback, Mitch! It's great to hear from our readers (regardless of whether the comments are positive or negative), and although we haven't yet launched a "Letters from our Readers" column, we continue to mull over the idea, and the only thing really stopping us is a lack of sufficient input from you folks. So, as Mitch says, "Please keep 'em coming!"

! ! !

These are exciting times in the horror genre, at least in this reader's opinion. Several relative newcomers have recently published (or will soon publish) notable books, including first novels from Sarah Langan (*The Keeper*), Joe Hill (*Heart-Shaped Box*), and Peter Raftos (*The Stone Ship*), and first horror novels from Stephen Graham Jones (*Demon Theory*), Scott Smith (*The Ruins*), and Simon Morden (*Another War*). And there are many other new writers pumping fresh blood into the genre.

In recognition of that, we're debuting a new interview series in this issue, entitled "New Voices." As its name implies, the series will focus on relative newcomers to the genre, starting with Jeremy Robert Johnson in this issue, and Michael McBride in our next issue. The interviews will be conducted by frequent CD contributor Steve Vernon and, when possible, we'll feature a story by the author alongside the interview. We hope you enjoy "New Voices."

! ! !

That's enough from me for now. I hope you enjoy the latest *Dance*.
Until next time...

-Robert Morrish

HELLO again and welcome back to another jam-packed issue of *Cemetery Dance* magazine. I hope you find something you like and come back for more next time.

As I'm sure you've noticed by now, CD #56 is our first issue in many years to spotlight a single author. From the moment I finished reading his wonderful collection, *The Two Sams*, Glen Hirshberg has been one of my personal favorites. I hope you enjoy this issue's special contributions, including an exclusive Hirshberg novel excerpt, a brand new short story, non-fiction, an in-depth interview, a bibliography, and a feature review of his new collection, *American Morons*, from Earthling Publications.

And, yes, we do plan to publish more issues in the near future focusing on the work of individual authors.

! ! !

Okay, now that I've shined my editorial spotlight on Glen Hirshberg, I need to mention that we have an amazing amount of other great material in this issue. Brand new short fiction from *Cemetery Dance* veterans Scott Nicholson, Stephen Mark Rainey, and David Nickle, as well as genre vets Peter Atkins and Jeremy Robert Johnson. Plus all the usual columns and author features on both Earl Hamner, Jr. and Jeremy Robert Johnson.

! ! !

I also want to take a moment to thank our new Associate Editor, Norman Prentiss. Norm came on board earlier this summer and has been a tremendous help. He's a true professional (not to mention a very talented writer), and we're very fortunate to have him on staff.

! ! !

As always, we'd love to hear your thoughts on the magazine - what you liked, what you didn't, what you would like to see more of. Please feel free to email your comments to info@cemeterydance.com, or mail them to P.O. Box 623, Forest Hill, MD 21050.

Okay, that's all until next time. Now, turn down the lights, flip the page, take my hand, and start the dance...

-Richard Chizmar



A Conversation with GLEN HIRSHBERG

conducted by Rick Kleffel

ONE OF THE GREAT strengths of the horror genre is the latitude that it offers writers who choose to work within it. Not every writer chooses to take advantage of that flexibility, nor do many need to. But those who do, like Glen Hirshberg, are able to create a body of work that often helps expand the boundaries of the genre itself. With novels like *The Snowman's Children* and short stories like those collected in *The Two Sams* and the forthcoming *American Morons*, Hirshberg has demonstrated that one writer can create a body of work that is varied in content, style, and subject, yet unified by an intense writerly vision not just of darkness, but also of hope. But Hirshberg has done more than just expand the written canon of horror. He's pioneered the art of live storytelling, working with fellow writers Peter Atkins and Dennis Etchison to take live readings of horror stories on the road with the *Rolling Darkness Revue*. The passion required to get up in front of an audience and try to re-create the campfire effect in a modern strip-mall bookstore is considerable, and it carries into all of Hirshberg's work. *Cemetery Dance* caught up with this vital writer and rolled back the clock.

CD Let's begin at the beginning. Glen, tell us about your life as a "writerly child."

GH I really do think I was born with this. There's a 90-minute cassette my parents have in which I—age not-quite-3—follow them and my uncle and aunt around the house, telling stories. The stories all have the same plot. My newborn brother destroys something or threatens something in the house. I save the something, fend off my brother, and restore order. The most amusing thing about the tape is not my stories, God knows—my basic technique amounts to asking "Did you know what happened?" after each new

sentence—but the evaporation of most of the adults, followed, on side two, by the slow erosion of my father's generally unquenchable enthusiasm. The cassette ends with an eruption of "What? WHAT? WHAT HAPPENED?" and the recorder being slammed off.

CD What's the first piece of fiction you remember writing down and caring about?

GH I know I had a dead dog story. The dog's name was Cloud. That was 2nd grade, I believe. In 6th grade, I wrote a dead-turkey story for Thanksgiving. That was the first thing I wrote that people not related to me found funny, a little disturbing, strangely touching at the end. So I had trouble with genre boundaries even then. And in 8th grade, I wrote my first ghost story. It was called "The Chill," and was—I'm afraid I'm not inventing this—about a scary refrigerator. The best thing about that was that a teacher took the folder with my story in it and circulated it through the school. When it was returned to me, it had these truly inspired blurbs on the back from students and teachers. They were considerably more imaginative and better written than the story.

CD Are there pieces of writing from your childhood or teen-aged years that you still like?

GH Not a one.

CD Do the things you've written in the past and discarded haunt you, or your work?

GH Honestly, they don't, I find the process of creating so exhilarating and so demanding that I don't have time to dwell much on what didn't work in the pieces I've decided were either finished or unsalvageable. I try just to keep working. On the other

hand, there are certainly pieces that I refuse to believe I can't get right, and that I continue to slug away at for years and years and years. The novel I'm working on right now has filled up drawers and occupied brainspace for eleven years. Right this second, halfway through what feels like a draft that really might work, I'm cautiously optimistic that there won't be a twelfth year. Or not a thirteenth, anyway.

CD Tell us the story of your first story—the first story you wrote for an audience to be sold, and how it was sold, and how the sale affected the writing that followed it.

GH My first novel, *The Snowman's Children*, took the traditional absurdly long, convoluted path to print. Several times during that process, I did rewrites, either because editors asked or because I had ideas. As a result, I wound up junking drafts of a new novel (the one I'm re-attempting now) and casting about for something else to write just to keep busy.

Meanwhile, I'd been telling my students ghost stories every year on Halloween, just because I love Halloween. One story, in particular, had acquired some notoriety on campus. In fact, the previous year, a couple students had snuck out of their chemistry class and into my darkened room to hear my recitation, thus getting themselves and me in all kinds of trouble. Seemed a good sign, somehow. Eventually, one of the students told me, "You know, you really might want to write that down."

So I churned out a draft of "Mr. Dark's Carnival." I'd read ghost stories all my life, but I'd never written one. The draft came out sixty-eight manuscript pages. Un-sellable, in other words. I'd done some reviews for Christopher and Barbara Roden of the Ghost Story Society, so I e-mailed them and asked

if they'd take a look at the story, just for an informed opinion.

Three hours after I'd e-mailed them the story, they bought it for their anthology, *Shadows and Silence*. I'd had no idea they were even doing an anthology. Shortly after the book came out, "Mr. Dark" got selected by Ellen Datlow for that year's *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. Then it got nominated for the World Fantasy Award. *Snowman* sold, I got requests for more ghost stories, and somehow, after all that time, I was launched at last.

CD Children and childhood are ever present in your work. Does your own childhood hover close? Do you confabulate your childhood with the lives of your children in your fiction?

GH I love kids, and I loved being one. As a parent and teacher, I think I've also become unsettlingly aware of how fragile—and how truly alien, and not like adulthood—childhood is. I don't think I'm an overwhelmingly nostalgic person. But memories make such wonderful modeling clay—whether they're mine, someone else's, or invented.

CD Why do you think that childhood attracts you as a writer?

GH Like most writers, I think, I'm attracted to moments of heightened and layered experience. So I'm interested in any moment in a life in which a person's interior reality—which has often seemed the "real" one to me, the one where joys and desires and hurts are most profoundly felt—threatens to swamp the daily, flatly experiential one.

CD Aging at all levels, growing older, the transformative experience of moving from one day to the next, from early childhood to adolescence, from adolescence to adulthood, from adulthood to informed adulthood, the lessons we learn—how do you transform all of this into your fiction?

GH I'm interested in the ways the things people dream and long for and believe and fear intersect (or fail to intersect) with the things people actually say and do. So moments of transition are natural places to look for such intersections.

CD Families, fathers, sons, mothers, uncles, aunts—all of them seem to haunt your fiction. Tell us about why families are so integral to your writing; how do the ties of the family lead you into realms beyond our everyday reality?

GH I don't have a pat or easy answer to this. I can only say that the sometimes overwhelming power of familiar bonds—healthy or otherwise—strikes me as one of the big subjects, and therefore worthy of all the attention I can give it.

CD While many writers focus on action, on activity, you seem to seek the empty spaces between activity and expand them to tell stories; for example, "American Morons" is about two people waiting for a tow. Why do the spaces between our lives attract you as a writer?

GH I like this question...and sometimes I wish this were not so about my writing. The lack of a big bang in stories with a healthy dose of suspense can sometimes be initially frustrating to readers—or at least some editors and marketing departments. I really do understand that.

But what interests me is the emotional and psychical effects of big moments, much more than the moments themselves. I find the effects are not only more meaningful, but also more suspenseful, more satisfying. In "American Morons," for example, I was attracted to the gentle, terrible fraying of the



relationship at the heart of it, and the obliviousness that simply growing up American can create in bright, genuinely well-meaning people. For me, the fiction is in the fallout, not the explosion.

CD Do you feel that your writing works by directing and re-directing the reader's attention? There seems to be an emphasis on focusing and de-focusing, blurring in your stories.

GH I think all fiction, to a certain extent, is about misdirection. On one level, this is a technique, plain and simple. Close-up sleight-of-hand. But gimmick or trick endings don't interest me much. My hope is that I redirect readers' attention a lot because there are all sorts of things going on in the story, and lots of shady corners worthy of a wave of the flashlight.

CD Now it's time for the entertaining influences question. Tell us about the reading experiences that transformed you as a reader and a writer, the writers you learned from, the writers you wanted to emulate—if they're not the same—and about the writers you're reading right now at this moment, both for pleasure and to learn from.

GH I read so much, and always have, that I genuinely find this question almost impossible to answer. I know that Ramsey Campbell's use of childhood fears and verbs, in particular, had profound effects on me as a kid. I know that Robert Louis Stevenson's efficiency, dedication to delicious storytelling, and ability to infuse even his most genre-directed work with distinctive characters and formidably acute observations about human nature and experience left a profound mark on me and continue to.

So many others: The Hungarian writer Tibor Dery, who wrote gorgeous, painful stories magical and otherwise, but always full of interiority and fiercely lived life and childhood and wonder and pain; John Galsworthy's utterly human, very funny *Forsyte Saga*, just for its compassionate, layered portrayals of people suffocating in the arms of a sometimes loving family; M.R. James' fascinating arcana and ability to imbue virtually any location with history and quiet, slow-creeping dread; Rudyard Kipling's wondrous rhythms and ability to nail an astonishing range of lived experience (his cat in "The Cat Who Walked by Himself"

may be the single truest portrayal of the nature of any living thing I have ever encountered—whether you like cats or not). Flannery O'Connor's steely clarity, Calder Willingham's almost terrifying sensuality, P.G. Wodehouse's brightness and sense of play...

I know I consciously tried to emulate Cormac McCarthy and J.P. Donleavy and Ramsey Campbell and Toni Morrison. Donleavy, in particular, was a terrible influence. Every time I picked up one of his riotous, sweet-sad, fervently rhythmic books, I'd find my punctuation marks. Escaping, Me as I tried. To locate. The heart of his. Meter.

And succeed only

In

Annoying...

I'm not reading anyone specifically to learn from anymore, not because I don't have anything to learn, but because I believe it's a writer's job to learn from absolutely everything. And I don't read to keep up. So my current shelf is always crazily random. Things I've loved most in the last couple years:

Wilkie Collins' *Armadale*—The "villain" at the heart of this spooky, thrilling book is Hester Prynne if she'd been vengeful, and if Hawthorne had let himself finish falling in love with her. One of the most fascinating characters I've ever encountered.

Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*—Forget the language games. This guy's a storyteller, and this book is smart and scary and sad and sweet, sweet, sweet. And that's a good thing. By the way, John, if you're reading this, thanks for stealing that bit about the town in Siberia where people walk around in a miasma of their own frozen breath. I saw that article too, and had good plans for it...

Chico Kidd's Da Silva stories—Such good-hearted, gory pirate-ghost fun. Good arcana, too...

Ann-Marie MacDonald—*Fall On Your Knees/The Way the Crow Flies*—Both of these novels out-think themselves, and run a little out of control. But if there's anyone working in English who's thinking bigger, reaching farther, telling more quietly riveting tales, or just plain writing more beautifully, I don't know them.

CD You're a teacher when you're not writing, and sometimes when you are. Tell us about your students, your stories and the connections between the two.

GH I've said this in other places, but it's still true. I've always known I was going to be a writer, and remain profoundly grateful that I now have the opportunity to publish what I write. But teaching has been the great revelation of my adult life. I took it as a day job after tiring of scratching out a freelance living writing about rock music and literature and television and Judaism and whatever else I could find to cover that someone might pay money for. Very quickly, I realized that I'd made a life-altering move.

There's so much I could say about this, but I'll try to sum it up:

Teaching changed the way I look at people. In thirteen years of it, I've found maybe three students I couldn't find a way to like. As a result, my writing has gotten warmer, richer, more varied, more compassionate. And my days have filled up with stories. As noted above, I'd never have written "Mr. Dark's Carnival," for one, if a student hadn't pushed me to. But the truth is, I wouldn't have been capable of writing most of what I've written if I hadn't dedicated so much of my time to figuring out how to help other people make their lives better.

Finally, for all the exhaustion and frustration that comes with the job—and there is plenty of both—I almost never have a day as a teacher when I don't feel I've been of some sort of use to somebody. For a writer, especially, I think that's a rare gift indeed.

CD What are the classics currently being taught in schools that belong there, and what titles would you like to see included in the scholastic canon?

GH I'd rather address a slightly different question. For me, the issue in our schools right now isn't which book is on the curriculum in any given year, but the nature of what we think learning means. The more we try to define our success by achievement test scores, the more we strangle creativity and exploration and imagination and joy out of the classroom and out of students. This is not a question of learning-for-its-own-sake vs. utilitarianism. ALL learning is utilitarian. People need to stop worrying about what's harmful in a given book and start worrying about what's harmful in a dead system that trains kids, from their first day in class, to measure themselves by their ability to achieve bare-bones competency.

CD Place plays a very important part in your fiction. Could you talk about how it influences pieces from the beginning, and how stories developed for Southern California differ from the Detroit work?

GH Place and atmosphere are profoundly important to me, simply because they interest me. I've lived in Detroit, San Diego, New York, Galway, Missoula, Seattle, Charlotte, Los Angeles. All of those places—geographically, climactically, historically—have a marked impact on the way lives are lived there. Again, I'm interested in how people assemble themselves, and what they long to escape. I'm interested in the crazy ways people grow off their roots. And I suppose I'm trying to capture something—a regionality, maybe? A sense of uniqueness in each community people have created—that I very much fear is vanishing out of the world as quickly as the animal habitats we're devouring.

CD You include a quotation from Mike Davis before your piece in this issue, "Transitway." Could you talk about Davis and what in his writing inspires you?

GH Davis just has so much to say and so many stories to tell and such a unique perspective on cities in general and Los Angeles, in particular. I've lived in L.A. for longer than I've lived anywhere except Detroit, and it is close to the top of the list of last-places-on-Earth I would have expected that to happen. It's a truly great city, and nowhere I'm ever going to love. But Davis helped teach me how to tell stories about it.

CD Have you lived or visited all the places you've written about?

GH Almost. I really have tried to travel and vary my experiences, and I really try to travel with my ears and eyes and mouth and skin wide open. I also try to listen to people talk about where they're from and where they've been. Sometimes, I've assembled a place out of dreams and other people's stories and research and imaginings. I will say this, though: all of the places in my fiction are intentionally fictionalized. That is, I'm trying to capture something about the essence of these places, the way they linger in people's psyches. I'm not trying to do what Mike Davis does,

for example, and capture the tangible "reality" of a place...whatever that is.

CD In the short story "The Muldoon," from your forthcoming collection *American Morons*, readers will get some insight into the influences of the Jewish religion in your work. Could you talk about the connection between religion and the supernatural, and how one has informed the other for you as a writer?

GH Obviously, religion and supernatural experience both revolve fundamentally around belief. Like a lot of American Jews, I grew up not at all certain what I believe, but powerfully tied through family to the traditions of the religion. Meanwhile, just because of who I was, I found myself constantly exploring the possibilities for magic, or at least surprise, that still might exist in the world.

But in the end, I'm a very odd collection of beliefs and hopes, and I honestly can't pinpoint exactly how all of that informs my writing. I'm a skeptic in love with wonder, an agnostic who keeps Kosher (in the house, mostly), a committed free-thinker who believes in the power of tradition and the importance of cultivating basic human decency. I'll leave figuring how any of that might apply to my work to anyone interested enough to explore it.

CD *The Snowman's Children*, your first novel, combines a sort of Ray Bradbury-style evocation of childhood and early adolescence with elements of crime fiction. Tell us how you brought in the crime fiction aspects to create this very literary thriller, and how you kept them at bay so that they do not dominate the book.

GH In this particular case, I didn't "bring in" anything. The crime element was a crucial piece of the childhoods in question. People have mistaken this book, sometimes, for being more autobiographical than it is, but without question, it grew out of a true experience: during the winters of 1976 and 1977, when I was ten and eleven years old, there was a serial killer killing ten and eleven kids in the suburbs around where I lived in Detroit. He was a particularly ghostly and terrifying figure, because he was never caught (at least not for the killings), and because the victims would reappear dead but



neatly brushed, virtually unmarked, fully clothed, laid out in intersections or yards. These events, needless to say, haunted school, teachers' and parents' behavior, games we played, conversations we had, everything. Years later, I went back to Detroit for a wedding, and wound up talking to a bunch of people I'd known in grade school. Someone brought up those winters, that killer. And the stories started pouring out, from everyone. I think I started writing *Snowman* before I even got back to my hotel.

CD Tell us about the research and the actual writing experience that you underwent to create *The Snowman's Children*.

GH I did do considerable research, just to see which of my memories were factual and which were myths I'd built in my own mind. But the story makes little attempt to stay true to the facts of the case. I wasn't writing a historical novel set during that time. I was trying to write a book about the violent end of childhood, and the lasting impact such events might have on the kids caught up in the whirl of them.

CD Could you talk about the relationship between superstitions and rituals - personal or those of organized religion or even cultural rituals - and how you use these as a writer to establish and maintain atmosphere?

GH This is really more a question for my wife (she's a folklorist). But I'm always drawn to the liturgies

people have inherited or invented, and how they're used as reminders, anchors, guides, punishments, etc. The moments when beliefs get shaken or rituals ripped apart can be terribly traumatic and also liberating, and so they are just the kind of moments I'm always attracted to.

CD Though you've been published and reviewed primarily as a genre fiction writer, your reach and the general feel of your work is quite literary. Have you pursued publication in strictly literary magazines? How do you feel, as a writer, about the state of so-called "literary fiction"? Do you feel that there are venues doing work worth reading for general audiences, or for genre fiction readers?

GH I'm grateful, frankly, to be reviewed at all. The literary world is so fickle, and tastes so quixotic while, at the same time, expectations are so engrained that I'm relieved whenever anyone finds something worth commenting on in my fiction. I've never set out to be one kind of writer or another. I just have stories I want to tell, characters who pop into my head whose lives seem worth exploring, a few ideas I find I want to express about how we approach our deaths and our lives and our wants and each other.

I do think that the only reason anyone ever considered *The Snowman's Children* a horror novel is because I'd published some ghost stories first. At the same time, I'm proud and honored that at least part of the horror community - which I've found literate, discerning, demanding, and healthily dismissive of genre boundaries, as a rule - has responded with interest to my writing. I have plans for many more ghost stories. And many more not-ghost-stories. And a whole lot of stories that are probably both.

As for the "state" of literary fiction...like I said above, I don't keep up. I do read anything and everything I can. As far as I can tell, literary fiction seems pretty much where it's always been: there are some fabulous people doing brilliant, important work out there - in all genres. A very few of them are even getting recognized for it. And most of what is getting recognized and celebrated is timid or overfamiliar or pretentious or cruel or just plain tedious. Same as it ever was.

The only difference may be that the industry is changing. Like every other

industry, the publishing biz is becoming centralized, monopolized. With the larger houses relying increasingly on the record-industry model—buy one book (if it's enough like some other, previously successful novel) see if it sells, if not, that's it for that writer, on to the next—and with distribution largely controlled by the handful of people who buy for Borders and Barnes & Noble, the accessibility of genuinely fresh or provocative or at least varied fiction may be shrinking. This creates more niches for small or specialty presses and online/new-format ventures to fill. But it also makes the possibility of earning a living as a writer remote, and the notion of an engaged, multi-cultural, passionate, diverse national discourse on the experience of reading impossible.

CD Though the days of "splatterpunk" versus "quiet horror" are past, you are still associated with the latter term. Do you deliberately turn down the volume of the *grue*? Do you feel that label is applicable?

GH I reject all labels, and reserve the right to get good and *grueful* (gruey?) when the story demands it. I don't deliberately do any one thing when I write, except try to stay true to the story I'm telling.

CD That brings up genre fiction itself. Could you talk about the liberations and limitations inherent in genre fiction?

GH To me, good writing is good writing. There are spectacularly powerful, deeply moving stories about ghost-pirates, and there are crashingly dull ones about families coping with daily life. The reverse is also true. To me, the subject is almost irrelevant. The quality of the work, the depth and compassion of the insight, the freshness of the tale...that's what makes a story worth reading, or writing.

CD Do you think you might write in other genres—for example, otherworldly fantasy or science fiction?

GH Since I really do reject labels, I can't answer this. I'm working on a novel about the Federal Writers' Project. My just-finished second novel, *Sisters of Baikal*, excerpted elsewhere in this issue, is a lost daughter/Great Lakes/complicated love/hard redemp-

tion/shipwreck/lighthouse/Siberian sisters/ghost(maybe) story. Does that count?

CD The genre is doing quite well in movies. Do you feel drawn to write a cheap horror movie yourself? Tell us how you feel about the relationship between written and filmed horror.

GH To quote (roughly) my pal Pete Atkins, "Look, if I thought I could write a cheap horror movie that would make some money, I bloody well would." The only things I've ever written that I felt good about were the ones I wanted to write. So I'm going to keep writing those.

Horror movies have experienced something of a renaissance in the past seven or eight years. Inevitably, that means there's a whole lot of garbage pouring out. It also means there's some genuinely frightening, atmospheric, and moving new work being done, all over the world. Kind of like the literary scene...

CD *The Two Sams* features some of the most devastating fiction I've ever read. As a writer, how do you enter such dark territory and emerge—and do you emerge—unscathed?

GH Maybe this says something truly disturbing about me, but I don't consider my work that dark. Melancholy, yeah. Unflinching, I hope, about staring down some of the truly terrifying and repellent things that come with being alive. But also full of survivors, full of people constructing lives and finding moments worth savoring and people worth treasuring even in the lurking presence of the very worst. I guess I consider dark territory refreshingly shadow-strewn, a little less inhabited, and emotionally stirring. So I'm drawn to what happens to the people walking there, whether by choice or no.

I don't find myself scathed by writing stories. Living does that plenty. But both writing and living also provide opportunities for the only release or transcendence or triumph or love I'm absolutely certain I might get to know.

CD You're a musician as well as a writer. Could you talk about how the two interact for you as an artist? Does one influence the other, affect the other, support or drain energy from the other?

GH I've loved playing and listening to music all my life, but I knew very early that I wanted to be a writer more than a musician. Therefore, writing and recording and performing music has always been a cathartic release, an unalloyed joy. Far from draining my energy, playing music replenishes it.

CD Tell us about your practice of writing. Do you write at a set time daily, a set number of words on a single work? Do you write more than one thing at a time?

GH I write as much as I can, whenever I can. Because I also wanted to have a life, and because I had to earn a living, I gave up any sort of imaginary requirements for conditions for writing long ago. I've written in airports and on dashboards, during doctor's appointments and on lunch breaks, on computer terminals and notebook paper and ketchup packets, all night long and in five-minute bursts. The hardest thing about being a writer, I truly believe, isn't surviving the nastiness of the publishing life, or finding a way to eat, or coping with rejection. It's getting the work done, period. So I've dedicated every available second to getting the work done.

CD Do stories pop out pretty much as they end up, or do you revise them greatly? Or both?

GH Both. And neither. There is no pattern. Part of the fun.

CD How do you feel submitting your work to editors? Have you ever received helpful feedback on a submission to a magazine that you've never submitted to before?

GH I love getting good edits, and you never know where they're going to come from. So I just try to stay open to feedback. The trick is in recognizing the stuff that really matters, in staying defended enough to know when not to change a word, and open enough to remain willing to change absolutely anything if someone tells you something that feels like the truth.

CD *American Morons* has a deeply political basis. Will we see more political horror fiction from you? Do you feel that "statement horror" is a

NEARLY HALF HIS LIFE AGO, Andrei spent 38 minutes as a corpse. It's not a secret that he shares with many people. Especially these last six years, ever since the comforting lie of tunnels and white lights crumbled away to leave him with the memory of what he really found on the other side of death. Not Hell, but something worse: a Heaven unlike anything he'd ever been taught to expect.

NOW, AS HEAVEN SEEKS TO RECLAIM HIM, Andrei awakens to the hidden truths of this world and the next, caught between two unequal sides waging a clandestine war for the soul of the world, in which everything he's ever taken for granted about good and evil has just been turned upside-down....

From the author of **HELLBOY: ON EARTH AS IT IS ON HELL** and **WILD HORSES** comes another masterwork that transcends the horror genre....

BRIAN HODGE WORLD OF HURT

WORLD OF HURT features a Foreword by World Fantasy Award-winning editor **Stephen Jones** and an Introduction by Stoker Award-winning author **Brian Keene**. Dustjacket and signature page art by **Robert Sammelin**.

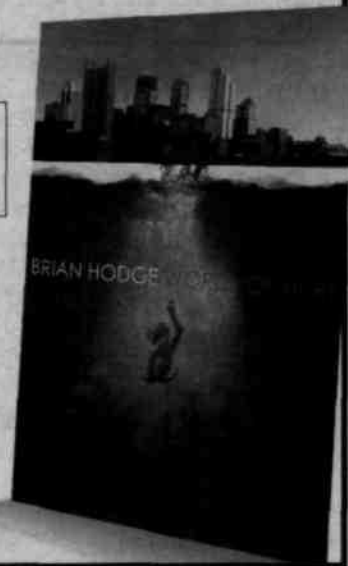
WORLD OF HURT will be released **July/August 2006** in the following editions:

500 numbered hardcovers	\$40
26 lettered, traycased hardcovers	\$250

Order now — no payment requested until book is ready to ship.

EARTHLING PUBLICATIONS
P.O. Box 413
Northborough, MA 01532 (USA)

www.earthlingpub.com
earthlingpub@yahoo.com



genre you'd like to pursue and expand upon?

GH I have no interest in "statement" anything. My sincere hope is that "Morons" is political in the sense that it's about the ways people respond to and are caught up in their cultures. If a story is just about a specific moment, a particular President or set of beliefs, a unique group of morons, then it is by definition finite, trapped in its moment, and probably better off as an essay. All that said, I care about the world we're all making, and if you're asking whether those feelings are likely to keep creeping into my fiction...of course.

CD Tell us about Glen Hirshberg's Publishing Adventures. What's your experience of the publishing world? Do you think that art and commerce are easily mixed? Do you find that you have to locate individuals to work with, as opposed to companies?

GH My publishing adventures aren't so unique, I think. I've have some astonishing rejections ("This

story is literate, chilling, beautifully written, ultimately quite moving. It's not for us"). I've had completely unexpected acceptances and generous editorial exchanges. I've experienced a decade of near-total rejection, followed by stretches of startlingly easy and numerous sales. The business sucks, plain and simple. It's inane, demeaning, cruel, sometimes inappropriately or dangerously flattering (magazines devoting beautiful, lavish tribute issues to grateful writers with all of two published books to their names, anyone?), and just generally unhealthy. Art and commerce mix very uncomfortably if at all.

And that's the nature of the profession. It's the price I have chosen to pay for the priceless luxury, the inexpressible thrill of having writing as part of my professional life and daily experience. I'm willing to pay it, and I'd pay more (not that I'm looking to, understand...).

CD What else should readers expect to see from you in the coming months?

GH Well, *American Morons*, the collection, is due out shortly. With any luck, my next novel, *Sisters of Baikal*, will follow soon afterwards. Then I've got my zingy, romantic, darkly gripping, strange hybrid-historical-literary-whatever novel about the Federal Writers' Project, *The Book of Bunk*, well on its way to completion. And a bunch of new ghost stories. And a young adult series, one day soon...

CD What would you like to, hope to achieve with your writing? Is there a single feeling that you hope to evoke from your readers with every story?

GH I just want to write stories worth reading about people worth caring about in situations worth remembering in places worth dreaming.

Glen Hirshberg Bibliography

Novel

The Snowman's Children
Carroll & Graf
October 2002
Hardcover First Edition
ISBN: 0-7867-1082-9

The Snowman's Children
Carroll & Graf
October 2003
Trade Paperback First Edition
ISBN: 0-7867-1253-8

The Snowman's Children
(Russian edition)
Azbooka, St. Petersburg
Fall 2005
Hardcover
ISBN: 5-352-01514-9

The Snowman's Children
(Signed Limited Edition)
Earthling Publications
(forthcoming, Fall 2006)

Collections

The Two Sams: Ghost Stories
Carroll & Graf
August 2003
Hardcover First Edition
ISBN: 0-7867-1255-4

The Two Sams: Ghost Stories
Carroll & Graf
September 2004
Trade Paperback First Edition
ISBN: 0-7867-1458-1

American Morons
Earthling Publications
(forthcoming, September 2006)
Hardcover First Edition

Short Stories

"Mr Dark's Carnival"
Shadows and Silence
Edited by Barbara Roden and Christopher Roden
Ash-Tree Press
December 15, 2000
Hardcover First Edition
ISBN: 1-553-10012-3

Reprinted in:
The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror
14th Annual Collection
Edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling
St. Martin's Griffin
August 2001
Hardcover First Edition
ISBN: 0-312-27541-2

As a standalone hardcover:
Mr. Dark's Carnival (Limited Edition)
Earthling Publications
October 2004



"Struwwelpeter"

SCIFL.com/SCIFiction
Edited by Ellen Datlow
SCIFL.com
November 28, 2001

Reprinted in:
The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror
15th Annual Collection
Edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling
St. Martin's Press
August 2002
Hardcover First Edition
ISBN: 0-312-29067-5

The Mammoth Book of
Best New Horror 13
Edited by Stephen Jones
Robinson
September 2002
Trade Paperback First Edition
ISBN: 1-84119-540-5

"The Two Sams"

Dark Terrors 6
Edited by Stephen Jones and David Sutton
Gollancz
2002
Hardcover First Edition
ISBN 0-575-07248-2

Reprinted in:
The Mammoth Book of
Best New Horror 14
Edited by Stephen Jones
Robinson
Trade Paperback First Edition
1-84119-794-7

"American Morons"

*Darkness Rising: The Rolling Darkness
Revue 2005*
Earthling
Chapbook First Edition

Forthcoming Reprints in:
*The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror
19th Annual Collection*

*The Mammoth Book of
Best New Horror 17*

**"Flowers on Their Bridles, Hooves
in the Air"**

SCIFI.com/SCIFiction
Edited by Ellen Datlow
SCIFI.com
August 6, 2003

Reprinted in:
The Mammoth Book of New Terror
Edited by Stephen Jones
Carroll & Graf (US)
2004
First US Trade Paperback Edition
0-7867-1409-3

"Shipwreck Beach"

Trampoline
Edited by Kelly Link and Gavin
Grant
Small Beer Press
August 15, 2003
Trade Paperback First Edition
ISBN: 1931520046

"Dancing Men"

The Dark
Edited by Ellen Datlow
Tor Books
October 24, 2003
Hardcover First Edition
ISBN 0-765-30444-9

Reprinted in:
*The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror
17th Annual Collection*
Edited by Ellen Datlow and Kelly Link
& Gavin Grant
St. Martin's
August, 2004
Hardcover First Edition
ISBN 0-312-32927-X

**NEW HORROR FROM
WORLD FANTASY
AWARD-WINNING**

SAROB PRESS

a new novel of unrelenting adult horror by
the Bram Stoker Award-winning author of
STAINED

**LEE THOMAS
DAMAGE**

Full Colour Dust Jacket Art by Paul Lowe

Available Halloween 2006 in two sewn
hardcover states:
Signed Slipcased Deluxe @ \$115 and
Unsigned Limited @ \$50

a new adult horror novel by the author of
BALAK & THE LEBO COVEN

**STEPHEN MARK RAINEY
THE NIGHTMARE FRONTIER**

Full Colour Dust Jacket Art by Chad Savage

Available Halloween 2006 in two sewn
hardcover states:
Signed Slipcased Deluxe @ \$115 and
Unsigned Limited @ \$50

**
ADD Airmail Shipping to USA
@ \$7.50 Per Copy

Print runs will be based on
PRE-PUBLICATION ORDERS
received by 20 September 2006
Order NOW to avoid disappointment

For Full Details visit
<http://home.freeuk.net/sarobpress>
Or
E-mail sarobpress@freeuk.com

*The Mammoth Book of
Best New Horror 15*
Edited by Stephen Jones
Robinson
October, 2004
Trade Paperback First Edition
ISBN 1-84119-923-0

"Safety Clowns"

Acquainted with the Night
Edited by Barbara and Christopher
Roden
Ash-Tree Press
December, 2004
Hardcover First Edition
ISBN: 1-55310-075-1

Reprinted in:
*The Mammoth Book of
Best New Horror 16*
Edited by Stephen Jones
Carroll & Graf (US)
October, 2005
Trade Paperback First Edition
ISBN: 0-7867-1600-2

"Like a Lily in a Flood"

Cemetery Dance #50
2004

"Devil's Smile"

Alone on the Darkside
(forthcoming, Fall 2006)
Edited by John Pelan
Signet/ROC

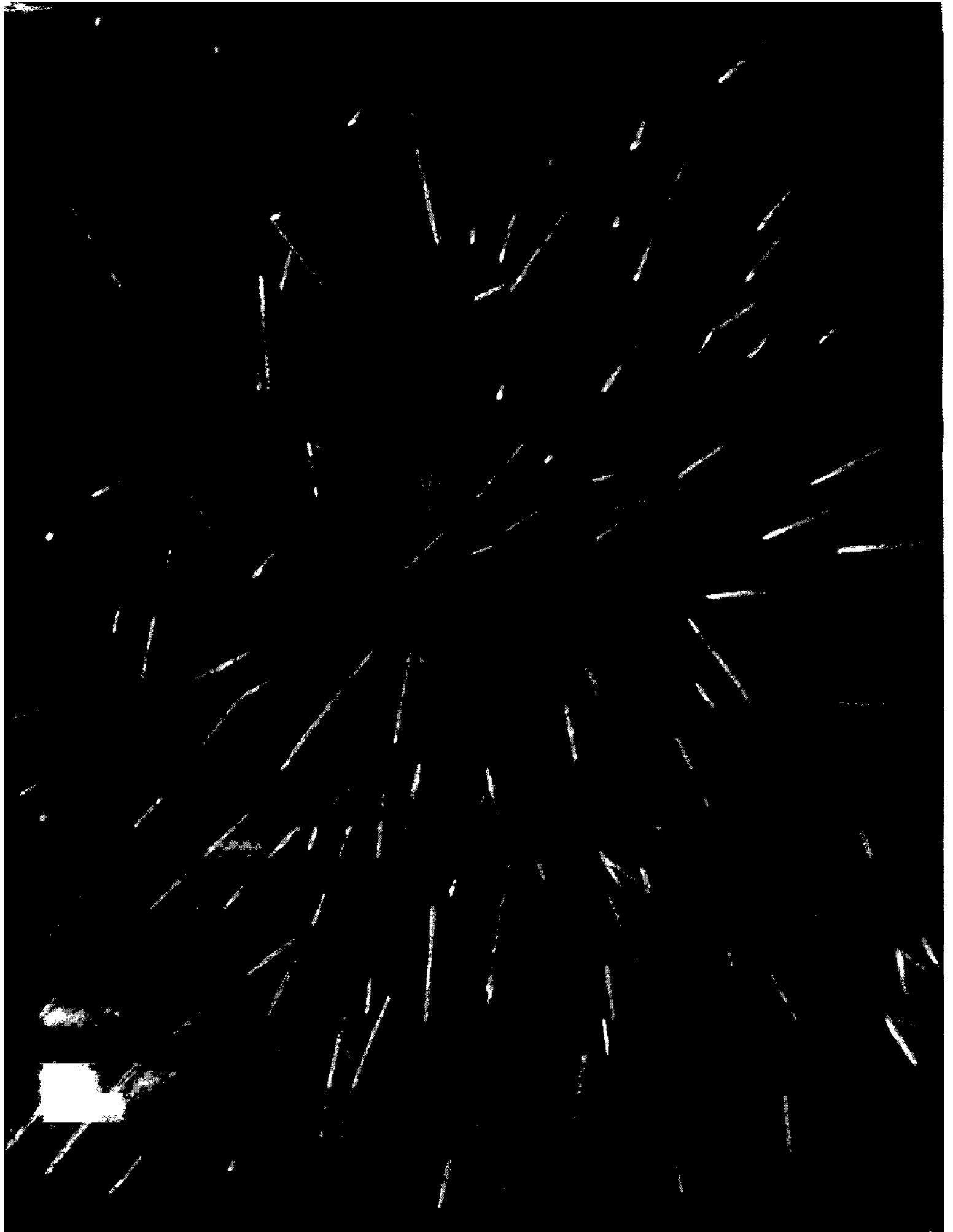
"Transitway"

Cemetery Dance #56
2006

"The Muldoon"

To Speak With the Dead
(forthcoming, 2006)
Edited by Barbara and Christopher
Roden
Ash-Tree Press





TRANSITWAY

Glen Hirshberg

"Is there any need to explain why fear eats the soul of Los Angeles?"

—Mike Davis

On the first day of his retirement, Ferdinand Fernandez awoke to banging on his front door. For a few, fuzzy moments, the sound bewildered him. He couldn't remember the last time he'd actually heard it. Rolling over, he dropped his hand onto the empty pillow beside him, momentarily wondered at the ghost of heat he imagined he felt there, then forgot it as whoever was outside banged again.

"Coming," Ferdinand mumbled, digging into the pile of clean but unfolded Hawaiian shirts he never bothered to return to his single chest of drawers. The one he pulled up was mostly blue, with swordfish leaping across it. Struggling into that and a pair of shorts, he stood up barefoot on his futon, feeling his gut drop onto his hipbones like some exhausted geriatric leaning over a seawall, and caught sight of the clock.

10:30.

The panic that seized him wasn't entirely surprising. He'd felt it buzzing around in his dreams all night. And it had probably been thirty years since he'd slept this long. This time, the banging on the door rattled his living room clock off the wall.

"Goddamnit," Ferdinand barked, though half-heartedly. As he stepped across the warped hardwood floor of his bungalow in his bare feet, he decided it wouldn't be the worst thing to see another human being's face this morning. Any human being's. After all, today—and pretty much every day, from now on—there would be no one, anywhere, waiting for him.

Throwing open the door, he blinked against the blinding L.A. sunlight, and Q shoved him backward and strolled in, brandishing a black satchel. His shined two-toned shoes clopped, as though they had taps attached. Knowing Q, Ferdinand thought, they just might.

"Out the way, freed slave coming through," Q said, bounding straight across the living room, through the kitchen toward the unused back hallway and the bungalow's other room.

For the second time that morning, panic flared in Ferdinand's chest. "Where the hell are you going?"

At the sound of his voice, Q stopped dead, one foot still in the kitchen, the other poised above the scraggly tan carpeting of the hall. When he turned around, he was wearing the surprised smile that had, all by itself, made him a better teacher than Ferdinand, and an exceptionally long-lived department chair. There was something endearing about someone so

completely in charge being that willing, and that often, to be caught off guard.

"No idea," he said. "Seems like last time I was here, we..."

"Last time?" Ferdinand blinked, rubbed at the sleep in his eyes and wound up smearing sweat there instead. "When was that, exactly?"

By now, Q had recovered, become Q again. "Right 'round the last time you invited me, F-Squared."

Ferdinand winced, although he knew Q hadn't meant any insult. The nickname had been pasted to him by a recent class of students and was a term of affectionate mockery since, other than P.E., his courses had become probably the hardest in all of Florence Normandie High School to fail. He hadn't meant to go soft. He'd just lost the point, somewhere, of telling these particular kids, facing their particular choices, that they sucked at communicating.

For a long breath, the two men stared at each other. Outside, the air Q had disturbed filled again with its more familiar sound: the gush and snarl of traffic pouring over the 110 freeway just down the block like the morning tide. Ferdinand eyed his boss—ex-boss—and felt a surge of startling and powerful gratitude. For thirty-four years, going to work had been better than it might have been because he got to spend at least twenty or so minutes of his time with this man.

Except that looking at Q now, it seemed Ferdinand hadn't really seen him for years. *When, exactly, had Q gotten old?* Well into his fifties, Q had kept his 'fro flying—"Springy as a trampoline, soft as your butt"—but sometime recently he'd shaved it down, and now all he had atop his knobby black skull were outcroppings of charcoal fuzz, like dead moss on a boulder. What had been Q's barrel chest was now a barrel all the way to his hips, and it swung when he walked.

"What?" Q snapped.

Ferdinand gestured at the black satchel. "That's your idea for our first day of retirement? Bowling?"

Q unzipped the satchel with a flourish, then drew out the strobe ball that had hung over his desk for three decades. He laid that on Ferdinand's white, round, plastic kitchen table, then pulled out eight bottles of Corona and set those ceremoniously next to the ball before flinging the bag away.

"Not your real uncle, praise the Lord," Ferdinand murmured, then blinked as Q straightened up, mouth flat.

"What?"

"I don't know." Ferdinand's breath felt furry and uncomfortable in his mouth. From too much sleep, perhaps. "Didn't I used to say that to you? Or some student?"

Q shrugged, settled back into his habitual, hip-cocked, preening posture. "Well, I ain't your uncle. I'm your daddy." And he waved at the beer and the strobe. "You imagine

how boring this year's end-of-term wine-and-whine faculty meeting's going to be without me and my stuff?"

"I'm still trying to get over how boring they were with your stuff."

Q grinned. "What's for breakfast, fellow free man?"

While Ferdinand got bowls down from his cabinet for cereal, Q wandered again toward the hallway that led to the back room. It made Ferdinand nervous. *God, when was the last time even he'd been back there? Guest room, that's what he'd called it. Hadn't he?* Stupid conceit. By the time he'd finally managed to save enough scraps from twenty-six years of teaching paychecks to put a down-payment on this place, his parents had been long dead, and his sisters had moved to Fullerton with their families, which was just far enough away for them to visit less often, but not far enough for them to sleep over. Except for Q, his school colleagues had stayed colleagues, not friends, and if Q ever did sleep over, it would be face down wherever the last Corona had left him, not in a bed. Right this second, Ferdinand couldn't even remember if there *was* a bed in that room. Whatever furniture there was in there, the termites and dust must have long since claimed it.

Pouring oat bran and milk into the bowls, Ferdinand let his eyes close for just a moment. People had warned him about the first hours of retirement. He'd told them they were crazy, it wouldn't be like that for him. From outside, sluicing through walls honeycombed with termite nests he couldn't afford to eradicate, came the gush of freeway noise. There should have been other sounds out there, too. Had been, once. The *blat* and *thud* from some suped-up ride stereo, say, or the sound of neighborhood kids woofing at each other's sisters. But his neighborhood had gone silent of late. Or else the freeway had overflowed its banks and drowned out everything else.

He turned, and Q scowled.

"What is that? Bran? I bring you my strobe, you offer me fiber?" Sweeping both bowls out of Ferdinand's hands, Q flipped them upside down into the sink. "Where the eggs?"

He didn't wait for Ferdinand to point to the refrigerator before popping it open. "Good. Where the peppers? You people always have peppers." He found those, too, piled in the vegetable drawer. "Okey-dokey. Now. Dance."

And all at once, Ferdinand realized it was all true. There would be no more Back-to-School night. No more "Wait, you teach English?" No more beautiful, still-hopeful faces disappearing mid-semester into their South Central lives and never coming back. No more F-Squared. No more no-flip-flops days. Dropping into a pose he could only hope was as gleeful as he felt, he launched himself into the *Macarena*.

"That's my boy." Q started cracking eggs, but Ferdinand completed a circle and bumped him out of the way, snatching up a knife and beginning to chop at the *jalapenos*.

"These eggs might make you weep," he said.

"Your dancing's going to make me weep," said Q.

Several seconds went by before Ferdinand realized his friend had neither returned to the table nor cracked the remaining eggs. Instead, he was staring into the sink.

"I gave you that," he said slowly, reached down, and lifted the bowl. It was white, with a picture of an apple-cheeked Red Riding Hood and a particularly sleazy, slobbering gray wolf under a red-checked bedcover painted on the bottom.

Ferdinand nodded. "Revenge, I think. For that..." *Skleton piñata? Was that right? What had started them trading gifts like that?*

Eventually, Q shrugged. "Still no reason to put bran in it."

"Sorry. Go sit."

Ferdinand wound up folding in so many peppers that the eggs turned sticky green-brown, the color of the palm fronds that somehow sucked nourishment from between the particulates in the L.A. air and kept growing alongside every deserted sidewalk and choked roadway. When presented with his plate, Q nodded his approval absently, flooded his entire plate with Tabasco sauce, then gulped it all down in silence.

From his own seat, Ferdinand stared past his friend, through the strings of dust drifting in the air like lines on an old TV set, into his living room. There was his old brown vinyl couch, the cushion on one side collapsed like an exhausted lung. Past the couch stood the matching free-standing bookshelves he'd bought from IKEA a few years back on a splurge, then accidentally assembled upside down so that the rough sides pointed out. Books crammed every available inch of those shelves, and piled up on the floor, too. He spent the great majority of his non-school time in there, so the dust all over everything surprised him.

Cracking open a Corona, Q fished a lime out of a baggie he kept in his shirt pocket, squeezed some into the beer, and drank half of it in a single draft. Then he sighed, returned the lime and baggie to his pocket, and crossed his ankles beneath the table. "Okay. What's it going to be, Ferd? What we gonna do with all this *time*? Santa Anita, bet us some ponies?"

"Too poor." Ferdinand initially waved off the new bottle Q offered him, then took it after Q popped it open with his thumbnail, the way he always did.

"How 'bout over to Swinger's, case us some ladies?"

Ferdinand smiled. "Too tired of people. And we're too fat."

"Plus, you dance funny. Okay, your turn."

"Clifton's," Ferdinand said.

Immediately, Q slapped the table with his open palm and laughed. "Hot damn. Clifton's, for some *roast beef*."

"And a pudding."

"Pudding, too."

"Eat in the trees."

Q laughed again. "Remember that time there, with the waterfall, when Moe—"

"Milt," Ferdinand corrected, and Q stopped.

Both men stared at each other. For the third or fourth time that morning, queasiness bubbled in Ferdinand's stomach. Finally, Q pushed a breath between his teeth.

"Milt," he said, as if the word were foreign, brand new to him.

"Pretty sure. Can't remember anything else about him, but that was his name."

"Just a kid."

"Field trip, maybe."

"Must have been."

After another few seconds of looking at each other, then down at the table, Ferdinand got up and put the dishes in the sink. The idea of Clifton's Cafeteria really did seem right. They'd tuck themselves at one of the tables by the indoor waterfall, beneath the giant fake trees, then sit for hours and watch Hollywood hustlers work the ground floor and get in arguments with Grand Market wheelchair thieves, while retro Zoot Suit thugs swung pocket watches and cribbed betting tips from old ladies stuffing themselves with French dips and

dripping sauce all over their Santa Anita racing forms. Best people-watching in Los Angeles.

"Hey, Q. After Clifton's, how about the main library? Check out some books we finally have time to read."

"Just as long as none of them's Flecker," Q barked, and leapt to his feet to toss his second empty Corona into Ferdinand's recycle bag.

This time, Ferdinand's smile didn't make him nauseous. Just wistful. Teaching in an academic system that had ditched Dickens, Twain, Dickinson, Hurston, Faulkner, Hughes and Wright as either too difficult for the students or irrelevant to their lives, Ferdinand had devoted a week or more, over thirty-plus years of objections from department chairs and district "curriculum advisors," to *The Golden Journey to Samarkind*. Partially, this was because there were always one or two kids, each year, who responded to poems about getting *somewhere else*. Partially, it was because not one of the parents who'd actually turned up for Back-to-School night had heard of Flecker, a fact Ferdinand never failed to enjoy, since the parents almost invariably asked if he weren't the Spanish teacher.

Mostly, though, Ferdinand had stuck to Flecker because that's what his father had read by campfire or starlight during his frozen three-week crawl up the cactus-strewn wastes of El Camino del Diablo over the border into Great Depression Arizona in 1938.

"For lust of knowing what should not be known," he found himself mouthing, for the thousandth time in his life. "For lust of knowing what should not be known." His students would forget him, every one. But in their most haunted hours—on their wedding night, maybe, or the day they fled town, or the eve of their very first gangbang—one or two would inexplicably murmur the forlorn phrases of a twilight-of-the-Empire British twit who'd dreamed hard and died young. A pathetic legacy, maybe. But a legacy, nevertheless.

"Move your Fleckered ass, and let's roll," said Q, and Ferdinand went.

Moments later, humming the *Macarena* to himself as Q downed yet another beer, Ferdinand led the way onto the cracked and weedy driveway to his 1974 Vega, shoved his key through the channel he'd made in the rust on the doorlock, and popped the doors.

"Sweet Jesus, get the air out," Q moaned as he settled onto the scalding, split vinyl.

"Air?" Ferdinand grinned. "They make 'em with air, now?" He jammed the key in the ignition and turned it.

The car didn't kick or even cough. It just sat. The grin stayed stuck to Ferdinand's face. This was only right, after all. Only fair. Every year, usually by dark on the first night of Christmas break, he came down with the flu he'd held off all fall, and stayed sick most of the vacation. Like his body, the Vega had apparently known precisely when it was okay, at long last, to go ahead and give out.

For a few seconds, Ferdinand sat and baked in the morning sunlight, stroking the cracking dash board as though it were the muzzle of a horse. A dead horse. Then he said, "Think maybe we should take your car."

Q grunted. "Walked."

Ferdinand turned his head in surprise. "All the way from..." *Where did Q live again? He knew, of course he knew, he'd gone there all the time when...*

"Wanted to see and hear people, you know? Felt weird getting up this morning, knowing no one's waiting."

Ferdinand nodded.

"Of course, L.A. being the great throbbing nowhere it has always been, I hardly saw anyone anyway."

"City of cars."

"Hardly even saw those. Had to trot onto a freeway overpass just to make sure everyone was still out there."

Sighing, Ferdinand waved a hand toward the window and the noise roaring up the 110. "Pretty sure they're still out there."

"Yeah, but where the hell are they going? Not *my* neighborhood."

The air in the car seared Ferdinand's lungs, seemed to seal his skin like paint. Nudging the door open, he climbed out, wanting to be away from Q for just a moment, and wandered to the edge of his driveway to stare at the row of stunted trees lining his street.

This was the scariest thing about bad L.A., he thought. Not a single moving car in sight. No faces at windows, no summer vacation kids on bicycles. But with the sunlight pouring honey on the palm trees and carefully kept rooftops and porches, and the purple flowers on the jacarandas swinging like little bells in the morning breeze, and that dry, delicious heat seeping up from the desert sand still stirring under all that concrete, you could so easily trick yourself into mistaking this place for some seaside Spanish town at siesta.

Just try not to notice the bars latticed over the miniature square windows of each stucco-and-cedar bungalow. Try not to acknowledge the way those bungalows hunch too close together on their tiny, ice-plant-choked lots like circled wagons. This particular low-income development had gone up in the 1940s but, despite its age, and like most southern California neighborhoods—rich or poor, grafted onto the hillsides or welded into the desert—the buildings all looked as though they could be coupled together and rolled off the landscape in a single afternoon.

Even so, Q's description of his morning walk nagged at Ferdinand. Had his neighborhood always been *this* quiet? Where were the earthquake tremors of hip-hop bass as the local teens threw open their car doors and sat on their driveways to smoke pot and stare at each other? Where were the women, older mostly, heads wrapped in scarves despite the heat, wheeling shopping carts to the convenience store, glaring their defiance at each passing gaggle of driveway boys?

Behind him, Ferdinand heard a single, hollow *thunk*. For no reason, the sound horrified him, made him afraid to turn around. His sweaty hands clenched at his sides. With a grunt, he forced himself to look back.

Q stood three steps out onto the square patch of dead, petrified grass that passed for Ferdinand's front yard. In one huge fist, he was holding the handle of a yellow whiffle bat. When he saw Ferdinand looking, he *thunked* the barrel again against the ground.

"This a whiffle bat in my hands, or am I just happy to see you?" Q said.

Ferdinand realized his own hands had stayed clenched. And deep in his throat, something was squeezing.

"Leave that," he croaked.

"What, here?"

"Where you found it."

"Found it right here, what the hell's the matter with you?"

"Put it back."

Raising a single eyebrow, Q ran a hand through his scraggle of hair. Then, with exaggerated pomp, he knelt and laid the bat gently in the dead grass. As Ferdinand watched, the bat seemed to lift slightly, then settle, like a bottle with a message in it washing out to sea. Abruptly, he stepped forward and picked it up himself.

The plastic had long since mottled and cracked, and a faint, fetid odor wafted out of a pinhole in the top. Ferdinand swung the bat once, in slow motion, and whatever it was in his throat constricted again. *Milt. Not your real uncle. My, Q, what big hair you have...*

"Goddamn," Q said. "Retirement's gone and made you wack."

"Think it was you that did that," Ferdinand mumbled.

"Used to play a lot, you know. Whiffle."

"I know."

"You do?"

Glancing up, Ferdinand was startled by the look on his friend's face. Mouth puckered, eyes glazed, turned inward. Pretty much like his own look, he suspected. "We've known each other a long time," he said, though he somehow thought he'd meant to say something else. He tapped the barrel into the grass.

What was it about that sound? Maybe just that there wasn't enough of it. It barely stirred the air, like footsteps on an unmiked soundstage. Silently, he cursed the Vega. He didn't want to be home anymore. He felt invisible enough already.

And then, all at once, as though someone had kicked a volume switch, noise poured into his ears. That permanent freeway roar, like the world's largest summer fan except it ran all year and made everything hotter instead of cooler, less bearable instead of more, and was so omnipresent he'd stopped noticing it half the time. Turning to Q again, he felt at least a semblance of a smile creep back over his mouth.

"Got an idea."

"This your first time?"

"Transitway," Ferdinand said.

Slowly, as though awakening from a deep sleep, Q shivered and glanced toward the street. "What about it?"

"Riding it, what do you think?" Ferdinand felt cramping in his fingers, then all the way up his arms. The sensation was painful, and also weirdly reassuring. *He was still part of the world. Could go where people were, be a resident of the city, even if everyone in it had already forgotten he was there.* "Thought you wanted to go to Clifton's."

"Before I die," Q said. "Thought maybe I'd put off my murder until just a few days after my retirement."

But Ferdinand could see, by the way Q was shifting his weight back and forth and shaking his head, that the idea intrigued him, too. "Aw, come on. You, the caller of everyone else's bullshit. Who do you know who's even ridden the Transitway?"

"We are talking about the Transitway, as in the bus line that runs up the damn 110, right? As in right on the 110? The one where people finally just hurl themselves off the bus stop benches into traffic 'cause they're already deaf from cars screaming by and burnt to death 'cause there ain't no shade and they've stopped breathing anyway because the carbon monoxide ate their lungs. *That Transitway?*

"Again," said Ferdinand, closing his weary eyes and feeling further from smiling than he usually did when Q started ranting. "Who do you know who's ever ridden it?"

"Whoever it was told me there are whole gangs shooting up together in the stairwells. Using the homeless people and anyone else they find down there as dinner tables."

"Hell, they're probably using them as *dinner*," Ferdinand said, and now he did start to smile.

"That's somewhere south of funny."

Ferdinand had heard the stories, too. "Look, what I heard, there's *no one* down there. City poured all that money into it, and people won't even go on the thing. 10,000 riders a day, they were expecting. I saw an article not too long ago that said they get less than 500."

"Wonder if that's because they built the stations *right on the fucking freeway*. We'll be waiting—probably two hours, given traffic and the frequency of buses our neighborhoods have always been granted—on a concrete island in dead sunlight or under some overpass where only the passing cars can see us get our guts ripped out, if anyone who happens to be around is in a gut-ripping mood."

"Like you said, probably won't be anyone around. So it'll be nice and quiet."

Q snorted. "'Cause we'll be deaf ten seconds after we get down there."

"It'll be an adventure. Kind of our own little mountain climbing expedition. All that carbon monoxide'll probably even give us that brain buzz high-altitude guys are always raving about."

"Mountain climbers go *up*," Q snapped. But by this time, they were already walking.

Halfway down the block, Ferdinand quickened his pace, and Q matched him wordlessly. The Transitway, he thought, couldn't be much emptier than the street where he lived. Heat hummed in his skin. His footsteps sounded hollow, the way the whiffle bat had when Q bounced it off the ground. And he kept catching his own shadowed, blurry reflection beneath layers of grime in the windows of parked cars. It was like seeing a home movie of himself twenty years older, crouched forward, inching his way to market at that lurching pace only the ancient and sick could bear. Except there wouldn't be any movies, because no one would take them. And who would watch?

The roar intensified. Glancing up, Ferdinand saw the entrance to the Transitway station and stopped. Q stopped beside him.

Flung upward from the sidewalk at a 45-degree angle, a giant wing of glinting steel loomed like the wedged-open lid of a tank, shading the escalator that dropped prospective passengers out of the neighborhood into the maelstrom of the 110. Several of the stations along the route bore similar architectural flourishes, apparently meant to signal the arrival of a new prosperity to even the most scarred and embarrassing sections of Los Angeles. Even if all they really marked were the exits.

Shielding their eyes against the beams of glare shooting off the steel overhang, Ferdinand and Q crossed Adams against the light, neglecting even to check the traffic, since there wasn't any. The cramping sensation crept all the way into Ferdinand's shoulders, now, and his steps got even faster. The excitement he felt was oddly nostalgic. When had he last experienced anything like it? Years and years ago. Maybe when his mother took him on the one and only plane ride of his childhood...or that time—with Q—going on Space Mountain at Disneyland. On some Grad Night excursion as

chaperones for the students, maybe. *Had Florence-Normandie really taken students to Disneyland, once? They must have.* Striding even faster, waving behind him at his friend, he passed into the shadows beneath the overhang, reached the top of the escalator, and his mouth fell open as the sound surged up the shaft to meet him.

He'd been standing there several seconds, gaping, when he realized Q was tugging on his arm and turned.

Q was staring down the escalator at the noise. Even Ferdinand's hips were cramping, now. Standing in that spot really was like being atop the caldera of a volcano bubbling toward eruption. Under their feet, the whole planet seemed to shudder as millions of tons of metal and rubber and cargo and drivers crawled and snarled and fought their way home or away from home along the so-called freeways. Even up here, the din bored into their ears, and not only their ears. Ferdinand could feel it drilling into the corners of his eyes and the top of his skull and the cartilage of his rib cage.

And then there was the exhaust, which he half-believed he could see rippling in the air at the bottom of the escalator. It didn't exactly float, any more than smog on the horizon did. It lapped, instead. Here at last was the man-made reservoir the people of L.A. had always dreamed of building, deep and renewable enough to sustain life in this city where nothing but desert tortoises and creosote should live. As long as the new inhabitants could drink and breathe carbon monoxide instead of water.

"Let's do it," he finally said. "Be like our own private limo once the bus comes."

"Got that right," Q half-shouted. "Don't see anyone else stupid enough to join us."

Ferdinand stepped onto the escalator, which whisked him silently down. He'd gone maybe fifty feet when the surging sound finally swept up and engulfed him. Jamming his palms against his ears, he half-turned, saw Q still poised at the top, not yet descending, and almost panicked. He didn't want to be down here alone, and somewhere in the onslaught of traffic noise the tunnel caught and magnified there were other sounds. *From inside his head? A small child's laughter, and whistling—like a whistle curving as it caught the air?—and something else, too.* Ferdinand lifted his right-hand palm a tiny bit away from his ear, just to check. Then he dropped his hands altogether.

That last sound, anyway, had come from the walls. A voice? Not exactly. *An articulated breath? A consonant in the burbling, snarling torrent.*

Dddd.

Hands at his sides, whole head ringing, Ferdinand glided down, watching Q recede out of sight. He could taste carbon monoxide slithering between his clenched teeth and down his windpipe. Just as he reached the bottom, he began to bounce up and down on his heels and opened his mouth, wanting to warn Q, shriek for him to go back. Then he just stood still, listening.

What he heard was roaring from the freeway, full of overtones, vibrating all the way down his bones. No laughter. No whistling. He was standing in a cylindrical concrete walkway, brightly lit. He couldn't see any tagging anywhere, just bright, cheerful colors winking off the walls and ceiling. So the city had continued pouring funds into keeping these places bright and clean and usable, even if they were deafening. Or else even the gangs wouldn't come down here.

The walls and ceiling were actually chrome, Ferdinand realized. The colors came from reflected sunlight shooting off the hoods and roofs of the thousand cars and trucks passing every minute out there, twenty feet ahead, where the tunnel opened onto broad daylight and the shelterless island of the Transitway station.

*"My friend, the Sun—like all my friends
Inconstant, lovely, far away..."*

Those were the words his father had used to propel himself north, through a silence all but unimaginable, now, to a promised land that had, in some ways, kept its promises. His father had never landed a job worthy of his education, but Ferdinand had. And now he stood here, using the same words just to propel himself onto a bus so he could go downtown. It was a mercy, he supposed, the way people's capacity for adventure seemed to decrease along with their opportunities for it.

"At least drowning's supposedly quiet," Q shouted as he stepped off the escalator and stood next to Ferdinand.

"What?" Ferdinand shouted back.

Instead of laughing, Q ducked, and Ferdinand did too, instinctively, as that hard *Dddd* he'd heard before erupted out of the ceiling like hail. When it stopped, both men straightened, glanced up the walls, and finally at each other. Ferdinand was surprised to find his hands at chest level, curled into fists, one on top of the other, as though cocking a bat. *Milt. Julio. Milt. Playing Bond-and-Blofeld in the dark as the cookie flashed overhead, that's what they'd called that splotch-asteroid that appeared right as they topped Space Mountain's lone hill...*

Sticking out a hand to steady himself against the wall, Ferdinand shook himself hard, felt whatever he'd been thinking fly to pieces. His fingers seemed to sink into the concrete. When he stumbled forward a step, he seemed to pass through strands of carbon monoxide hanging in mid-air like cobwebbing.

"You hear a dog?" Q yelled.

Ferdinand turned slowly, eyeing his friend.

Q shrugged. "For a second, swore I heard Benjamins."

"Listen hard enough down here, you'll hear anything you want to," Ferdinand said, but too quietly. Even he couldn't hear himself. "Benjamins?"

"My..." Q started. Then he just stood. Slowly, as though he were liquid, a shudder rippled over his still-massive shoulders.

"Q. You don't have a—"

"Got to cut down on the pre-noon Coronas don't I? Remind me, yeah?"

Ferdinand began to nod, and the shudder caught him, too. *Because of the way Q said the dog's name. As though...*

Then he heard barking. Stiffening, Ferdinand glanced fast toward the walls, blinking away the blinding streaks of color. When his vision cleared, he was looking up at a shiny reflection of himself upside down. A paunchy wannabe-gringo in a button-up shirt two sizes too big, floating bewildered in a sea of pavement. Why wouldn't there be dogs here? It was as good a place as any to shit and scavenge and wrestle for dominance with your friends and get run over and die.

Q, he noticed, was not looking. He was staring straight ahead. Slowly, he put his hand out, turned it over, as though awaiting a lick. And at that moment, Ferdinand thought he felt it, too. A trace of warm wetness across his palm, heavy

golden paws on his chest, but there was nothing, nothing, never had been...

Yanking his hands up from his sides where they'd been dangling, Ferdinand realized that his ears were literally quivering against his head, trying to fold like evening primroses fleeing light. He jammed his palms to his temples once more. What he'd heard wasn't dogs, or *Dddd*, either. That was just the scrambled sense his brain was trying to make from the din.

Benjamins, Bond-and-Blofeld, Milt and Julio, piñatas and Robin Hood bowls, Petra laughing...

Spinning so fast he almost twisted right off his feet, Ferdinand took two fast steps back the way he'd come. He was saying something, too, shouting, maybe just making sound, trying to cancel out the racket the way noise-blocking headphones supposedly did. His eyes had started to stream—from *exhaust, just exhaust, it was probably healthier to hike across Bikini Island after a nuclear test than to spend fifteen minutes down here*—and now he was singing. The Bond theme, the guitar bit, *dung-de-de-dungdung-de-duh-duh*.

There *had* been an up escalator, hadn't there? He hadn't noticed. Sweat broke out all over him, and without lowering his hands or stopping humming or opening his eyes any wider than he had to, he scurried back to the bottom of the shaft from which he'd descended, and yes, there it was, gliding silently up. The way out. Home. He took another step, and Q grabbed his shoulder from behind, turned him, and as he saw his friend's face once more, Ferdinand smiled a single, desperate smile, and said, "Petra."

Q's fingers tightened, dug hard into Ferdinand's skin. "What the fuck did you just say?"

Ignoring the pain—relishing it, really, so sharp, so undeniably *there*, the first time in so unspeakably long—Ferdinand reached up and touched Q's hand with his own. "I said my wife's name." His eyes welled and overflowed. "My wife's name was Petra."

Around them, barking erupted again, louder this time, more distinct. When Ferdinand craned his neck, he saw his overhead reflection swarmed by thousands of flashes of color, as though set upon by sharks in a frenzy. He couldn't stay here. Not in this tunnel. Not one more second. And the fastest way out wasn't up, but straight. Onto the freeway. Ripping free of Q's hand, barely registering his friend's gaping, terrified face, Ferdinand flung himself forward.

Seconds later, he was doubled over gagging in the sunlight. Eventually, he felt blindly with his hand, found the mesh metal bench the city had thoughtfully provided to mark the bus stop, and sat down. For a long time, he concentrated on trying to breathe. Behind him, the sounds continued to swirl, rioting in their cavern. *Petra*. Nothing else. Just the name. And the certainty. Ferdinand felt tears mass in his eyes again, let them come, held on tight to the bench as the passing traffic rattled him.

Finally, Q emerged, too, stumbled to the bench, sat down. Another long minute passed before Ferdinand realized he was sobbing.

"Milt," Q said, through the fingers curtaining his face. "My son."

Which was right. Of course it was. For Christ's sake, when Julio had been very young there was no one on earth, not even Ferdinand and Petra, that Julio had wanted to see more than—

Julio.

DDDD, wailed the voices behind him. *Ddddadaahhh*.

Half-screaming, now, as the wind of two massive trucks thundered over him, he looked down, one last time, at his hands.

Fist on top of fist. Batting position. Ferdinand surged fully awake in one headlong, convulsive rush.

The cookie on the ceiling of Space Mountain. The furniture in the guest room, which had never been a guest room. Bunk bed, plastered with L.A. Raiders stickers. Poster of Farrah in that hideous brown bathing suit upside down right next to the head of the top bunk, "So she's always looking right at me, and only at me, Pops." Bukowski on the bookshelves, which Ferdinand had railed against, hoping his disapproval would disguise at least some of his pride at his boy's discovery of such writing at the age of twelve.

His son's room. His *son's room*. Even through his own screams, he could hear Q's, took half a moment to wonder what he'd just remembered. Then Ferdinand was saying Julio's name again. Just the name, turning it in his mouth like a key in a lock, feeling it click, watching his whole life swing open.

Milt and Julio together. Striking each other out with the whiffle, demanding constantly to be left alone, to go off alone, go downtown, take the bus...

"Oh, no," he said, and somehow, through the aching that gripped his entire frame like a vise, he sat up. "Oh, no."

They'd come here. Julio. Petra. Milt. All. Sooner or later. How long ago? How fucking long?

Right then, glancing to his right down the freeway, Ferdinand saw the bus. Giant, empty, shambling straight toward them. A year or two ago—it was almost funny, not funny at all, that he could remember this but not his family—Q had showed up outside Ferdinand's classroom door outraged, waving a newspaper. He'd waltzed right into Ferdinand's first-period class and brandished the paper at the students. "You don't exist," he'd practically shouted. "It's right here in the paper. You don't exist." The article he'd been waving had come from the *Sunday Times*, reporting on a City Council vote to remove the name South Central from all future maps of Los Angeles. Too many negative associations. And it hadn't ever been a *real* place, anyway. Had it? Not one you could fix a precise location to.

"One by one," Q croaked. He was all the way standing, now, staring at the bus, which crawled closer, towering over the traffic before it. Shepherding it.

"One by one," Ferdinand murmured back.

Everyone they'd cared about. Everyone they'd loved. Everyone around them. One by one, each for their own reasons, they'd glided down those escalators and stepped aboard the Transitway, which had swallowed not only them but the memory of them, wiping them clean out of history. Was this whole thing some unthinkable top secret city project, a logical extension of that Council vote? The runoff channel the city had needed for so many decades, to help it funnel the unnecessary and unseemly into the sea of oblivion?

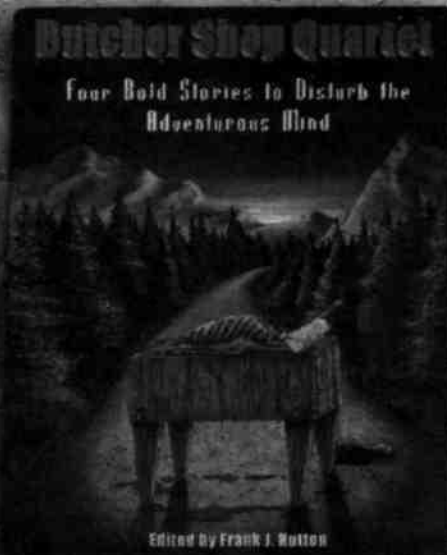
Or maybe the desert had arisen at last from the distressed sand, reclaiming itself from the teeming creatures it couldn't possibly sustain.

Or was the Transitway a Transitway, after all, a service that simply shuttled riders elsewhere?

"Come on," Q said, grabbing Ferdinand's elbow and trying to tug him back toward the tunnel.

Ferdinand just opened his mouth, turned, and stared. "Come on? Where?"

CUTTING BLOCK PRESS PRESENTS



CUTTING
BLOCK
PRESS

www.cuttingblock.net
www.horrorlibrary.net
www.groundfrost.com

G

"Anywhere. It's coming, you idiot. Run!"

"Run where?" Both of them were shouting. It was the only way to be heard. Behind them, the sounds in the tunnel seemed to have cohered into a rumbling, feline snarl. "Q, I'm going where the bus goes."

"It goes nowhere, man. Don't you get it?"

"It goes where they went. Where else would you want to be?"

"Right fucking here, dude. Where I can remember. Where I can grieve. You go cop out, I'm taking their lives back with me. Or their memories, anyway. I persevere, and I preserve. It's what I've been doing my whole life."

In the tunnel, the snarling intensified. When Ferdinand looked toward it, the light in there seemed to have dimmed. "Q," he said. "I'm not sure we actually have a choice."

"One way to find out."

Without another word or a goodbye glance, Q launched himself off the traffic island and ran straight for the tunnel. Ferdinand almost went after him, though whether to drag him back or follow he couldn't have said, then caught sight of the bus inching closer. All but here. He stopped, stared at it a second, looked back toward Q.

It was like watching a car back over one of those rows of angled spikes set up next to signs reading DO NOT BACK UP—SEVERE TIRE DAMAGE. At the mouth of the tunnel, Q took a little leap, and so he wasn't even touching the ground when his body shredded. It simply came apart in the air, in dozens of pieces, and Ferdinand fell to his knees screaming and weeping, but he couldn't close his eyes.

The most astonishing part, in the end, was the absence of blood. Each shining sliver of Q seemed to shoot straight up, like a spark ejected from a fire, and for that one moment, all the things he was and knew seemed to hover in the air, all jumbled up, a kaleidoscope of bone and books and beer and muscle and love of kids and quiet, seething, desperation. And then it vanished. Every speck.

Falling forward onto his hands, Ferdinand crouched, rocking, blowing heaving breaths through his lips. Tasting the fouled, poisoned air. Remembering.

Then, slowly, he stood, turned. The bus had come, was sliding into the station with a weirdly human breath that seemed to echo all the way across the endless lanes of endless traffic.

Black hair. His wife had had black hair. She'd worn a clip in it, every single day, right at the base of her neck. Clenching his jaw, Ferdinand tried to remember more. But nothing came. Not now. Not yet. *Soon.* He'd see them soon. Petra. Julio.

Or else he wouldn't. Regardless, he was going. Either way, he wouldn't be alone anymore. He hadn't ever been, not in the way he'd imagined all these...however many years it had been. Years, though. He allowed himself one quiet prayer: That the Transitway had taken Q, too. That all ways out of this place led somewhere, or at least to the same nowhere. Drying his eyes on the drooping sleeves of his ridiculous blue shirt, Ferdinand stepped toward the bus as the doors sighed open.



A behind-the-scenes peek at the Rolling Darkness Revue

Roll, Dark

Glen Hirshberg

AT THE VERY first performance of the Rolling Darkness Revue—Dark Delicacies bookshop, Burbank, California, October of 2004—a thoroughly competent former student of mine showed up with a digital camera and a cinematography-minded companion from USC film school. A year later, at the kick-off event for the 2005 tour—Mystery and Imagination Bookshop, Glendale, Ca.—a correspondent for National Public Radio arrived with microphone gear and snazzy digital deck. In between and afterward, at more than half of our shows, there've been other cameras, cassette recorders, even one guy with a mini-disc.

And yet.

Two years into its existence, barely a frame of film or thread of tape or byte of digital whatever exists to prove that the Rolling Darkness Revue was ever there. In 2004, my former student called me a week after our debut, baffled and embarrassed, to say that all she'd shot were shadows. Our radio correspondent (the dedicated and extraordinarily helpful Rick Kleffel, about whom more later) realized only after the 2005 launch event that he'd somehow arrived with the wrong mic, and gotten only murmurs that couldn't quite be clarified enough for NPR.

It seems that capturing the Rolling Dark in action is a little like recording EVP (that's Electronic Voice Phenomena, as in the floating, disembodied voices of the dead). There are those who swear they've heard it. A few who can claim they saw it. For the rest of you, it's going to have to come down to faith.

At least until we can sucker some unsuspecting shop in your town into letting us roll through...

Creation Myth

Dennis Etchison, indisputably one of the Rolling Dark's co-founders and its eminence grisé based on bristly Hemingway beard alone (never mind the multiple World Fantasy Awards, British Fantasy Awards, decades of stunning stories, blah blah, yeah yeah), still thinks this was his idea. He bases this claim, as far as I can tell, on two occurrences.

First, he refers repeatedly to a 1997 event at the Jazz Bakery in Los Angeles, California, at which he and the great Ramsey Campbell regaled a justifiably rapt club audience for more than two hours with recitations of four of their best-loved stories. There is no denying the existence of this event; unlike the Rolling Darkness Revue shows, there are tapes to prove it, and I'm the proud owner of a set.

Second, he reminds me of a conversation he and I had the second time we met, reading in a sort of line-up at Mystery and Imagination in Glendale at their annual Saturday-before-Halloween extravaganza. We were talking, he reminds me, about how oral storytelling played a crucial role in luring both of us into the field. We talked about favorite readers, about Ramsey Campbell huffing up like a cartoon dragon and breathing terror in slow, scorching bursts from the armchairs he prefers onstage. We also talked about wrestling, which has nothing to do with the Rolling Dark, but if you talk to Dennis for more than a minute or two, you're going to talk wrestling.

Somewhere in there, Dennis claims, he told me we should set something up. A touring cavalcade. A company of terror-players traipsing the countryside, pulling up in local bookshops or better still, little clubs and theaters, telling tales with low-key

theatrical and musical accompaniment, slipping out of town again, doing the Halloween season right.

Maybe he's correct. I remember it a little differently, and in a different order. And I have no idea who broached it first. Maybe not me, because what had I done, to that point in my career, to make me think Dennis (or Ramsey, with whom I'm certain I'd had a similar conversation at the World Horror Convention the previous spring) would want to come traipsing in *my* wagon?

Doesn't matter. What matters is this: For Dennis, it was old-time radio. For Ramsey, it was films, I believe, at the very first. For me, it was Perry Berkeley (I think that was his name). He was my counselor at Camp Willoway (I think that was the camp), and one night, when I was eight years old, he told our cabin the story of the Tent Monster, which scared me so badly that I fled into the dark weeping, and ignited my feverish little brain so ferociously that I woke Perry in the middle of the night and made him tell me the story again.

At the opening of the original John Carpenter version of "The Fog," John Houseman, in the role of Mr. Machen (*wink-wink nudge-nudge*) claps a pocket-watch shut, stares around him at the firelit faces of a group of mesmerized kids, and says, "11:55. Almost midnight. Time enough for one more story. Just to keep us *waaaarm*."

I can't tell you exactly the moment when the Rolling Darkness Revue was born. But every single person who has performed with us has longed, at some point in their lives (or, in my case, *most* of my life), to be *that* guy. The one with the watch in his hands and that look on his face as he or she settles in to tell the last story before twelve...

Enter Pinhead

Cheap joke, it's true, although he did write not one, not two, but three of the HELLRAISER movies based around that Clive Barker character, and he has worn his hair in bristles ever since I've known him. But the truth is that whoever thought up the Rolling Darkness Revue, Peter Atkins' entrance on the scene went a long way toward ensuring its eventual existence.

A longtime friend of Dennis' and well-liked companion of pretty much everyone who has written a word of horror in the past twenty years, as far as I can tell, Pete brought some essential qualities to what had somehow become a planning committee. Urbane and relaxed, he proved equally at home chatting about glam rock with Dennis, about crazed American noir author Harry Stephen Keeler with both of us, and about actual tour details with me. He has a winning, understated Liverpudlian accent that had me imagining scores of helpless American listeners leaning eagerly forward for his tales (even Dennis practically curls up in his lap). And he has a crucial knack for phrases like, "Uh, fellas, we're now one month from showtime, and I still feel like I'm about to stand up in school with my trousers at my ankles."

Plus, like me, he plays music. Or, as both of us would say, plays *at* music. He has a band—quite rockin', very fine—called Invisible Cinema, appropriately enough. (My own band is called Momzer, and if you want to know what that means, ask a Yiddishe friend, but make sure you're not *calling* your Yiddishe friend that.) Gradually, almost miraculously, an actual performance concept began to cohere out of our collective, perpetual writers' fogs...

Punk Rock

I found the voice-alteration unit in a closet in the band room at the high school where I teach. The fact that its accompanying power supply adapter had a frayed connecting wire and cracked back cover that melted a little more every time electricity surged through it just gave the whole thing that appropriate patina of risk.

After several hours of jamming, Pete and I discovered a chord on which we could both improvise for thirty or

even sixty minutes (it was D). Two hours into our lone officially scheduled run-through, Dennis looked up from WWWwhatever-letter-goes-here on the WB long enough to announce that he had a passage from his book, *The Death Artist*, that would make an ideal introduction to a night of storytelling, particularly if delivered through the voice-alteration box, which, incidentally, he would *not* be plugging in, that was up to us young'uns.

I bought a cheap fog machine and experimented in the living room and made my two small children happier than they've been since the last time our cat jumped on my head while I was sleeping.

Somehow—dreaming big dreams of a new horror era, in which dozens of Rolling Dark-inspired caravans left home and crisscrossed the nation, bringing the art of scaring people silly back into the intimate, face-to-fog-machine venues where it has always belonged, and still with that metaphorical trousers-about-ankles feeling—we arrived at opening night. October 16th, 2004...

The Grand Opening, or, Where's Dennis?

It was a rare error in judgment from Mr. Atkins.

Alternately inspiring and panicking each other, we'd gotten to Dark Delicacies a good five hours before showtime. We'd tested the fog (still foggy), mic-checked the voice-alteration box (still sparking and lethal), even tuned our instruments. Best of all, Pete had swung across town and picked up Dennis and chauffeured him to the store, just to insure that the ceaselessly inquisitive Etchison brain didn't leap off down some wrestler-haunted corridor.

And so it was, overconfident and fog-soaked and food-deprived, that Pete somehow agreed to let Dennis take the car and go get his good pal George Clayton Johnson.

Terrific writer, Mr. Johnson. Author of "Logan's Run," *Twilight Zone* episodes, lots more. Wise conversationalist, too (get him going on Robert Louis Stevenson's efficiency sometime; most productive eighty seconds I've had on the craft of writing in twenty years). A snappy addition

to any audience in his straw hat that so nicely accentuates his wise, white beard. Bound by few time constraints, however, and unlikely to constrain Dennis.

Our start time approached. Actual human beings turned up, some of whom we didn't even know. 15, maybe 25 people, a hefty turnout for an experimental reading event. Student, with cameraman. No Dennis. Pete stepped outside to smoke and stare hopefully down Burbank Boulevard across the San Fernando Valley. I sat and played with the power supply to the voice-alteration box.

I don't even remember the moment Dennis actually reappeared, or where he came from. Suddenly, there was his voice, dropped four octaves by the box, intoning, "You do not have to find him. He has already found you." I flicked on my keyboard, glanced toward Pete, who'd also scurried into place at his guitar. I stepped on the fog pedal, blasting poor George Clayton Johnson, who just stood in the onslaught, not even blinking, a bearded, straw-hatted cypress who'd be there, blissfully watching, decades after we'd gone.

I read "Mr. Dark's Carnival," the story I'd originally invented to tell my students on Halloween years before and that had somehow, miraculously, established me as a writer at long last. Pete read a creepy section from his novel, *Big Thunder*. Dennis read "The Dog Park," the same biting, hilarious, quietly vicious story he'd employed on that seminal 1997 evening with Ramsey Campbell. The fog billowed, the music stayed on D, someone took George home. Somehow, we were launched.

Snapshots, 2004

At what point did we realize that what we were doing meant something, at least to the three of us? I think it was on the second day of that first tour, at a Denny's in Santa Cruz in the pouring rain.

We'd meant to drive together—that was part of the allure. But we didn't. Long story, Pete with a movie conflict, Dennis wrestling with deadlines, etc. I drove alone, stopped midday in the misting wet at Pacheco Park and walked up an empty, grassy hillside toward a lone, twisted tree and marveled for the thousandth time

at the variety of California, got lost somewhere on the transition to the 1, and wound up parked right next to my companions, who'd pulled into the Denny's lot moments before.

Pete and Dennis weren't hungry — they'd stopped at Harris Ranch, where the cows really may be slaughtered out back when your steaks are ordered — and I was cold and exhausted. And yet we were at that Denny's for hours and hours, talking Harry Stephen Keeler and Kenneth Patchen, Roxy Music and doo-wop, novel-writing vs. story-writing, wrestling. Gentleman Pete went outside for a smoke and came back with the life story of the prostitute huddled under the awning to stay out of the downpour. Dennis went out for a smoke and disappeared by himself God-knows-where and came back.

The next morning, we did an interview with Rick Kleffel, insightful critic, publisher/editor of *The Agony Column* website, co-host of a fine book program on the local public radio station. Under Kleffel's gentle, enthusiastic questioning, our collective enthusiasm spilled out. None of us even had new stuff to plug at the moment, we pointed out; we weren't in this for the money (never mind the box of T-shirts in the trunk, the piles of books and CDs and memorabilia we'd lugged hopefully north with us). We dismissed the notion that the purpose of horror literature was catharsis, and then, one by one, reinforced it. We carefully positioned ourselves as between genres — classic horror? Mainstream literary? Something else? — then reaffirmed our loyalty to the field. Dennis told a story about Stephen King roaming the halls of a 1970s World Fantasy Convention in a computer-geek T-shirt and boxer shorts. Afterwards, none of us could remember quite what we'd said. But we were pretty certain we'd meant every word.

Dark Carnival, Berkeley, CA 10/20/04

A late arrival — the accomplished, laughing, frighteningly bright woman who, as a girl some thirty years before, had provided the inspiration for the desperate and possibly psychotic Theresa Daugherty character in my novel, *The Snowman's Children* — saved us from the ignominy of an event with

more performers than attendees. We left the shop happy, anyway, because the friendly Dark Carnival people had made us these really nifty magnets and bookmarks with our book covers and the event dates on them.

Evidence. Maybe we'd been there after all.

Borderlands, San Francisco, 10/21/04

Many more people, startlingly enthusiastic crowd, fog machine seemingly kicking up extra-thick mist in response and nearly choking the extraordinarily knowledgeable and helpful staff. Good thing, too, since we basically had to park in Oakland and walk the amps and equipment miles down Market Street, waving that mutant power supply-cord before us like a cobra on a leash.

Mysterious Galaxy, San Diego, 10/22/04, or, Where's Dennis II?

Actually, where are Dennis and Pete, since somehow our gypsy caravan got itself separated in the Orange Crush freeway strangle, and I arrived at the shop a good ninety minutes before my colleagues. We left the fog machine in the car, did the show dry. A woman came whom I'd taught at a Writer's Conference two years before. The fact that she even remembered who I was gave me that gorgeous, surprising making-at-least-a-little-difference feeling I only really get from the teaching part of my writing life.

Rolling Dark 1 1/2, or, Someone Wake Those People Up and Tell Them We're Done... Hilton Hotel and Convention Center, Burbank, CA June, 2005

When the people running the 2005 Horror Writers of America convention called and asked if we'd like to do an encore of our Rolling Darkness Revue performance as the featured Friday night entertainment, we got a little proud, I think. Or maybe just overenthusiastic.

We knew we'd loved the previous fall enough to do another round, despite the fact that we'd raked in almost enough money on T-shirt sales to cover gas expenses between Santa Cruz and Berkeley. So we looked at this rare summer opportunity as a chance

to reprise what had worked and try out some new elements.

We thought we'd include (ready for the impressive biz lingo?) *interstitials*: zippy, brief extracts from our works as transitions between full-length readings. Plus a backing musician this time, the multi-talented Rex Flowers. Plus a longer intro, to take better advantage of the voice box. Plus a bang-bang flurry of terrifying excerpts for the grand finale.

The part that wasn't our fault was that the convention planners — trying, in all good faith, to give us a showcase slot — scheduled us against no other programming, for right after the Friday night social with the open bar, around 10:15 or so. We actually went on around 11, once we found Dennis, who'd located a whole quadrant of the HWA to chat WWF with. The voice-alteration box finally exploded. The fog machine malfunctioned. The show can't possibly have been as interminable as I remember. It definitely was *not* light out when we got done. But if the boundlessly peppy Nancy Holder, self-professed author of 78 novels, tells you afterward that she "whoop, got a little snoozy," well...

We went home chastened. Determined. And buoyed by some convention notices — from someone who'd apparently dreamed a better performance than we gave — suggesting that we really were on to something.

Darkness Rising; Exit Dennis

We had better plans for Rolling Dark 2, starting with the name — Darkness Rising — which was all Dennis'. This time, we were going to write original stories, with a traveling theme. We were going to enlist different backing musicians — real musicians, who could play multiple chords — at each new gig, giving the whole thing that improvisatory feel we very much wanted. We got the ever-industrious Paul Miller, publisher of Earthling Publications, to agree to print chapbooks featuring the new stories. Three weeks from opening day of year two, Dennis quit.

It's tempting, here — it's what any self-respecting wrestling fan would do, surely — to construct some mythology at this point. Some Shani Davis-Chad Hedrick meltdown, ending with Dennis slamming Pete and Glen's

heads together, leaping atop a table in triumph, and fleeing down the 405. The truth has much more to do with the endless, tedious, frequently terrifying mechanics of trying to make a living as a writer. Dennis had deadlines. Work he had to get done, that he was actually sure was going to pay him. The dates didn't work.

Traveling and reading with Dennis has been and will remain a profound privilege, and I very much hope to have the chance to do it again. Once Pete and I got over the disappointment, we started calling around. We realized quickly that there were more than a few writers who'd either heard about what we were doing already, or who liked the idea once we told them. Within days, we had a whole host of new talent lined up, each for separate gigs, so that every single night really would be a unique and unrepeatably event. The 2005 Darkness Rising tour wound up featuring readings by Robert Masello, Nancy Holder, Tamara Thorne, Robert Morrish, and Michael Blumlein, along with Pete and me.

Another student of mine, Kat Hartson, painted an eerie, gigantic backdrop of a street corner, a single street lamp, a shadowy figure in a hat. We nailed a couple cans to a board and created stage-headlights, came up with a frame story about a broken-down car, a nervous driver waiting in a dead neighborhood and telling himself stories while hoping for someone to come. We bought hats, and my wife told me I looked "weirdly almost sexy" for the first time in a while. We got a better fog machine, a bag of fall leaves, and left the voice-alteration box home.

The Dark would roll once more.

Snapshots, 2005

God, the music, first of all. Rex Flowers and Jonas Yip, my longtime friends and bandmates, droning dreamily and hypnotically in Glendale, at the first show in which the Rolling Dark actually had to turn people away. Prog-rock pounders Pegasus all but blowing us offstage but stirring a responsive crowd in a tent outside Lou's Records in San Diego. Amar Chaudry's playful stylings at the wonderfully welcoming Capitola Book Café near Santa Cruz. The amazing Mr. Kleffel's eerie vocal & electronics ensemble, Pets Gone Wild

(featuring his longtime companions Dana Massie and Jinny Royer), amping up the ambience as we kicked off the Dusk-til-Dawn Fest at Borderlands.

The sights, too: the old guy at Mystery and Imagination who got an accidental, full-face blast of the new fog, nearly passed out, and stayed anyway. Robert Morrish and his unannounced, full-cast, old-time radio-style blitz through his story, "Junkyard of the Damned" at the Capitola Book Café. Michael Blumlein showing up in mask-to-boots fetish costume and alarming even the jaded Market Street denizens for his inspired reading of "Greedy for Kisses" at Borderlands. The highlight of that night, we thought, at least until store owner Alan Beatts took the mic, thanked us, then put the entire RDR to shame with a dazzlingly dry, funny, and devastating reading of the best Richard Laymon story I've ever encountered.

On the way through the mountains to Santa Cruz, my parents called on my cell phone to report that my grandmother had died. This was not unexpected. She was 94, cancer-riddled, under hospice care. She'd been sedated into deep sleep because of encroaching panic, and I'd said my goodbyes before we left. Pete sat quietly, said nothing when I pulled off once more into Pacheco Park. He lurked near the park entrance while I walked up the grassy hill to the lone tree once more. I'm pretty sure I'll stop there every year, now. Then I went back, thanked Pete for his intuitive quiet, and we rolled on into Santa Cruz.

In wondrous and surprising and uncomfortable and inspiring ways, the Rolling Darkness Revue had officially gotten away from us. It's itself, now, I think. It's coming anywhere that will have it this October. What will happen once it gets there is anyone's guess.

11:55

Best thing about being the one to write this article, of course, is that I get to be the guy with the watch. With the one more story.

A couple years ago, at the ConDor Conference in San Diego, I wound up on a panel with noted science fiction author David Brin. Mr. Brin was nothing if not provocative, issuing pronouncements—some of them genu-

inely thoughtful—about pretty much anything anyone in the room cared to talk about. When he realized he was on the panel with a couple of ghost story writers, he proceeded cheerfully to dismiss pretty much the entire field. Science fiction writers were forward-thinking, essentially optimistic, rooted in the real. Horror writers, he claimed, were romantic pessimists, in love with and mired in a peculiar nostalgia for a time when there was more we did not know.

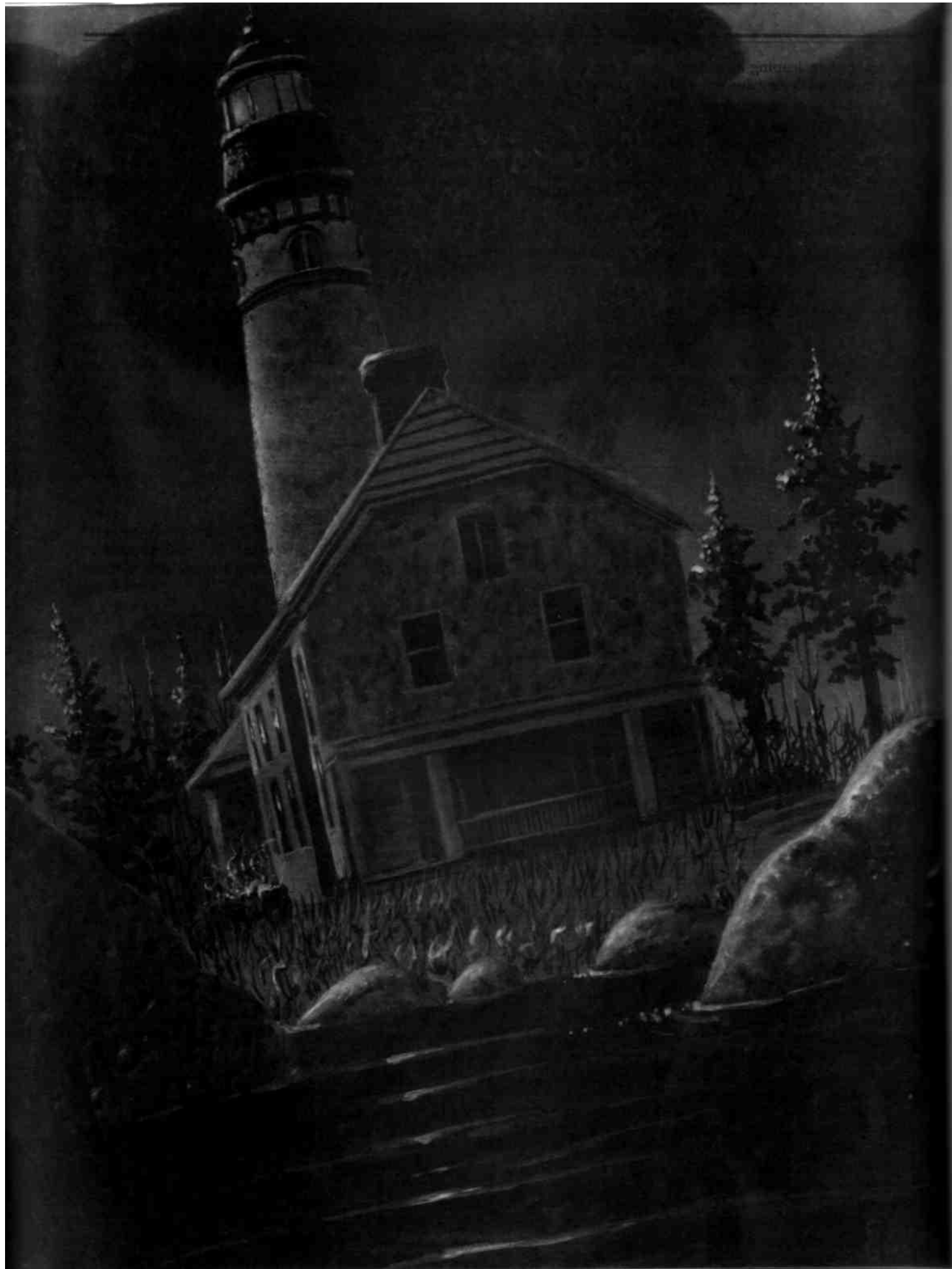
To me, there are few human actions more forward-thinking, optimistic, and profoundly rooted in authentic human experience than staring down the inevitable end and transforming it into story. It's true, I don't remember a whole lot about the performances immediately following my grandmother's death. But I will forever weave the last moments I shared with her in this world into the story of the Rising Rolling Dark, and I will always be happy to visit her there.

Years ago, I took my folklorist-wife to the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesboro, Tennessee. Nostalgia everywhere that weekend, no question about it. Stories a little squeaky-clean and bloodless as a lot, for me. Except for Saturday night—by far the best-attended night of the entire event—when what seemed the entire population of the eastern half of the state gathered on the riverbanks to hear ghost stories told from the pavilion. There was something so joyful, at once fundamentally universal and supremely solitary in that experience, and it only became more joyful as the moon got higher and the chill more ferocious and the stories darker.

As long as we can continue to pull it off—as long as the dates line up, and the economics at least provide the illusion of working out, and the musicians and painters and guest stars keep popping up and contributing their fabulous ideas, and the listeners keep coming—Pete and I have pretty much committed ourselves, now. This year, maybe we'll have the privilege of bringing the river to you.

(Want to book us? Get in touch through Glen's website at www.glen-hirshberg.com)





THE SISTERS OF BAIKAL

(NOVEL EXCERPT)

Glen Hirshberg

In the Madison Island Light and Aquatic Center (MILAC), a decaying building on a little-visited Lake Erie shore island, Michael Lowen has begun preparations for the final session of the summer camp for disadvantaged children he has run for the past fourteen years. The camp has lost its state funding, and will soon be closed.

Lowen has just hired two Siberian sisters, Irna and Daria, to serve as swim instructors for this last six week stretch. The sisters appeared uninvited on his island, immediately injecting laughter and curiosity into a life that has had little of either in recent years. A lonely and ground-down divorcee, Lowen spends most of his non-camp time brooding in the light-tower, wondering about the daughter he has not seen for nine years, ever since his ex-wife moved her to England. But for the moment, buoyed by the prospects of six more weeks of new campers to teach – not to mention the sisters – he finds himself having an uncharacteristically productive, hopeful day...

By then, I felt so active and oddly good that I dialed the international number engrained into my muscle memory and left a message for my daughter. We had set times when I was to call and Tam would answer. This, obviously, was not one of them. I knew it was after midnight there, hoped maybe I'd catch Tam awake and Jenny asleep. I got the machine instead, almost hung up. Then I said, "Hi, it's Dad. The marooned one. Just calling from the isle to say hey. I'll, uh, probably be in most of the night if you feel like chatting..." An old joke. Where else would I be? And for the most part, after so many separated years, we mostly talked at the appointed times.

By now, the evening wind had gotten inside the building. I could hear it wriggling between stones and old, green lumber, and even in my office, two corridors and a hundred yards from the nearest window, I could feel it on my bare arms and down my back. Thanks to the MILAC or maybe just the lake, it was moist, and colder than it should have been. Collecting two apples, a sardine tin, the remnants of the curds, and my last can of Stroh's from the tiny, portable refrigerator, I left my office, tossed yet another penny into the deep end of the pool, and made my way down the dimming corridor toward the light-tower's cracking cement steps.

From the way the wind sounded, I expected storm clouds massing on the horizon. Instead, I stepped into the tower room and found the sun melting into its own reflection. Beneath

and all around it, though, white-tailed waves humped up and hurried over the surface, noses down, smacking into and over each other. Laying my food on the rim of the cylindrical casing that had once housed the MILAC's fresnel lens, I cracked open a Stroh's, switched on my short-wave, swiveled the tuning knob at random, and discovered the signal.

For a second, I just stood there. It had been such an unexpectedly sweet mirage of a day that I couldn't process the sound at first, even though I recognized it instantly through the lightning-slashes of static. I planted my Stroh's on the floor and fiddled with the knob to get a clearer band. *Di-di-di-dah-dah-dah-di-di-dit*. No breaks; proper usage. With the establishment of satellite tracking, even some of the maritimers I knew seemed to have forgotten that S.O.S. didn't stand for words (Save Our Ship, Save Our Souls, etc.) or even letters. It was an aural procedure assigned a single, planet-wide sea-meaning. Morse code for screaming.

Ever since I first came to the MILAC, I'd had lighthouse keeper fantasies that went roughly like this: I'd be sitting up here some evening, watching thunderheads sprout out of the lake, when I'd spot a reeling craft or desperate swimmer struggling toward my island. Sometimes, I imagined plunging downstairs and into the downpour, dragging my two-oar dinghy out of the reeds by the jumble of roots and rocks that passed for Madison Island Beach, and performing heroic deeds myself. Other days, the fantasy involved little more than a ten-second phone call to the Coast Guard, a brusque "Thanks, bud" on the other end of the line as the Great Lakes rescue machinery roared into motion.

But I had little training in shipping communications, and no way of knowing where this signal originated or when it had begun broadcasting. By now, no doubt, the Coast Guard had latched onto the sound and sent ships rushing to precise coordinate points on charts I didn't have and couldn't have read anyway. My function, as usual, was apparently limited. So I left the dial where it was, pulled over the tilting three-caster chair I'd dragged from one of the empty conference rooms downstairs, and settled myself to drink and eat and listen. Once again, faces of campers I'd tried to render buoyant surfaced in my memory, even without the Polaroids I'd been pouring over in my office these past few weeks. *Kellie, who despite her slight size could splatter my office walls with her*

cannonball. Big Venezuelan Lat, who refused to say "Marco" during Marco Polo games, cornering his classmates in lethal, serious silence. I'd finally made him laugh by accidentally banging my head on the bottom trying to demonstrate a backward somersault. What were the chances that Lat—or any of them, really—were anywhere good or safe by now?

All around me, darkness lifted off the water and swept inland. Directly below, the pines and hackberries on the slopes of Madison Island leaned backward on their trunks as though playing limbo with the last of the daylight. Clouds of gnats whirled between them. Thanks to the wind, I half-believed I could still hear Irna's laughter echoing in the downstairs hallways, drifting over my silent pool, and that got me thinking of Daria's bare ankle and her black eyes. Or maybe I'd been thinking of Daria's eyes anyway.

Di-di-di-dah-dah-dah-di-di-dit.

The next memory rose the way it always did, slithering out of the shadows and swallowing everything else. Why was my first thought of my daughter always this one?

Her mother had left me eighteen months before for her boating partner, Lance, after admitting a four-year affair with him. The only thing I ever knew about Lance was that he wore a green and yellow sweatband across his forehead that read *Bunny*. I'd thought about fighting for Jenny, decided that I really was hurt and anyway wouldn't win, and settled for a fifty-fifty split on time with Tam, since Jenny certainly loved her.

For a year or so, Jenny dropped Tam off at my tiny Madison Beach house every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon and Saturday mornings for the whole weekend. Mostly, Tam and I spent our time lurking near each other and not speaking much. I'd always assumed she liked that, felt peaceful around me, and I wanted to give her space to work through what had happened and say or do whatever she needed to with my support but without my coaching. We went to the zoo or the park nearby, she helped me wash my Pacer, we played *Crazy 8's*, we read old *Three Investigators* novels about green ghosts and phantom ships, she colored or sometimes just sat and twisted her long, brown hair into braids while I pretended to work on camp stuff and looked at her.

Always, at least once per visit except in the winter, she went outside to tend the tomato plants she'd seeded and staked in the only corner of our miniature lot that got afternoon sunshine. During the summers, she'd settle herself on the dirt out there with her *Pippi Longstocking* book open and her mouth moving, as though she were reading to the stalks. Every now and then the Walsh sisters would fly by on their bikes, and sometimes Tam would drop her book and hop her three-speed and hurtle after them. Not often, though.

I loved Tam's comfortable solitude, the same way I'd loved her mother's back when I thought the secret places inside Jenny were simply secret, not undiscoverable or non-existent. But that last year, I'd noticed an increasing reticence in my daughter toward other human beings. Most times, particularly with adults, she would simply look down and decline to respond when spoken to. Understandable, maybe. But I was worried that that behavior would handicap her severely. And I suspected her mother, who kept at least as much to herself but had learned to meet people's gazes, at least, didn't even realize what was happening. I didn't want

to torture Tam, or force her to be someone she wasn't. I just wanted her to say hello.

In May of 1995, Jenny got an offer to teach and do post-doc work at the London School of Economics, and she and Lance accepted. They made plans to move, with Tam, at the end of the summer. Immediately, I got a lawyer. Jenny got one too. Way too late, I made a middle-of-the-night phone call and begged Jenny not to do it. To my astonishment, she burst into tears, said she had to, told me she was sick of Ohio, sick of Lance except in bed, sick about what she'd done to me but couldn't come back, sick of not getting academic posts and scared her career was about to collapse. She swore it'd be for two years, tops, that she'd send Tam both summers, for the whole summers, and I could come whenever I wanted and take her anywhere. She said living in Europe would be a revelation for our bright, quiet, hungry girl, as opposed to wandering around my decrepit isle and swimming alone in the pool when my campers had gone. The next day, I'd called off my lawyer.

In the few remaining months I had, I decided that the final project of my everyday parenting life would be to help Tam peek her head out of her private cave just far enough so people could see her. The next Saturday morning, I called Tam out of her garden. I sat her down on our front stoop to stare at the gentle, misting Spring rain with me and told her, "Every time you meet someone, I want you to say hi and look them in the eye, okay? It's important. Let them see your sweet face for a second. We've talked about this, honey. I want to help you learn this. You're going to need to do it in a new country. It's going to be strange and wonderful there. But only wonderful if you actually talk to people. Will you try?"

Tam shrugged.

"Just try. It really does matter, okay? And I mean it. So every time you don't do it, you're going to have to stay away from the tomato plants for the rest of that day. Alright?"

She'd glanced up at me then from under her bangs. I couldn't read the look on her face, but there was no hostility in it. "Okay," she said.

And that was that. Once or twice, she'd forgotten on an outing with me to the zoo or the grocery store, and I'd enforced the consequence. Mostly, she'd done better.

Di-di-di-dah-dah-dah-di-di-dit.

The last Saturday of my daughter's American life dawned hot, yellow-gray, swarming with mosquitoes. Even so, Tam arrived, kissed me on the cheek, and headed straight outside to her plants. I sat on the stoop for over an hour and watched her. She was wearing the Joe Carter Cleveland Indians T-shirt I'd bought her, and she was barefoot, up to her ankles in the dead summer grass. Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore and started toward her. I was barefoot, too, and the lawn felt brittle but warm. Heavy sunlight dripped down my back, and bugs swirled around my ears and mouth.

I was three steps away when Sally Walsh jogged into view, returning down our cul-de-sac from her Saturday run. As usual, she wore the shortest white shorts possible, which only served to emphasize her stubby legs. Her farmer tan, I couldn't help thinking, had to be even more pronounced than my own. She always smiled and bobbed her curly blonde head at me, and her blue eyes sparkled, and she took wonderful care of her daughters. For no fair or logical reason except that she chirped and had always liked me too much,

she'd annoyed me even before Jenny left. The sight of her exasperated me now.

Slowing to a stop, she jogged in place right in front of Tam, wiping a sweaty forearm across her sweaty forehead. Lifting a hand, she waved by wagging her fingers at me, bent forward slightly, and said, "Hey-a, Tam. Whatcha got?"

For a few seconds, she waited there, bobbing. Then she continued up her drive and into her house.

Inside me, something pinged, as though I'd been hit in the chest by a flung pebble.

"Oh, Tam," I said. "Sweetie. Why can't you—"

"Look, Daddy." She stepped back to reveal her palm, which was cupped around a dangling, fist-sized fruit, newly red, like a just-formed heart.

Dropping into a crouch beside her, I put one hand on my daughter's hair. It was warm as the grass but infinitely softer. With the other hand, I gently touched the tomato.

"It's beautiful," I said. "I'll take good care of it. But you have to let it go now."

She understood immediately, stared at me with her mouth open and tears forming in both eyes.

Why, I was thinking, even as I said it. Why bother, today of all days? Cut her some slack, and yourself, too. But the answer came almost as quickly. Because it's my last chance. Because it will be two years, at least, before I get to be this kind of dad again. I almost called my lawyer back right there, seriously considered bundling my daughter into my Pacer and lighting out for anywhere at all.

"Come on, Tam. I want to spend our last hour or so with you, anyway. And you know the rules. You have to be friendly to people. Even if you don't want to. Even if you don't like them, and you won't, a lot of the time. That's just how the world works. And you're about to go out in it, and I want you safe, and I want you happy, and I love you."

Without another word, she let go of the tomato and walked side by side with me into the house. "Do you want some jui—" I started.

But she kept walking, into the empty, square space that had once been her room, and shut the door. Once, fifteen minutes later, I knocked and opened the door. She was sitting Indian-style on the floor, playing cat's cradle with a long piece of yellow string she'd pulled from her fraying carpet.

"Tam. You can be mad at me. Maybe you have a right to be. I only—"

"Daddy. Can I be by myself?"

So I let her be. Forty-five minutes later, her mother came and took her away.

Nine years ago.

Di-di-di-dah-dah-dah-di-di-dit.

Far out on the horizon, oblivious to the towering thunderclouds that had materialized out of nowhere within the past fifteen minutes, the evening's first cargo freighter lumbered into view, long and heavy and dumb as a sauropod. Even in hotter summers, these were the boats I saw most often from my tower. As the shallowest of the Great Lakes, and therefore the most volatile, Erie generally intimidated all but the stupidest Sunday sailors. And that summer, thanks mostly to the series of storms that had seemed particularly sudden and violent even for Erie, the Catamaraners had clung to the shore.

But not the one on my radio, apparently. I don't know why I assumed it was a pleasure craft, maybe because it was still using the S.O.S.

This night, though, a little after nine, the thunderclouds broke apart as silently as they'd formed without unleashing a single drop of rain. I watched the last brown wisps of them drift to the east like factory smoke. A few minutes after the sky cleared, the S.O.S. on my short-wave shut down with a shriek. Possibly, the Coast Guard had reached the craft, rescued the people on board, turned off the signal. Or else the lake had found a way in, claiming ship, people, and radio in one black gulp.

Or maybe it meant neither of those things. For all I knew, tonight's signal had originated in Scandinavia or the Indian Ocean, and it could have been decades old. The short-wave bands are full of signals forgotten and left transmitting, like the numbers stations ostensibly set up during the Cold War, still bleating their coded words of comfort or urgent warning to no one. Whole nights, those years, as my only significant social venture crumbled to nothing and my daughter built her new life somewhere over the ocean, I'd sat in the MILAC light tower just the way I was now, listening to other people's messages I could never fully translate, all that meaningless noise echoing forever around the vast but finite boundaries of the world like loon call over a lake.



HELLNOTES.COM

THE EVOLUTION OF HELLNOTES
CONTINUES

- AUTHOR NEWS
- ARTICLES
- BOOK REVIEWS
- HORROR NEWS
- INTERVIEWS
- MORE
- AND IT'S FREE!

[HTTP://WWW.HELLNOTES.COM](http://www.hellnotes.com)

Feature Review

American Morons

reviewed by Rick Kleffel

American Morons
Glen Hirshberg
Earthling Books
US Trade hardcover First Edition
ISBN 0-976-63398-1
Publication Date: September, 2006
212 Pages; \$30

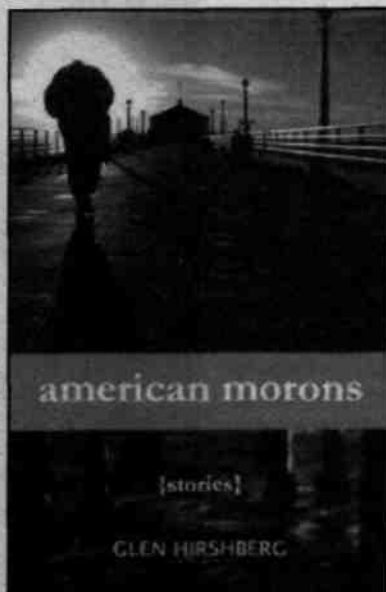
WE LIKE TO THINK of ghosts as ethereal remnants of the dead, as see-through versions of once-solid characters. As difficult to photograph in reality, as they are easy to dismiss, ghosts at best might sing to our souls in the keys of remembrance, of grief. As a literary device there is power in this form of ghosts. Writers have resurrected them with sturdy reliability from the time humans first thought to write through to our flying-car-less future.

But our future is not without its own sorts of ghosts. Not the by-now expected ghosts in the machine, but the real ghosts that have haunted us through the ages, the ghosts that the visible dead have been fronting for all this time. In truth, most of us would love to see a ghost, or to be able to truly claim that we were haunted by the spirits of the dead. Oh, we're haunted all right, but not by the dead. It is our own mistakes that haunt us and those around us, the bad choices that fester in the shadows.

Writer Glen Hirshberg understands those shadows intimately and explores them well in his latest collection of stories, *American Morons*. Though he's found his route to publication in the world of genre fiction, there's not a story in here that wouldn't sit as comfortably in the pages of *The New Yorker* as in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. *American Morons* is a finely crafted collection of gut-wrenchingly bad decisions, judgment calls gone horribly wrong and finely sliced errors in evaluation. There is terror here, and there are vibes so bad they can't be confined

to ordinary experience. But *American Morons* is an excellent demonstration of just how ordinary the extra-ordinary has become.

The title story starts as the rental car driven by two American tourists in an all-too-gritty part of Italy stops. Yes, it's Kellen's fault, and he feels bad. Worse, he feels impotent, unable to fix the problem, unable to protect Jamie, his girlfriend, and unable even to communicate clearly with the threateningly helpful but overly hairy men who arrive to lend a hand. Hirshberg evokes the post-millennial, post-9/11, post-Iraq war unease of Americans abroad with spectacular but understated ease. His unresolved resolution perfectly portrays a deer-in-the-headlights young man realizing just how big our small world is and how small any individual can be, how small any individual can feel. In the depths of time-lost ancient Europe, how can a stranded American feel like anything other than a helpless infant?



"Like a Lily in the Flood" immerses the reader and Nagle, a man with just a little too much time on his hands, in our own secret history, in his own secret history, where lost is just a beginning. Staying at a remote country house, Nagle lets himself be inveigled into listening to his hostess tell the story of the Millerites, an actual nineteenth century sect that was certain not only that the world would end, but that the date would be April 3, 1843. Hirshberg's tale hypnotically unfolds, enveloping the reader and the characters in deep time and distant familial connections. Of course, the care comes when Hirshberg telescopes through time with a flip of his prose lens. It's an impressive if depressing performance.

"Flowers in Their Bridles, Hooves in the Air" and "Safety Clowns" find their haunting moments in a carefully evoked Southern California landscape. The former story sneaks down to a rotting bit of Long Beach, to the pier that seems to exist in very beach town up and down every coast in the world. There's a wonderful moment of Richard Laymon-esque viciousness here, the kind of filthy detail where the surreal and the supernatural sleep together but wake up in a nightmare. Hirshberg sets his tale of urban decay against a tense triangular relationship, with unresolved affection that slides easily into anger. He's a master of these character-oriented details, and he uses them to make his stories even more unsettling than the settings.

"Safety Clowns" is a job-from-hell story, and not a literal job from hell. The devil we know proves to be much worse than the devil we see in the movies. Instead, Hirshberg informs his work with a very weird and disjunctive combination of jovial joy tainted by scurrilously scummy behavior. He also cranks out a fascinating tale of crime

fiction with a twist that verges on the supernatural, but doesn't exactly get there. Where it does end up is difficult to say, even though the pictures that Hirshberg paints are startlingly, vividly clear.

You won't get far into "Devil's Smile" before Hirshberg paints for you in prose a picture of startlingly surreal beauty. Set on the east coast, in another rotting seaside town, this time in the nineteenth century, Hirshberg's story starts as Selkirk comes to de-commission a lighthouse. What he finds within is beyond all imagination except Hirshberg's. What's notable here is that though the story has some aspects of the supernatural, the most awesome scenes, and they will indeed cause readers' jaws to drop, are those that simply collect bits of our world and rebuild it into something morbidly beautiful.

"Transitway" returns to Southern California with an epigram from noted non-fiction writer Mike Davis. Davis, whose work *Ecology of Fear* used Los Angeles as an example of how urban planning is designed to induce fear into those unfortunate enough to live

within the borders of the modern urban landscape, would surely be proud of Hirshberg's portrait. The sameness of the smoggy days, the undiluted, street-by-street procession of shops, houses and lives wasted one day at a time are brought to life-in-death by Hirshberg's airless prose. It's an interesting technique and an indication of Hirshberg's skill as a writer that he can go from the big-screen, storm-swept historical settings of "Devil's Smile" to the claustrophobic confines of public transportation, and find the same worm wriggling into the hearts of men.

The final story in the collection, "The Muldoon," takes a look at a complex family story, pulling apart and putting together a tale told over generations. There's a deep sweetness here that contrasts with some of the darker moments that have preceded it, but it is a sweetness fought for with vigor and skill, a sweetness earned and not dictated. This is not to say that there are no shadows here. There are shadows everywhere, and Hirshberg is not one to ignore the shadows. Indeed, he explores them throughout this collection and

while he never shines a light, he does manage to define the darkness.

Hirshberg's *American Morons* is a perfect example of the power and range of what can be called either literary fiction or horror fiction, depending on where you find it. These stories are not ever gory stories of straightforward revenge. There's little violence and if the supernatural elements emerge at all, they do so slyly, in the background. This is not *Tales from the Crypt*-style horror fiction. It draws on the heritage of Shirley Jackson and Edgar Allen Poe, or Ramsey Campbell and Herman Melville. *American Morons* is nothing less than the constantly sorry state of the world we must live in, of the lives we must lead, wrought in beautiful prose with a twisted sense of the imagination. You may have many regrets in your life. You have haunted yourself well, Hirshberg tells us. Here's a mistake you can avoid. Buy and read *American Morons*. Or live with the potential for remembering this moment, *now*, in an unimaginable but probably less pleasant future.

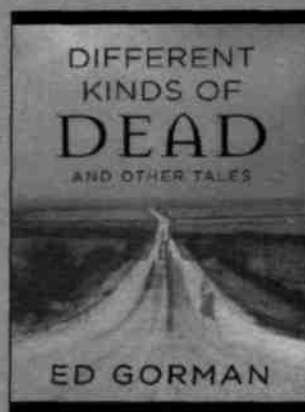


"These pieces span more than 25 years of superb story-telling."

—*Library Journal*

DIFFERENT KINDS OF DEAD AND OTHER TALES

by Ed Gorman



"Best known for his crime fiction, Shamus-winner Ed Gorman shows he can also spin a strong suspense story with a horror or SF edge in *Different Kinds of Dead and Other Tales*."

—*Publisher's Weekly*

ISBN: 1594142130
July 2005, \$25.95



"All of these stories are edgy and gritty...a must read for fans of this author, and for those who like smartly written books with twists and turns."

—*Romance Reviews Today*

"These tales will rivet and terrify...Gorman's is the grizzled, hard-shelled voice of a certain kind of writer, a writer who delves so far into male experience that he unearths the tremulous core of fear and need at the center of the masculine psyche."

—*Edge Boston*

Got Worms?

From Brian Keene and Leisure Books
THE CONQUEROR WORMS

(Paperback, \$6.99, ISBN 0843954167)

One day the rain just didn't stop. As the flood waters slowly rose and coastal cities and towns disappeared, some people believed it was the end of the world. Maybe they were right. But the water wasn't the worst part. Even more terrifying was what the soaking rains drove up from beneath the earth — unimaginable creatures, writhing, burrowing... and devouring all in their path. What hope does an already-devastated mankind have against... The Conqueror Worms.

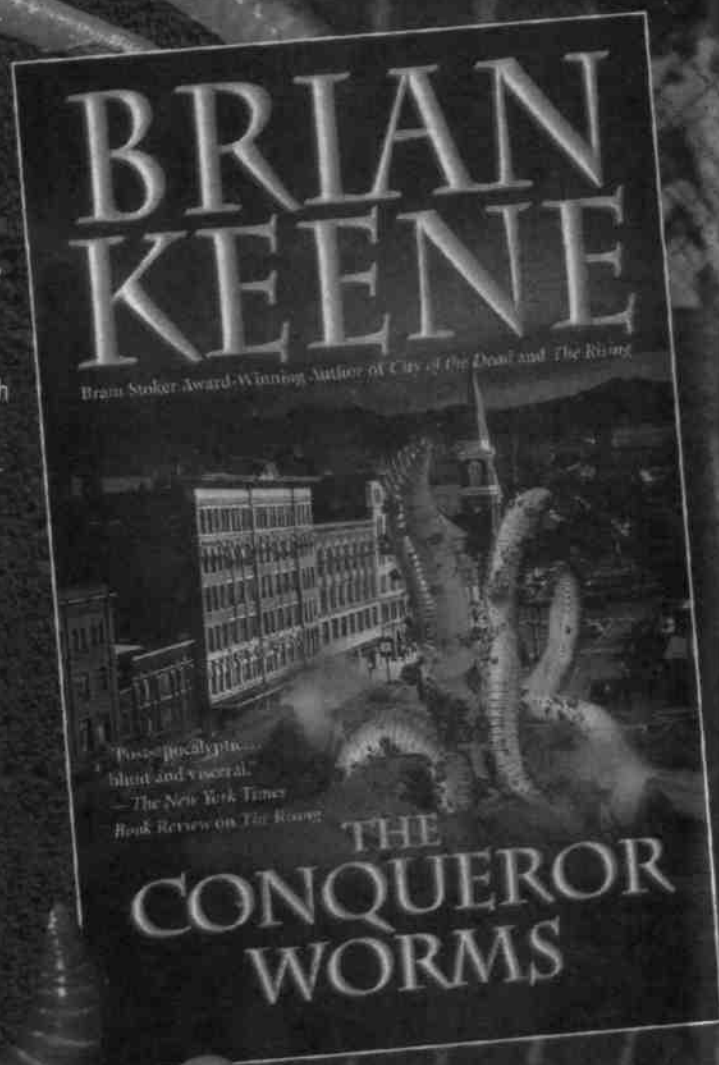
"*The Conqueror Worms* is a classic monster-pulp novel with plenty of outrageous happenings and wild and intense action. Forget Stephen King, we've got Brian Keene now. Exactly the voice the horror genre needs; no-frills, fast-paced entertainment."

— *Insidious Reflections*

"Tremors meets Waterworld... As a nod to Lovecraftian lore, this works beautifully... A great read!"

— *Horror Web*

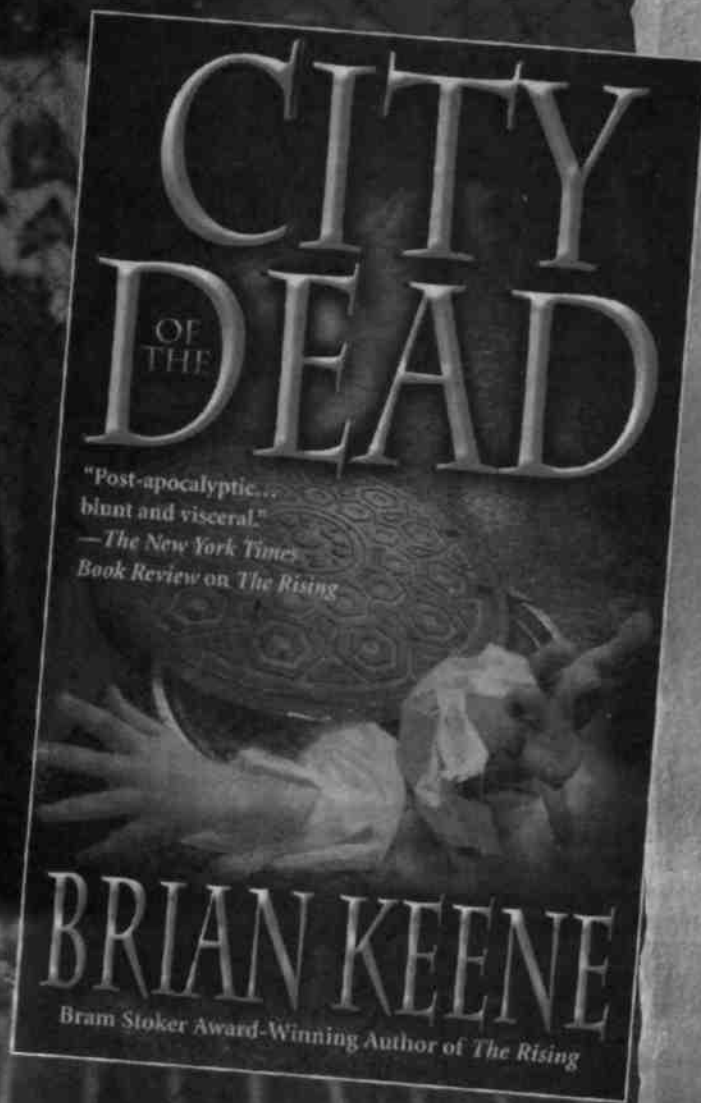
AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD



BRIAN KEENE is the two-time Bram Stoker Award winning author of several novels and short story collections, including *The Rising*, *City of the Dead*, and *Terminal*. His work has appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines, and several of his novels and short stories have been optioned for film.

Find out more about Brian Keene and his work at www.briankeene.com





From Brian Keene and Leisure Books

CITY OF THE DEAD

(Paperback, \$6.99, ISBN 0843954159)

This long-awaited sequel to last year's most talked about horror novel, *The Rising*, immediately raises the stakes – and the horror.

Welcome to New York City – population eight million zombies. Trapped inside a fortified skyscraper, humanity makes its last stand against an unstoppable and undying enemy. The terror mounts with every page as they face overwhelming odds and dwindling numbers.

Welcome to...the *City of the Dead*.

Here's what critics had to say about last year's *The Rising*:

"*The Rising* is more terrifying than anything currently on the shelf or screen." — Rue Morgue

"*The Rising* is an absolutely kick-ass, mega-page turning zombie reinvention novel. Flamboyantly violent, action-packed, and verbally straight-up on delivering the goods."

— John Skipp

"An apocalyptic epic packed with violence, gore, scares and moral dilemmas. Brian Keene has given zombies their next upgrade. *The Rising* signals the arrival of a major new horror novelist." — Cemetery Dance

"Brian Keene has raised the living dead to a profound new level. A prodigious talent — *The Rising* takes a bite from beginning to end and you're hooked!" — Ken Foree, Star of Dawn of the Dead

"*The Rising* is chock full of gore and violence...an apocalyptic epic."

— Fangoria

AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD



And don't miss Brian Keene's *THE RUTTING SEASON*, available in trade paperback now:

www.bloodlettingbooks.com



BEV VINCENT

FROM THE DEAD ZONE

I'M NOT FOND of making top ten lists. The notion paralyzes my mind. If the selection pool is small—a set of books by a particular author—I might be able to pick my five or ten favorites, but to rank them in this-is-better-than-that-but-not-quite-as-good-as-the-other order defies me. What is my favorite film? I don't even know where to start. With a gun to my head, I might say *The Maltese Falcon* just to end the misery, but is that true? Probably not.

People frequently ask what my favorite Stephen King book or story is. Paralysis sets in. Sometimes the enjoyment of a book is inextricably woven with the experience of reading it. I'll always have a fond spot for *Salem's Lot*, because it was the first. It's an incredible book, I read it during a memorable time in my life, and it launched me on a voyage of discovery. However, I also have a strong affinity for *Bag of Bones*, the first book I read in manuscript. I consider it one of King's best novels, but the reading experience was also unique, comparable to the way I experienced the final three Dark Tower books for the first time.

All this is preamble, a lead-up to discussing a novel I consider to be among King's best. Top five for sure. Top three perhaps.

By the time you read this, *Lisey's Story* should be in bookstore storage rooms awaiting its October 24 launch date. If you read my last column, you won't be surprised to hear me say I wasn't overly fond of *Cell*. It was okay, but I had issues with the book's heavy

reliance on pseudo-technological explanation for what happened.

However, ever since I read the first excerpt of *Lisey's Story* last year, I've had a good feeling about this book. "Lisey and the Madman" was a tantalizing sip. If you liked *Bag of Bones*, you're going to love this one. One is the mirror image of the other, the yin and yang of creativity and marriage. Both are horror stories, but they're also love stories. Tales that examine the intimacy of marriage represented by a particular language understood only by the partners in that relationship.

John Irving described the book as a love story with monsters, some human, some not. That sums it up as well as I could. Lisey Landon's husband, Scott, a famous and esteemed novelist (National Book Award and Pulitzer winner), died two years ago after twenty-five years of marriage. She's just now getting around to delving into his literary remains—books, magazines, manuscripts, computer files, and ephemera. The task is more difficult than she anticipated; her progress is slow. She has difficult decisions: what to keep, what to store, what to destroy and what to donate—and to whom.

She's getting pressure from an impatient group she calls "the Incuncks," derived from the word "incunabula," which describes books from the 15th century, the infancy of printing, but which Lisey uses as a synonym for "memorabilia." Collectors—some very determined—are drooling at the chance to get their hands on Scott's leftovers.

Though the Landons' marriage was, on the whole, a happy one, like any relationship it had rocky periods. Times when Scott's drinking got out of hand. When his writing wasn't going well. When Lisey's four sisters—Cantata, Jodotha, Darla, and unstable Amanda—added to their stress.

The time Scott was shot while in Tennessee appearing at a groundbreaking ceremony for a campus library.

Forgetting is a skill Lisey refined during her marriage. When she opens the door to the past, she realizes that she has draped a veil over certain early memories. It becomes her task to peek beneath the curtain, to go on a *bool* to rediscover fundamental things about the man she loved, a process reminiscent of the one Jack Sawyer undergoes in *Black House* when his memories of the Territories re-emerge. The comparison is apt, for though *Lisey's Story* has been described as a Dark Tower book, it seems more like a Talisman novel. *Boo'ya Moon* and the Territories, if not identical, are in the same neighborhood.

In the present, Lisey has to deal with her house-cleansing tasks, a dangerous man on a relentless mission (who, like Ted from "Secret Window, Secret Garden," is from Shooter's Knob, Tennessee) and Amanda's deteriorating mental condition (at her worst, after her ex-lover returns to town married to someone else, she descends into catatonia).

Then there's the past, which Lisey must get at by unpeeling layers, like an onion, and by digging into her memo-

ries. The shovel that graces the cover (filled with hollyhocks) represents her archaeological dig, as well as depicting a literal shovel, made of silver, that plays a pivotal part in the tale at several points.

Along the way there are scary creatures aplenty—the long boy with the endless piebald side, for example, that Scott threatens to call with a chattering, sucking sound while his life's blood seeps from his body under the hot Tennessee sun. The bad gunky that occasionally takes hold of members of the Landon family. The laughing creatures of Boo'ya Moon. The real-life monster who maims Lisey with a bottle opener.

I look forward to rereading this book to see how King's clever foreshadowing works when I know how everything will play out. The truth behind Scott's childhood, and the reason why Landons heal quickly—much of which he told Lisey Debusher before they were married and which they never discussed again—is revealed a little at a time. Even in cases where the general facts are known (like what happened to Scott's father), when the details finally appear on the page, read by Lisey in the shadow of the Story Tree, there's little in King's fiction that compares for sheer visceral impact.

But the book is full of love. The sometimes dysfunctional love between a group of sisters who irritate each other but who would drop anything to rush to the aid of another, which is fertile ground for a book in itself. The complicated love Scott felt for his father, even though it was a miracle he survived his childhood. And, foremost, the long term fidelity and dedication Scott and Lisey had toward each other that got them through the difficult times and helped them enjoy the good ones.

The dust jacket copy concludes, "What begins as a widow's effort to sort through the papers of her celebrated husband becomes a nearly fatal journey into the darkness he inhabited. Perhaps King's most personal and powerful novel ever, *Lisey's Story* is about the wellsprings of creativity, the temptations of madness, and the secret language of love."

Michael Chabon says, "King makes bold, brilliant use of his satanic storytelling gift, his angelic ear for language, and above all his incomparable ability



to find the epic in the ordinary, to present us with the bloody and fabulous tale of an ordinary marriage. In his hands the long, passionate union of Scott and Lisey Landon—of any long-lived marriage, by implication—becomes a fantastic kingdom, with its own geography and language, its dark and stirring chronicle of heroes and monsters, its tragedies, griefs and glories. King has been getting me to look at the world with terror and wonder since I was fifteen years old, and I have never been more persuaded than by this book of his greatness."

Nicholas Sparks says, "*Lisey's Story* is a wondrous novel of marriage, a love story steeped in strength and tenderness, and cast with the most vivid, touching and believable characters in recent literature. I came to adore Lisey Landon and her sisters, I ached for Scott and all he'd been through, and when I finally reached the bittersweet and heartfelt conclusion, my first thought was that I wanted to start over again from the beginning, for it felt as if I were saying good-bye to old friends. This is Stephen King at his finest and most generous, a dazzling novel that you'll thank yourself for reading long after the final page is turned."

The book's cover is a departure. Bold red background with King's name in a large sans-serif white font at the top and the title in yellow at the bottom. In between, the stylized spade that looks psychedelic at first glance that, upon closer inspection, you realize is filled with flowers. To the right, the simple statement: A NOVEL.

A generous number of galleys were distributed, starting in May, over five months before publication. After restricting the distribution of ARCs for recent novels to avoid having them show up on the pre-publication black market, Scribner tried a different approach this time. The cover superimposes a letter from publisher Susan Moldow on large gray letters that read NOT FOR SALE. The letter asks reviewers to share the galley with a friend or donate it to a charitable institution (library, school or hospital) "if the volume of galleys you receive is so overwhelming that you must recycle." Of course, this was promptly disregarded, and the first ARC showed up on eBay during the opening days of May.

King will have a signing in New York around the book's publication date, followed by stops in San Francisco (10/30), the Literary Lecture Series in Seattle (11/1) and Portland, Oregon (11/2). He also has several events planned for a UK tour in early November. Check NewsFromTheDeadZone.com for the latest information.



The airdate for *DESPERATION* was pushed back to May 23rd, where it went head-to-head with *American Idol*. Garris told Fangoria magazine: "Apparently, the feedback [ABC] has been getting is overwhelmingly positive, and Tuesday seems to be a better day for the film."

I watched the movie in March, and again just prior to completing this column. Boy, did Garris ever nail this one. My teenage daughter put down the book she was reading (*The Da Vinci Code*) and ignored several phone calls from friends on a Saturday night once she got caught up in the story, which is as good a testament to the film as any I can imagine. It will be interesting to see how the general public receives it, because it doesn't shy away from the religious debate of the novel: David Carver's unflinching faith and Johnny Marinville's lack thereof.

The movie's star is Tom Skerritt as Johnny. A terrific performance. My favorite line: "Norman Mailer burned my ass in the *New York Times*—what more could a man ask for?" The rest of the cast is decent: Charles Durning as the town drunk is another notable. Steven Weber gets better as the movie

progresses, Kelly Overton makes a good Cynthia Smith though she doesn't match my visualization of the character, and Ron Perlman is a hoot as Collie Entragian, vacillating between manic lucidity and insanity. Camera angles accentuate his size and distort his face to good effect. Matt Frewer is uncharacteristically restrained as David's father. David's mother is bitchy and strident and I wasn't sorry when things didn't work out so well for her.

The film doesn't flinch from violence, either. There are shocking scenes and gross-out moments the likes of which I've never seen on broadcast TV. Faces torn to shreds, arms ripped off. Pencils sticking out of eyes. One question: Why did blood come out of the slot machine? Residual effects for the can taks? The scene where Steve and Cynthia encounter the stone carvings is particularly well done. Commercials abound of course, which might dilute the impact (my screener marked them with brief blank gaps), but hold on for a heckuva ride. The fact that it's all on one night should help fend off viewer attrition, not that I expect that to be a problem.

The only review I've seen so far comes from the *San Antonio Express News*. Their bottom line: "The movie has a little of everything: heart, spirituality, incredibly crafted flashback sequences, wonderful acting and shiver-under-the-covers shocks, a combo that should get ABC big audience numbers."

Ron Perlman told *SCI FI Wire* that his character "commits some very, very gruesome acts that are very cold-blooded, very sudden and very unpredictable, and they're without compunction, which is really the scariest part of it all. There's no censoring. There's no value judgment to this guy's bloodlust. And he's smart. Because he's a Stephen King character, his turn of a phrase and his theatrical point of view is really, really smart. So there's an added



perverseness to all of it that makes it incredibly compelling to watch."

Three weeks before its broadcast, the movie had an exclusive prescreening in Tucson, where it filmed in 2004. Several cast and production members got a red-carpet welcome, including Garris, producer Mark Sennet and actors Weber, Annabeth Gish and Perlman. Locals, including the Bisbee mayor, who were extras in the film, were also expected to attend.

The DVD release from Lion's Gate was set for the end of August.



I lied last time. Twice. I said the TNT series *Nightmares & Dreamscapes: From The Stories Of Stephen King* would debut in June with a one-hour episode per week for eight weeks. In truth, it debuted in July with two one-hour episodes each week for a month. Sorry! The series will run without commercial interruptions, relying instead on product placement and on-air promotions.

I was hoping to screen at least one episode for this issue, but I didn't get advanced copies in time. From the trailer posted at the TNT web site (see the online column for a link), this looks like a classy, well-produced series. Here is the available episode information:

1. "Umney's Last Case," directed by Rob Bowman from a teleplay by April Smith. Starring: William H. Macy and Jacqueline McKenzie.

2. "You Know They Got a Hell of a Band," directed and written by Mike

Robe. Starring: Kim Delaney and Steven Weber.

3. "The End of the Whole Mess," directed by Mikael Salomon (TNT's *SALEM'S LOT*) from a teleplay by Lawrence D. Cohen (*CARRIE*, *STEPHEN KING'S It*). Starring Ron Livingston and Henry Thomas.

4. "The Fifth Quarter," directed by Rob Bowman from a teleplay by Alan Sharp (*ROB ROY*, *REVERSIBLE ERRORS*). Starring Jeremy Sisto and

Samantha Mathis.

5. "The Road Virus Heads North," directed by Sergio Mimica-Gezzan from a teleplay by Peter Filardi (*SALEM'S LOT*). Starring Tom Berenger and Marsha Mason.

6. "Battleground," directed by Brian Henson from a teleplay by Richard Christian Matheson. Starring William Hurt.

7. "Crouch End," directed by Mark Haber from a teleplay by Kim LeMasters. Starring Eion Bailey and Claire Forlani.

8. "Autopsy Room Four," directed by Salomon from a teleplay by April Smith. Starring Richard Thomas and Greta Scacchi.



Cell had a decent run on the best-seller list, debuting at number one and sticking around for several months. In mid-March it was in the top five and in early April it was still in the top ten. As of this writing, it is #32 on the *New York Times* list.

Rene Rodriguez (*Miami Herald*) says, "King sets up the nightmarish scenario so quickly and deftly, the reader doesn't have time to stop and ponder how ridiculous it all is" but echoes my thoughts about the book's final third. "The risible aspects of the story take over, and the plot becomes mired in dull, explanatory exposition." David L. Ulin (*NY Times*) wonders if the book stumbles "because its intent

remains unclear." Dorman T. Shindler (*Seattle Times*) says *Cell* is one of the first novels "to truly capture the tenor, at least so far, of the 21st century." Though not generally positive about the book, Dave Itzkoff (*NY Times*) says, "When King sets his own id loose on the page, the results can be as startling as any of the intentionally scary moments." Carol Memmott (*USA Today*) says the book is "a soothing balm to the world's technophobes and a disturbing send-up of what the world can be reduced to in an 'us against them' situation."

King took umbrage at the latter. "It wounds me to be called a technophobe," he said in a statement sent to the *Times*—as if to prove his point—via e-mail. However, the *Times* reporter commented on how the excerpt from *Lisey's Story* in *Cell* "is written by Mr. King in longhand. With a quill, no doubt."

Love Monkey author Kyle Smith (*Wall Street Journal*) calls *Cell* "a 200-page plot lost inside a 350-page calling area." Jeff Guinn (*Star-Telegram*) says, "King has no peers when it comes to wry cultural commentary, and *Cell* is loaded with it."

King responded to numerous queries posted on his message board about what happened after the ending. "Based on the information given in the final third of *Cell*—I'm thinking about the reversion back toward the norm of the later phone crazies—it seems pretty obvious to me that things turned out well for Clay's son, Johnny. I don't need to tell you this, do I?"

An article in the *Boston Globe* discussed King's depiction of greater Boston. "Stephen King has fond memories of Malden. He's showing his affection by unleashing a horde of zombies on Salem Street. It's kind of touching, really." King explained that his aunt lived on Salem Street, where Tom McCourt lives in the novel. He originally planned to set the book in New York but relocated the opening sections to the Boston area after he and Stewart O'Nan spent so much time in the city while following the Red Sox championship season.



"No matter where you set these things, somebody will point out the geographic errors, unless you've lived there your whole life," King said. "So I just put this thing in saying that I take liberties." He gets dozens of letters and e-mails per book complaining about geographic issues, which was another reason he decided to avoid New York as a setting. "New York people are real geography snobs. They make Boston people look laid-back when it comes to that."

In a letter to the *Boston Globe*, Kathleen Boczenowski says, "Who is going to have the heart to inform Mr. King that the neighborhood he fondly remembers was bulldozed in January to build a 770-unit condo development?"

King took part in a lengthy POD-cast interview where he described the genesis of *Cell* and was the first guest on a 12-episode webcast series called "Amazon Fishbowl With Bill Maher." King recorded his interview at the Sundance Film Festival in January. After the series launch in June, the free webcasts will be available for on-demand viewing anytime, though they can't be downloaded.



HOSTEL director Eli Roth will direct the movie version of *CELL* for Dimension Films. Roth wants to write or co-write the script, depending on the time constraints created by work on the *HOSTEL* sequel.

Roth called King his favorite writer. "I couldn't put it down. It was such a balls-out horror movie with a smart take on the zombie genre...I love zombie movies and I love horror

movies that have some level of social commentary in them. When you read that book, you feel that Stephen King has been driven crazy by people on cell phones. I think it's such a smart contemporary idea to have everyone on cell phones turn into psychotic serial killers. I've always wanted to do an apocalypse movie, a zombie movie and a Stephen King movie." He's sees the project as a big-budget, apocalyptic zombie movie "in the spirit of the *DAWN OF THE DEAD* remake."

In another interview, he says, "The great thing about collaborating with Stephen King is once you're doing his movie that's it. He's pretty cool about people adapting his work and not getting too precious over it. He really liked *HOSTEL* and approved of me. I'd love to put him in as a cameo if he's available for it. There's certainly room for it, but he'd have to get killed in some horrible way."

Roth said he plans to bring his own peculiar sensibility to the material. "Well, there's going to be a little bit of violence. There's going to be some blood. I want to make it really, really, really sick. Just full-on sick. But I also want to try to make it a worldwide event. I really want to see people going crazy all over the world and just see the end of civilization."

"Everybody has told me to just go make the best movie and that if I have to change things, Stephen will be cool with it. Otherwise, I wouldn't have done it. I don't want to upset Stephen King—I want to make him proud—but I've got to have the freedom to change things if I'm going to make the movie."

Production is not expected to begin until 2007 at the earliest.



King was a guest of Dennis Lehane at the Writers in Paradise at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg in January. King told the packed auditorium he's nearly ready to set a novel in Florida. "You have to get a little bit of texture for a place," he said. "We've been down here now spending about half the year

since 1998. I think I have an idea for a book."

He started the evening by reading a new 7500-word story titled "Willa" that tells of a couple on their way to San Francisco by train to be married. While waiting for their connection at a station in Wyoming, Willa disappears. Her fiancé tracks her across bleak terrain to a roadhouse bar. During the Q & A session that followed, he told one audience member, "We all face evil on a daily basis. That's my understanding of how life works. None of us escape it unscathed, and none of us escape it alive."

He test-drove another new story called "Memory" at Florida State University while appearing as a last-minute replacement for Richard Russo, who had to cancel because of a family medical crisis. The story was inspired by his 1999 accident. "I had seven minutes permanently burned out of my memory," he said. "I did get one back of the guy coming over the hill heading toward me. It's like a coral islet in the sea." In "Memory," the first-person narrator is a wealthy building contractor who is almost crushed to death when he's run over by a construction crane on a job site. He grapples with regaining speech, thoughts of suicide, deep hatred for a Reba McEntire song, and exactly what he may have done to his wife while recovering from his coma.

Prior to the public appearance, he gave an informal master class to graduate students from FSU's film school to discuss "adventures in the screen trade" and field questions about his novels. "I don't think my books would've have been as successful as they are if the readers didn't think they were in the hands of a true crazy person," he said. "When I start a story, I don't know where it's going."

He also sat down with Mike Hinson of the *Tallahassee Democrat* for an interview. For those who think that he doesn't get editorial advice any more he said, "My next book (*Lisey's Story*) came back to me with more markings on it than my French essays in college," a sentiment he echoes in the book's Author's Statement.

He told Hinson that his *Entertainment Weekly* gig isn't as easy as it looks. "The only column they ever bounced was one I wrote about the whole Tom Cruise-Scientology thing a little while

back. No one really knows what Scientology is, so I decided to explain it for people. It's no crazier than Mormonism or several other religions I could name. It turned out that there's been a running lawsuit between L. Ron Hubbard and Time Warner, the company that owns the magazine, since 1992. I didn't know that but the lawyers sure did." Though EW expected him to quit over the issue, he didn't. "I just did a different column. In fact, I think it was the one I did about waiting in movie lines and it turned out to be one of my most popular columns. So, a little ego deflation is not a bad thing."



Secretary of Dreams, the graphic short story collection illustrated by Glenn Chadbourne, has received final design approval from King and is with the printer. By the time you read this, it may have rolled off the production line.

In an interview with *Fangoria*, Rich Chizmar discussed the project's genesis. He and Glenn were talking on the phone one day when the idea of a graphic collection of King stories arose. Both he and Glenn sent short proposals to King's office, along with samples of Glenn's art that got King excited. Within a month they had the green light to proceed with the project. "I was drinking a cup of coffee at the time, and I launched a little spray of Maxwell House on my desk in shock!" Glenn recalls.

King was involved from the start, participating in the story selection and book title, but once the work started, he let Glenn "do his thing." The initial concept was a dozen stories, but as the size of the project became clear, the decision was made to split the book into two volumes, each featuring six tales. "[King] just listed down what [stories] he wanted to see drawn and let me go for it. I had carte blanche to come up with the best vision I could imagine for each story."

Glenn reread each story then worked on pencil sketches to establish the look of each character. Once satisfied with those, he drew out all the pages, leaving space for the word panels to be added when he was finished. He conceptualized the stories in moviemaking terms, like storyboards

for a film. The first volume took nearly two years to complete. Each page of story text translated into five or six pages of drawings.

Glenn is currently hard at work on the illustrations for the second volume, the contents of which are secret at present. Copies of the gift edition of Volume 1 are still available.



Peter David will script the first seven issues of the Marvel Dark Tower graphic novels. The series launches in February with an adaptation of the Mejis backstory from *Wizard and Glass*. The comics will work in conjunction with the novels, further supplementing and defining the saga's mythology under King's direction. David has written *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5* novels. As a comic book scripter, he is best known for a long run on *The Incredible Hulk*.

King's research assistant Robin Furth is writing storylines based on tales created by King. They will then be illustrated by Eisner-award winning artist Jae Lee, colored by Richard Isanova and finally scripted by David. Subsequent comics (there will be thirty in all) cover the period between Roland leaving Hambry and the fall of Gilead.

In consultation with King, Furth is developing Mid-World legends—the origin of the Wizard's Rainbow, for example—and is mapping the baronies of Mejis and New Canaan. She is also converting her *Dark Tower Concordance* into a single volume, which will be published in trade paperback this fall by Scribner and in limited edition by Cemetery Dance Publications.

Zone Notes

Mikael Hafstrom started shooting an adaptation of 1408 this summer. John Cusack stars as Mike Enslin, author of a best-selling series of books with titles like *Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Castles*, who checks into the Dolphin Hotel in Manhattan to investigate reports of paranormal occurrences. Samuel L. Jackson plays Olin, the hotel manager. Matt Greenberg wrote the original script and Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski did the rewrite.

"The Things They Left Behind" from *Transgressions* was nominated for a Bram Stoker Award. Winners were

FIRST IN A YEARLY SERIES CHIMERA: AN ANTHOLOGY OF ESSAYS, FICTION AND ART

Centipede Press
2565 Teller Court
Lakewood, Colorado 80214

www.centipedeprpress.com

Numbered, 500 copies. Dave Curtis and J.K. Potter on **James Turner** and his years at **Arkham House**; 30 page retrospective of art by the late **John Stewart**, in black and white and full color; 20 page, full color retrospective of German psychedelic artist **Helmut Wenske**; Mark Tansey gallery; Stuart Galbraith on **War of the Gargantuas**; Andrew Britton on film noir classic **Detour**; Flannery O'Connor, Sigmund Freud, Max Ernst, Gustave Moreau, A. Colin Wright on **The Master & Margarita**; Michael Shea's "**The Autopsy**" in a unique typographical treatment; Patrick McGrath, Stuart David Schiff on **Whispers**, & more.

500 copy edition in slipcase: \$250 (\$275 outside the U.S.)

A signed, deluxe, leatherbound edition is also available.

Checks, money orders, PayPal accepted.
(Colorado residents add 4.6%)

See website at
www.centipedeprpress.com
for more payment information.

announced at the Stoker Weekend in New Jersey in June. As with *Legends*, the paperback edition of this anthology (released in late August) was split into multiple volumes. King's story is in Volume 2 along with "The Ransome Women" by John Farris.

The Complete Stephen King Universe: A Guide to the Worlds of Stephen King by Christopher Golden, Stanley Wiater, and Hank Wagner, was published at the end of May. This is an updated version of the book originally titled *The Stephen King Universe* that takes into account work up to *The Colorado Kid*.

Locus magazine announced that King will edit *The Best American Short Stories: 2007* for series editor Heidi Pitlor at Houghton Mifflin. Charnel House's Kev Quigley reported seeing King in the bookstore where he works. King told him he "needed to read like 300 short stories, with the panic that he'd be missing one."

King is writing an introduction for a new edition of *Dandelion Wine* due from PS Publishing in early 2007.

In February, King participated in a call-in show on *Voice of America*.

Many callers were nervous, and much of the hour was spent trying to extract lucid questions from the phoners. King indicated that he probably won't ever finish *The Plant* ("Never say never, he qualified"), there will be a third book in the *Talisman* series at some point and he fully expects there to be a *Dark Tower* feature, though not necessarily in his lifetime.

John Mellencamp reports that he and King are looking for a director for their musical *The Ghost Brothers of Darkland County*. "What we will do is take it to Chicago or the equivalent and workshop it—get the kinks out before we try to take it to Broadway," Mellencamp told the *Bloomington Herald-Times*. "Elton John opened his musical in San Francisco, and it lasted all of seven days before they closed it down and decided to rework it. When we hit Broadway, we want it ready from day one."

Outside the Zone

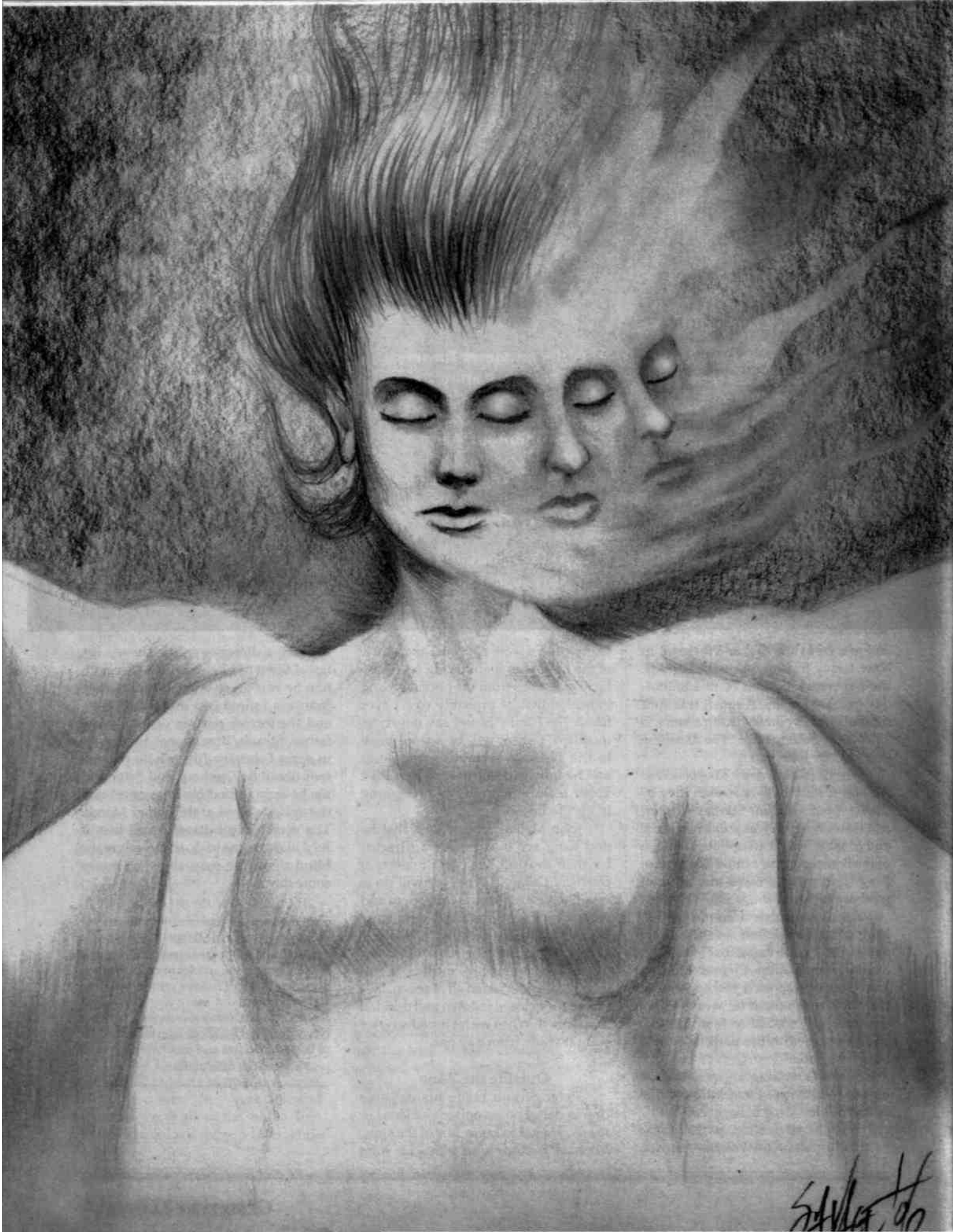
Peter Straub made his daytime drama debut on an episode of *One Life to Live*. He got to know one of the stars, Michael Easton, who plays Lt. John

McBain, a detective in the show's fictional town of Llanview, PA. Through him he was given a small part as Pete Braust, a retired cop in Atlantic City, and the former partner of John's late father. Straub/Braust shot his scenes in early February (the whole process took about half an hour and Peter told me he only fluffed his lines once) and the episode aired at the end of March. The director/producer asked him if he'd like to come back, so the enigmatic blind detective may show up again some day.

End Zone

Thanks to Mike Boczenowski and Charles Wilson for sending articles my way. See you next time, when I'll have critical response to *Desperation* and more about the TNT *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* series. Check out NewsFromTheDeadZone.com for a calendar of important dates and other current news, plus my contact information.





THE CUBIST'S ATTORNEY

Peter Atkins

PETER ATKINS is the author of the novels *Morningstar* and *Big Thunder* and the collection *Wishmaster and Others*. His fiction and non-fiction has appeared in *Fear*, *Weird Tales*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and several award-winning anthologies. For the screen, he wrote three of the *HELLRAISER* movies and *WISHMASTER* and has also written for television, comic-books, and the stage. This story—originally written for the 2005 tour of *The Rolling Darkness Revue*, of which he is a founding member along with Glen Hirshberg and Dennis Etchison—marks his first appearance in *Cemetery Dance* and he's delighted to be here.

Thing is, he hadn't even liked the guy. Only met him once. Fifteen years ago, and the little prick must have been over eighty then. He'd been one of the other guests at a soiree of Doug Gordon's and, even for Doug's crowd of narcissistic mediocrats, Gabriel Anzullar had seemed to be more than somewhat full of himself.

Demanding attention and delivering aphorisms that sounded not only rehearsed but dusty with long service, he'd monopolized several party conversations—which God knows were dull enough in the first place—with cobwebbed stories of his time in the sun. He'd been a minor painter in a time of giants and, his more talented and more famous colleagues having done him the kindness of dying before him, he could command center stage now simply because he'd survived them all. And that seemed to be a perfectly sufficient reason for many of the other guests at the party to hover around him adoringly. To spend time with him wasn't a brush with greatness exactly, but it was at least a brush with one who had brushed.

Jackson himself, spectacularly uninterested in Anzullar's tales of post-war Paris and nineteen-fifties New York, had exchanged maybe three sentences with the old man. Nothing significant—*Paté's good, huh? Yes, have you tried the squab?*, shit like that—and, after the third, Anzullar had turned to their hostess—Doug's third wife, the anorexic blonde—and asked her, as if teasing out some special secret, "And what does our young friend here do for a living?"

The wife—Margaret, was it? Some piss-elegant version of that anyway. Margaux, that was it—had paused for a second and looked at Jackson as if trying to remember. He took pity on her and answered for himself.

"I'm a lawyer," he said.

"Oh!" Anzullar said, "A lawyer."

He'd stressed the word into a ridiculous burlesque of a man overwhelmingly impressed. It was like Jackson had told him he was the guy who'd invented water or gravity or something.

"Do you have a card?" he'd asked as if both the possibility was slim and the audacity of the request breathtaking. Jackson had handed one over and then the tides of the party had taken them both elsewhere.

He hadn't thought about him at all in the decade and a half since then. Hadn't even read past the first paragraph of the *Times* obituary last week.

But now the widow had called and asked him in his capacity as her late husband's attorney to contact the heirs and read the will. Jackson's attempts to tell her that he'd never actually become Anzullar's lawyer were met with a somewhat offended directness. "Well, he gave me your card," she'd said, as if that was that.

And apparently it was, because Jackson had found himself agreeing to take receipt of the will. He wasn't sure exactly what had prompted his why-the-hell-not response. Maybe it was a slow day. Maybe he hadn't wished to upset a recently-bereaved woman, however pissy she was. Maybe he just figured it would make for a fine dinner-party story, one that needed the third act of the actual reading of the will to make its little drama complete. All he knew was that now, with the document actually lying on his desk in front of him, he wished he hadn't been so stupidly amenable. He took another quick glance at it.

Christ, he had to read this shit with a straight face?

It wasn't a will. Not in any sense other than the formal and the clumsy layman's attempt at legalese that opened it. It was more like Anzullar had decided to make this document his last work of art, albeit literary rather than pictorial. Perhaps he thought it was clever. Jackson begged to differ. It was precious and twee and would stand up to any legal challenge about as long as a hard-on in the proximity of a straight razor.

He glanced at his desk-clock.

Three twenty-nine.

The recipients of Anzullar's largesse would be here any moment. He hoped they were bringing their senses of humor.

As if prompted by his very thought of them, the beneficiaries entered his office and sat down. There were three of them and they were absolutely identical.

Jackson had met twins before and knew of course that triplets existed—but there was something really disturbing about staring across his desk at what appeared to be three editions of exactly the same person. It might conceivably have been less disconcerting if the person in question had been—what? An ugly middle-aged guy running to fat and losing his hair?—but what was sitting in triplicate in his room was a stunningly beautiful young woman.

They were the daughters, or so the widow—who was not herself named in the will and was thus not herself present—had told him. Jackson realized now, with a rush of reluctant admiration for the recently departed old bugger, that Anzullar must not only have scored himself quite the hot young chick for his second wife but also have managed to impregnate her sometime in his mid-seventies, because

these girls — girl? girl cubed? — couldn't have been more than twenty-one years old.

And gorgeous. Absolutely drop-dead gorgeous.

The three sisters each tipped their head a little to the side in a gesture of inquiry and gentle puzzlement and Jackson realized that he'd been staring at them for several seconds without saying a word.

Gathering his professionalism as best he could, he spoke up, his voice polite and clear and mercifully free of overt lust.

"Thank you all for coming," he said. "My sincere condolences for your loss. I'm Isaac Jackson."

"Chinchilla," said the first daughter.

"Diamante," said the second.

"Sam," said the third.

Hmm. Perhaps Anzullar's copy of *The Poseur's Guide to Naming One's Children* had been missing the entries for 'S'. Whatever. Jackson gave them all a respectable smile and then picked up their father's will.

A whole page was devoted to the single phrase *Clause the First* written in magenta ink by a spidery hand that was presumably the deceased's own. The following page contained said clause, and Jackson read it aloud just as if it had been written by someone less full of shit.

"To the worms of the earth and other agents of decay I leave all my worldly goods. May their desiccation, liquefaction, ossification, and putrefaction be found sportive to those with eyes to see."

Chinchilla gave a brief musical laugh.

Sam clapped her hands once in delight.

"Oh, Daddy," said Diamante, in that tone of disapproving affection that people use for their mischievous but beloved children or outrageous but adored friends.

Jackson felt an obligation to clarify things for them. "We can assume your father means to let his house and possessions stand and rot," he said. "While that may be his wish, it's certainly something you could seek to overturn on the grounds of —"

Chinchilla interrupted him. "You mean claim his house?" she said.

"His things?" said Sam. "I don't want them. Do you want them?" she asked her sisters.

"No," said Diamante, and Chinchilla shook her head.

"Alright," said Jackson. "I'll move on."

Clause the Second, equally cavalier in its generous waste of paper, was the first of the bequests to the girls.

"To my precious Diamante," Jackson read aloud, "I give the following observation. May she use it wisely.

"When the philosopher-poet Bob Marley said *Don't worry 'bout a t'ing. Every little t'ing's gwine be a'right*, do you honestly think he was lying?"

That was it. Jackson looked up apologetically at Diamante and was astonished to see that her eyes had misted with tears.

Sam reached her hand over and squeezed her sister's.

"I'm so happy for you," Chinchilla said, as Diamante nodded her thanks.

Jackson did his best to keep his face benignly blank as he looked at them. Jesus Christ. All three of them. Beautiful. Arousing. And as barking mad as their fucking father. He turned his attention back to the will.

"To my adored Sam," he read, "I leave the afternoon of September the seventh, Nineteen-sixty-three, as it appeared in New Brighton, England between the hours of two and five. I also grant her full custody of the adjectives *crepuscular* and *antediluvian*. I trust to her generosity of spirit that she will not unnecessarily withhold their fair usage by others."

Sam seemed as delighted by her inheritance as Diamante had been with hers, whispering her adjectives repeatedly under her breath as Jackson turned to Clause the Third.

"To my beloved Chinchilla, I bequeath the following air."

Jackson paused there. That single sentence at the top of the page was followed only by a hand-drawn musical staff which contained the notes of a melody spread out over eight measures. The rest of the page was blank.

"I'm afraid I can't read music," Jackson said, and held the page out uncertainly to Chinchilla. She took it eagerly and, holding it to her face, seemed to smell it. No, more than that, really. Seemed almost to breathe it in. After a moment, she held the loose leaf out so that her sisters could see.

"How generous!" said Sam, with a pleasure apparently untainted by envy.

"Do you...do you know the tune?" Jackson asked, feeling like an idiot.

Chinchilla nodded. "It's a melody from the Italian," she said. "The words tell of how Harlequin came to the shores of a great salt lake and burned the still-beating heart of his lost love."

There was a suitably impressed silence for a moment, which was broken by a braying snort from Diamante. "No it's not," she said. "It was written on Daddy's piano by that awful little man from Cedar Rapids. It was a jingle. For a *product*. Metamucil or something equally banal."

"Diamante, you are so fucking *literal*," Chinchilla said. "I'm not sure you're my sister at all. I'm really not."

Chinchilla laid the piece of paper back down on Jackson's desk and looked at him.

"Thank you for your time, Mister Jackson," she said. "Are we done here?"

Jackson hesitated for a second. "Um...No. Not quite. This is a little awkward." He glanced down at the final page of the will. "I'll just read the last Clause, shall I?"

"Please," said Sam, encouragingly.

Jackson cleared his throat. "To Isaac Jackson, for services rendered, I leave a gift which will be given to him at a time and place of my daughters' choosing."

The girls were silent for a moment. A look passed between Chinchilla and Sam, and then Chinchilla looked back at Jackson.

"Oh, yes. Yes," she said. "I know about that. I'll be in touch." Her mood seemed to have been ruined a little by her earlier disagreement with Diamante. Not sad or annoyed, really. More distracted. She stood up, gesturing to her sisters to do the same.

Jackson stood too, sweeping the pages of Anzullar's will back together and putting them in a file folder. Sam shook his hand. Diamante did the same. They headed for the door, leaving Chinchilla standing by Jackson's desk. After she too had shaken his hand and repeated her thanks, he nodded down at the file.

"A completely unique take on life in hell. Snappy dialog and a bizarre backdrop set this adventure tale apart from the pack." —Christopher Moore, author of *Lamb* and *Practical Demon Keeping*

THE DISTANCE TRAVELLED

A NOVEL BY

—BRETT ALEXANDER SAVORY—

Why have certain denizens of Hell taken to throwing farm animals through innocent folks' kitchen windows? How long does it take a dead, desiccated gas attendant to walk out to his pumps? What sort of relationship do the Lord of the Underworld and Hell's Head Torturer have besides the obvious professional one? What kind of air conditioning units do they use down there? Do they listen to Cyndi Lauper? What is Hell's official currency, and by what criteria did The Big Red Fella choose it? Can pigs eat cereal with a spoon? What nameless beast dwells in the flame pit near the hole to Upside? What is Upside, for that matter, and why should you care anyway?

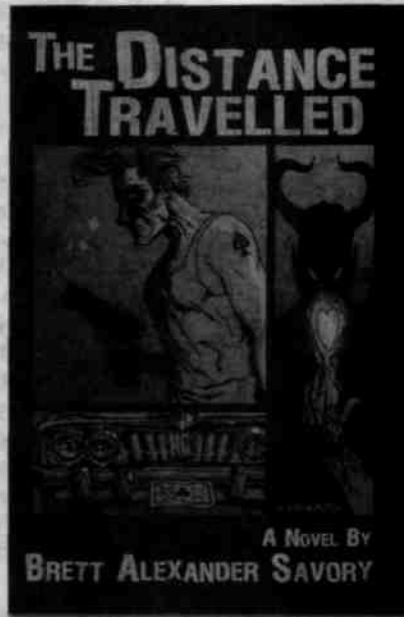
Within the pages of this book, you will find the answers to these pressing questions, as well as answers to other, significantly less pressing, questions...

"Brett A. Savory goes to Hell—not in a handbasket, but behind the wheel of a kickass El Camino—in this un-Divine Comedy. Slapstick, surreal, and definitely scorching, *The Distance Travelled* offers mirth and mayhem with (dare I say?) devilish glee, and on the far side of the heat is a moving meditation on the role of here in the hereafter. It's a wild and wonderful journey, so climb aboard...but look out for the flying pigs!"

—Douglas E. Winter, author of *Run*

"Two questions for Brett Savory: 'What're you smoking?' And 'May we please all have some?' *The Distance Travelled* is an ergot-spawned argot of a novel that nabs its readers for a ride Charlie Starkweather'd be too chicken to take. Not since Lord of the Flies has fiction been so rough on a Piggy. Now, where'd I put those damned glasses?"

—Michael Marano, author of *Dawn Song*



"I loved it. Stylish, fun, and neatly turned. Distinctive and bizarre—and I mean that in a good way—this is a fine ride through some very unusual territories."

—Michael Marshall Smith, author of *Spares* and *Only Forward*

"True Grit meets *Falling Angel*... *The Distance Travelled* reads like a blissed-out round-the-table collaboration between Kinky Friedman, Clive Barker, Jim Thompson, Dante, and Thorne Smith. It's a Hell we could all learn to love—kind of—and Brett Savory is a very bad man. But the good news is that it's safer for us all that he's writing this stuff down rather than living it."

—Peter Crowther, author of *Escardy Gap* (with James Lovegrove) and *The Longest Single Note*



NECRO PUBLICATIONS
PO Box 540298
ORLANDO, FL 32854-0298
CREDIT CARD ORDERS CALL:
407-443-6494
OR ORDER ONLINE AT:
WWW.NECROPUBLICATIONS.COM

300 TRADE PAPERBACKS ISBN: 1-889186-62-7

\$15⁹⁵ + \$5 PRIORITY SHIPPING

100 HARDCOVERS ISBN: 1-889186-61-9

\$45⁰⁰ + \$5 PRIORITY SHIPPING

"Technically, the page with the melody on it is your inheritance," he said. "Your physical property. If you'll let me Xerox a copy for the files, you could take it now."

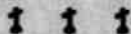
"No need," she said.

"Okay. If you're sure," he said. "I should point out, by the way, that if your sister is correct, you own *only* the piece of paper. You can't really do anything with the tune. Commercially, I mean. The copyright remains with the composer or his publisher."

Chinchilla smiled at him.

"You misunderstand," she said. "My father hasn't left me the copyright. Nor that piece of paper. He has left me the melody itself."

She leaned in and whispered in his ear. "And with it I can unlock the world."



Jackson eased the Maserati up to 70 and flicked on the cruise control. The road was so straight and so uncongested that he felt he could probably even prop the *Times* against the steering wheel and take another crack at the crossword but he resisted the temptation. Instead, he pushed the radio pre-sets until he found something he remembered from his college days and then sat back and let Tom Petty explain how American girls were raised on promises.

Over to the west, the sun was setting. Jackson turned off the AC and cracked the windows a little to let in the evening's gathering breeze. The odometer said he'd been traveling thirteen miles since he'd turned off the county road onto the state highway. Shouldn't be far now.

He hadn't expected to ever hear from Chinchilla or her sisters again, and had given little thought to the unspecified gift that he was supposed to receive. What was it likely to be anyway? Custody of all oblique angles found in geometry textbooks published between 1921 and 1934? Part-ownership of the color green? Gimme a fucking break.

But a few days after their first meeting Chinchilla had called. Her voice on the phone had been warm and inviting and Jackson had found himself inevitably wondering while she spoke if there was any possibility at all that the gift she was to give him would involve her being naked and pliant. He was way too old to be led by his dick anymore but he'd nevertheless found himself writing down certain coordinates and travel instructions and agreeing to meet.

And now here he was. On the road. Like a hormone-drenched high-schooler kicked into gear by a kiss and a whisper.

He'd thought he was familiar with this stretch of highway but the lines of strip malls and outlet stores that he'd expected to run all the way to the merge with the Interstate had long since disappeared behind him and all that was visible now on either side of the road was flat grassland, its colors already fading into a uniform deep purple as the sun finally dipped out of sight beyond the low and distant western hills.

A black limousine hurtled past on the other side of the divider line heading back to civilization. Jackson watched its tail-lights disappear in his rear-view and realized it was the only other vehicle he'd seen in either direction for several minutes. He also realized that the breeze coming in through his windows had dropped several degrees once the sun had vanished. He didn't need to put the heater on yet but he

rolled up the windows and wondered again why the hell he was doing this.

Chinchilla's instructions, needless to say, had kept up the family tradition. Why use street names or freeway numbers when there was a whole world of latitudes, longitudes, north-by-northwests, and Evening Stars to play with? And the meeting point wasn't specified so much as poetically alluded to. He'd managed to translate it down to this highway at least and asked her if he'd reach the Interstate. She'd said no and, when he asked where he turned off, added that he needn't turn off, that he'd stop when it was appropriate, and that she'd be there. He took that to mean that somewhere between here and the Interstate—theoretically just a mile or so ahead, though he could see no sign of it yet despite the flat ribbon of highway running straight in front of him to the horizon—she'd be parked on the side of the road and would flag him down. Provided it wasn't beneath her dignity to do anything so mundane or rational.

Night had fallen properly now and his headlights were the only illumination on the road. Where the hell *was* everybody? He'd been driving less than an hour but he was as alone as if he were on some back road in the middle of the Mojave. And the road itself, and the land around it, didn't seem to jibe with what Jackson knew to be the geography of the area. This straight? This empty? This dark? It was as if he were driving through a vast flat midnight desert bounded to right and left at the limits of his vision by long low hills scarcely distinct in the darkness from the sky above or the ground below.

Paul Simon had just finished assuring him that, though the day was strange and mournful, the mother and child reunion was only a moment away when the radio cut off completely.

No static, no signal fade, just sudden and instant station loss.

He'd have hit the other pre-sets for an alternative had he not realized at that exact moment that the silence was more profound than merely the absence of music. His engine had stopped running too.

"Shit!" he said. His hands flexed instinctively on the wheel. His foot stabbed instinctively in the direction of the brake—but he managed to resist the impulse to slam on and instead tapped at the pedal gently to ease back the momentum that was all that was moving the car.

The lights were still on, thank Christ, so he could guide the car onto the shoulder as it continued to slow down. It took about half a minute for it to coast to a perfectly safe stop. Perfectly safe, but come on—the fuck was up with this? Jackson put the car in park and turned the key back to the off position.

Oh man. It was *really* dark without the lights. Jackson felt a sudden stab of unfocussed anxiety and forced himself to take a breath and let his eyes adjust. Alright. That helped. A little.

Through his closed windows, he could hear the chattering of cicadas. He tapped at the plexi-glass of the dash, which was about the extent of his mechanical expertise. None of the dials moved. The car still appeared to have nearly a third of a tank of gas. Already wishing he'd listened when someone had explained to him once how you can tell when you're flooding the engine, he turned the key again.

And again.

Nothing.

The key would click into the first position, powering the lights and electrics, but it simply couldn't make the car start.

He turned it off completely again. It seemed that each time he did, the darkness into which he was plunged was deeper than before but he knew that that was his imagination. He knew that.

He looked out of the windows, ahead and to the sides. Nothing. Alright. Fuck it. What did he pay Triple-A for anyway? He pulled out his cell-phone and powered it up. Reassuring tinkle of chimes...pretty little screen display...and then the message *No Service*. He flung it onto the passenger seat to let it keep searching and turned the key one more time.

His headlights stabbed through the night. Directly ahead, caught in the beams like some vaudeville act who'd been standing waiting for their spotlight, were the three sisters.

They were twelve yards or so down the road from his car and appeared to have arrived here with no vehicle of their own. They were wearing matching white gowns and, from this distance, their expressionless faces seemed almost as white against the darkness of the night.

Jackson opened his door and got out, leaving his headlights on. The sweetly overpowering smell of jasmine hit him as, slowly, he walked towards them. He wasn't sure why he didn't call out a greeting. He wasn't entirely sure that a greeting was what he would have called out anyway.

The sisters were silent too, and remained motionless as he approached them.

When he was just a few feet away, the one in the middle—he assumed it was Chinchilla but who could tell?—stepped forward slightly and the ghost of a welcoming smile slid briefly across her lips.

"Mister Jackson," she said. "How lovely to see you again." There was nothing unpleasant about her voice. Not at all. Perhaps just a hint of mild surprise at this converging of paths.

"I was invited," he said. He didn't know why he said that and he didn't like the way his voice sounded saying it, but it didn't seem to bother Chinchilla.

"Oh yes," she said. "You were."

"My car. It's...stopped. I mean, it won't start."

"That's alright," she said, and her smile grew wider. "You won't be needing it."

She looked as beautiful as ever, but pale. Extremely pale. She leaned a little towards him to say something more and Jackson had to fight the urge to flinch back from her, though there was nothing threatening or fast about her movement and her voice was a delicate and sweet whisper.

"This is the gift we bring you," she said. "The gift of seeing with one's own eyes."

The car's headlights went out.

The moon must have risen while they'd been talking, or the stars had come out, because Jackson could still see her as she stepped back from him to join her sisters, who moved closer in on either side of her.

There was nothing violent or distressing about the way their flesh melded. It seemed natural and gentle. Like the flow of water into waiting channels or the delicate sweeping application of paint to canvas, the sisters slid into each other effortlessly. Like the sundered images on a stereoscopic photograph marrying themselves to reveal an unsuspected depth, they came together, becoming one.

But not really. Not quite.

There were too many arms. Too many eyes.

The landscape behind seemed to both thicken and recede, losing definition and light, becoming a backdrop, a setting, a black base against which they...she...it...was foregrounded like a surrealist figure on an abstract canvas.

Jackson could still feel the ground beneath his feet. But his other senses were protesting their starvation. The sweet heady smell of the night-blooming jasmine had disappeared and the rhythmic chafing of the cicadas gone with it. His eyes were his only passport to the world and what they saw was already reducing itself to these new essentials. The impossible woman and the darkness behind. That was all there was.

From somewhere within the collage of flesh in front of him, what used to be Chinchilla's mouth smiled again.

And then she was vanishing, all of her was vanishing, shrinking in on herself to a point of dazzling white singularity like the last collapsing sun in a voided universe. Impossibly, piercingly bright. Inconceivably distant. Unutterably beautiful.

And then gone.

There was only the darkness now, a darkness from which all definition and distinction was disappearing.

He was not on the road. He was not in the desert. He was just in the dark. All stars a memory now, and the moon forgotten.

He heard Chinchilla's voice whispering the melody of her Italian song.

And the night peeled open like dark petals.



What the HELL's so funny?



Wildly off-kilter stories by:

William F. Nolan, Jeff Strand, Steve Redwood

d.g.k goldberg & William D. Hicks

Scott Nicholson, Randy Chandler, Kevin Anderson

Robert N. Lee & John A. Burks, Jr. & MORE!

Available at Shocklines, Clarkesworld Books,
Barnes & Noble online and HellBound Books



THOMAS F. MONTELEONE

THE MOTHERS AND FATHERS ITALIAN ASSOCIATION

FUCK ART, LET'S KILL (and other great slogans for your T-shirt)

I read "The Terror Out of Tujungu" (from your MAFIA collection) first 'cause it's kind of how I grew up... The Nite Rock symbolized everything entertainment-like from my adolescence. One of the most remarkably entertaining paragraphs describing bar-monkeyshines I have ever read: "As I hit the dance floor, my eyes are following the ball's trajectory; it's a high shot, a gracefully arcing shot, a shot in the parlance of the sport called a 'rain-maker.' The music seems to fade away and the amoebic mass of Nite Rockers seem to be holding their breath as the ball begins its descent into (dare I say it?) destiny."

Fucking beautiful, T!!! April's shower! I love it!

-Zen481

Glad to see you finally got around to writing a hysterically funny and dead-on column about that ridiculous crappiest of a movie, War of the Worlds, in CD #54. I thought it was a scream, even though I'd already been treated to the gist of your thoughts on the subject during our interview at Horrorfind last August.

-Judy Comeau

Your film commentary at the beginning of "A Tale of Two Producers: Part One" caused me to nod my head and laugh a lot. I read it to my wife and she got the same charge out of it I did. It just goes to show that good movies can't be made by committee. Reading the "Two Producers" portion,

I can just hear the gnashing of teeth. The impending sense of doom is... pretty thick. Thanks for the insight and laughs.

-Bill Zeranski

OKAY, GLAD TO SEE everybody's here for a few pages of mirth and maybe a little something to think about. As I write this, it is spring in Maryland, and the weather is about 20 degrees warmer than it is in New Hampshire right about now. There are certain aspects of living in New England I miss a little, but the five-month winter isn't one of them. I never want to lay my hands on a roof-rake again.

That said, I have a couple of things to log in—especially since I continue to resist the urge to start an online blog and blather out stuff about my life to any mook who knows how to click a mouse. I much prefer using these pages as a semi-official record of what was going on in my life and my mind right now.

I used to always say these columns would one day exist to provide a look into the past for any of my grandchildren who will want to know more about Nonno¹ than most descendants ever get a chance to discover. Well, friends, I can no longer make vague references to the possibility of grandchildren because my oldest son, Damon, and his wife, Gioconda, ¹The Italian word for "grandfather."

produced Grandson No. 1. His name is Leonardo Monteleone and I think this mention marks his first appearance in print. He is a beautiful boy and I wish him a life at least as happy and fulfilling as his Nonno's.

And while I'm on the subject of my offspring, I'd like to mention that my other son, Brandon, is now in the United States Navy, serving on the USS Abraham Lincoln, a very large carrier, somewhere in the Pacific. He is very happy and I am very proud of him. As for Olivia, she just completed her freshman year at Maryvale Prep, where she hit the honor roll a couple times and also lettered in Varsity Field Hockey and Varsity Softball. She's also as beautiful as her mother, my lovely Elizabeth.

Now, I know some of what I just wrote is of absolutely no interest to most of you, but hey, that's one of the perks of the gig—I get to write whatever I want, right?

But so do you.

As usual, I invite comment, opinion, suggestions for future columns via tfm@thomasfmonteleone.com or POB 660 Fallston MD 21047.

Now, on to the topic of the day.

* About two weeks back, I was in that store my pal Gary Braunbeck calls "Walpurgis Mart" because I needed something or other at the cheapest

price. Now, as you probably already know, this particular vendor attracts what is known as "all kinds." And as you or I walk down the aisles of plentitude, we see visual (and sometimes olfactory) evidence of this truth on any given visit.

So, on this trip through the store, I see a guy walking about twenty or thirty paces ahead of me. He is a typical Walpurgis shopper in that he walks with sloping shoulders, has long, unkempt hair, shambles forward with a splay-footed gait, and is not exactly dressed to the nines. It is, in fact, his attire that has captured my attention. He's arrayed with the shoddy non-style that typifies many Americans in these early years of the new century—ill-fitting jeans slung under a generous belly and a T-shirt. Nothing remarkable about that, to be sure, but it's the "message" emblazoned across the back of his black T-shirt that's caught my attention.

It said, as you've most likely surmised (if you're not on crack):

FUCK ART
LET'S KILL

To complete the picture, he was sway-shouldering along with (as they say) "a tadpole" in tow—a little girl of perhaps eight or nine (and as cute as a redneck button can be).

Well, you know, I couldn't help but notice—this just wasn't very profound.

It was in fact, really offensive.

And before all the mooks in the audience start screeching about the First Amendment and free speech and all that biz, let me explain why it pissed me off.

For one, and this is the most basic reaction, I find it incredible that anyone would wear that thing in public and think it typified a baseline "norm" of the society, and that it was therefore acceptable to most of the people who still possessed the literacy skills to actually read it.

I'm no Puritan by any stretch, but it very much bothers me that other people are forced to explain to their kids what that message or the word "fuck" means (when maybe they really don't want to). I think parents have a right to expose (or not expose) their kids to things like sex, religion, politics,

and just about anything else. By this asshole wearing that brainless T-shirt, everything changes for anyone who cares about what their kids learn and when they learn it.

To say nothing of the lovely sentiment itself.

Although it's doubtful the T-shirted simian had much understanding of the more subtle nuances of the message, it's still a sad commentary on where we're going as a culture. In case you hadn't noticed, we're going down, friends. With all the grace of the palooka who just caught the roundhouse right to the jaw. Something has happened to us in the last couple generations that is subtly destroying us, and it's doing it under the guise of "freedom."

I still look at all the old black-and-white newsreels of people at ballgames and other public gatherings and just about everybody is dressed neatly. Women in skirts or dresses, men in white shirts and often ties...and that was in a time when the majority of Americans were not engaged in what the sociology texts term "white-collar" jobs. People have lost a basic respect for one another, and concomitantly, themselves. And I'm not sure if there's anything we can do about it.²

You see, in my younger days, when I was a whole lot crazier than I am now, I would have walked up to that troglodyte in the shirt, tapped him on his hairy fucking back, and asked him why he thought it was acceptable to wear that stupid and offensive shirt. I wouldn't have cared about the consequences. But now, I know too many lower-lifeforms out there are capable of putting too much hurt on me because I'm not as agile and mean as I used to be.

I say this because the low-life essentially "got away" with it.

Nobody challenged him. Nobody acted like...anything. Now, either people can't read, or...they don't give a shit. Whatever the correct fork in that line of reasoning, our society is in trouble. If reps from Wal Mart had walked up to the guy and said some-

² Okay, I KNOW this was also a time when society openly discriminated against minority groups, and of course that was a very heinous thing, but I think in some odd cultural ablation, we threw out the baby with the bathwater. We lost more than our ignorance and our prejudices...and I'm not sure yet just what it was.

thing like "You know what, pal, this store is a family venue, and we don't really appreciate you walking around here proclaiming to all what an IDIOT you are. So get your saggy ass and that T-shirt outta here," then maybe people would take notice, and in the least, give some indication of how they stand on the issue.

Even if it caused problems, I submit that's what should happen. We need to cause some problems for the uncultured paramercia who are turning the country into a cesspool of barbaric slob. I don't know about you, but I have really had it with rude people. From the jerks who speed up when you want to change lanes on the Interstate (after you've flipped on your turn signal and before you flipped them the bird) to the dilatory clerks in stores who substitute service with irritation that you interrupted them from somnolent conversion of oxygen into carbon dioxide. I still get REALLY PISSED OFF at this array of sub-humanity, and at such times, Elizabeth reminds me that along that path lay madness...and probably a coronary.

When I look at a random evening's list of television programming, I see a heavy larding of Reality TV, which is beginning to make the average Jerry Springer abortion resonate like Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. Most of these "concept" shows represent such a lowering of an entire spectrum of standards ranging from ultra-vapid to infra-redundant, that I truly can't imagine a more abysmal nadir for cultural illiteracy. How many times can a population find entertainment in watching big-breasted simpletons eat meal-worms for money? Or find abject captivation in acerebral substitutes for suspense or drama involving amoral adulterous housewives?

I think the problem for me is simple—I live by a fairly well-defined moral code³. I am faithful to my wife, devoted to my children, loyal to my friends, and courteous to strangers who don't assault me with their rude or felonious behavior. I get no pleasure from doing shitty things to other people, and

³ Don't confuse this with any particular religious dogma. Although I see plenty of good in the function of religion in a civilized society—such as the codification of actions and responsibilities for those not mentally equipped to work things out for themselves—I don't feel it occupies any special place as the final arbiter of moral behavior.

I have this pesky expectation that gets me in deep shit from time to time: I expect others to do nothing I wouldn't already expect of *myself*.

Our post-liberated society portrays a world I don't know very well and one with which I want little to do. Children have no respect or love for their parents. Traditional families are the subject of "comedies." Modern, urban women disdain husbands and children to shuffle through sexual partners like men—straight and gay—used to be stereotyped. Stealing and murder are somehow "okay" if you are smart enough or rich enough or stylish enough to look good while you're doing it. Stories with characters who are heroic in a classic sense are considered fodder only fit for sophomore satire. Songs which glorify horrific treatment of women win Academy Awards, and a musical genre that routinely lyricizes bitch-slapping, putting "caps" in people, and fucking anything of a higher vertebrate order than a snake bullet the charts week after week. (I can't tell you what a treat it is to drive my daughter to Catholic school in the morning as the radio plays some ebonic half-wit "singing" about tappin' his ho's ass.)

Nice.

And yeah, yeah, I hear you with the "you-don't-like-it, turn-it-off-bullshit." Well I *do* turn it off, but that solves nothing. Philosophical and cultural trees are falling in the forest and they make plenty of sound whether we're listening or not. There is a pervasive *sickness* seeping up around our feet like the overflow of a septic tank in serious need of a pumping. And anyone who notices it, or who has the balls to argue against it is often denounced as a religious nut or an alarmist prude or the latest -phobe-of-the-week.

Sorry if you feel that way.

I am none of those things. I happen to be a smart white guy in an age in which you're supposed to feel guilty if you're part of that demographic. Sure. Watch me. Any time now, I promise.

And look, if you think our culture is as elegant and respectful as any of history's Golden Ages, well maybe I've just lost touch with what's really important in the world.

Somehow, I doubt it.

Which doesn't mean I'm not open to your own feelings or observations



Reach over
30,000
potential
customers by
advertising in
Cemetery
Dance
magazine.

Inquire here:
advertising@
cemeterydance.com
or
410-588-5901

(Highly competitive ad rates
and excellent discounts for
long term advertising.)

on the subject. I mean, that's the beauty of human discourse—we can *do* it. No other planetary species has yet matched that feat—despite what PETA⁴ might want you to think. I may be way off base here. I wish I were, but...

Hey, after all, what's the big deal anyway? What're we worried about?

I mean, we've been given a new cultural mantra⁵, you know?

Let's say it all together and feel really good:

Fuck Art.

Let's Kill..

Keep those emails burning up the ether, folks. (I live for this.)

Shameless Hype and Promotion: by the time you read this, I will have completed my latest novel with the working title of *Submarine*. I'll update you about it when I know more myself. In the meanwhile, since there are *always* more stories to tell, I have offerings coming up in anthologies such as *Masques 5*, *The Brimstone Turnpike*, *Evermore*, and *Midnight Premieres*. You would do well to get these and read them—because I have a feeling they contain a few award contenders by my favorite writer. I should also remind you that Borderlands Press still has a few copies of the Stoker-winning omnibus collection of this column (more than fifty!), *The Mothers And Fathers Italian Association*; and if you still haven't bought yours, you can get 25% off the price by mentioning you saw this notice in this issue of CD. You should also go to the BP website and listen to a sample of my reading of "Horn of Plenty" which will not only entertain you, but hip you to what a great reader I am. Here it is: <http://www.borderlandspress.com/hop.html>. Now go click on it and turn your speakers on.

⁴ Actually I shouldn't lampoon that group—especially since I'm a member of P(eople) E(ating) T(asty) A(nimals). I mean, come on, if God didn't want us eating animals, he wouldn't have made 'em outta meat...

⁵ You know, I really hate that word because it is so misused, and so I use it here in sardonic defiance.

DEAD CAT'S

TRAVELLING CIRCUS OF WONDERS AND MIRACLE MEDICINE SHOW

Your favorite Dead Cat is back and this time he's on the road with the circus, a freakshow and a sideshow and more in an all new anthology edited by those who spawned him Gerard Houarner and GAK.

Join Dead Cat as his adventures under the Big Top are chronicled by some of the best writers in modern horror:

- BRIAN HODGE
- TIM LEBBON
- GARY A. BRAUNBECK
- JEFFREY THOMAS
- GERARD HOUARNER
- TREY R. BARKER
- GARRETT PECK
- MICHELLE SCALISE
- P.D. CACEK
- MARK MCLAUGHLIN
- WRATH JAMES WHITE
- MICHAEL HUYCK
- ROBERT STEVEN RHINE
- JACK M. HARINGA
- AARON WORLEY
- LINDA D. ADDISON

300 HARDCOVERS \$45 AVAILABLE IN MAY OF 2006



Bedlam Press • PO Box 540298 • Orlando, FL 32854-0298 • 407-443-6494

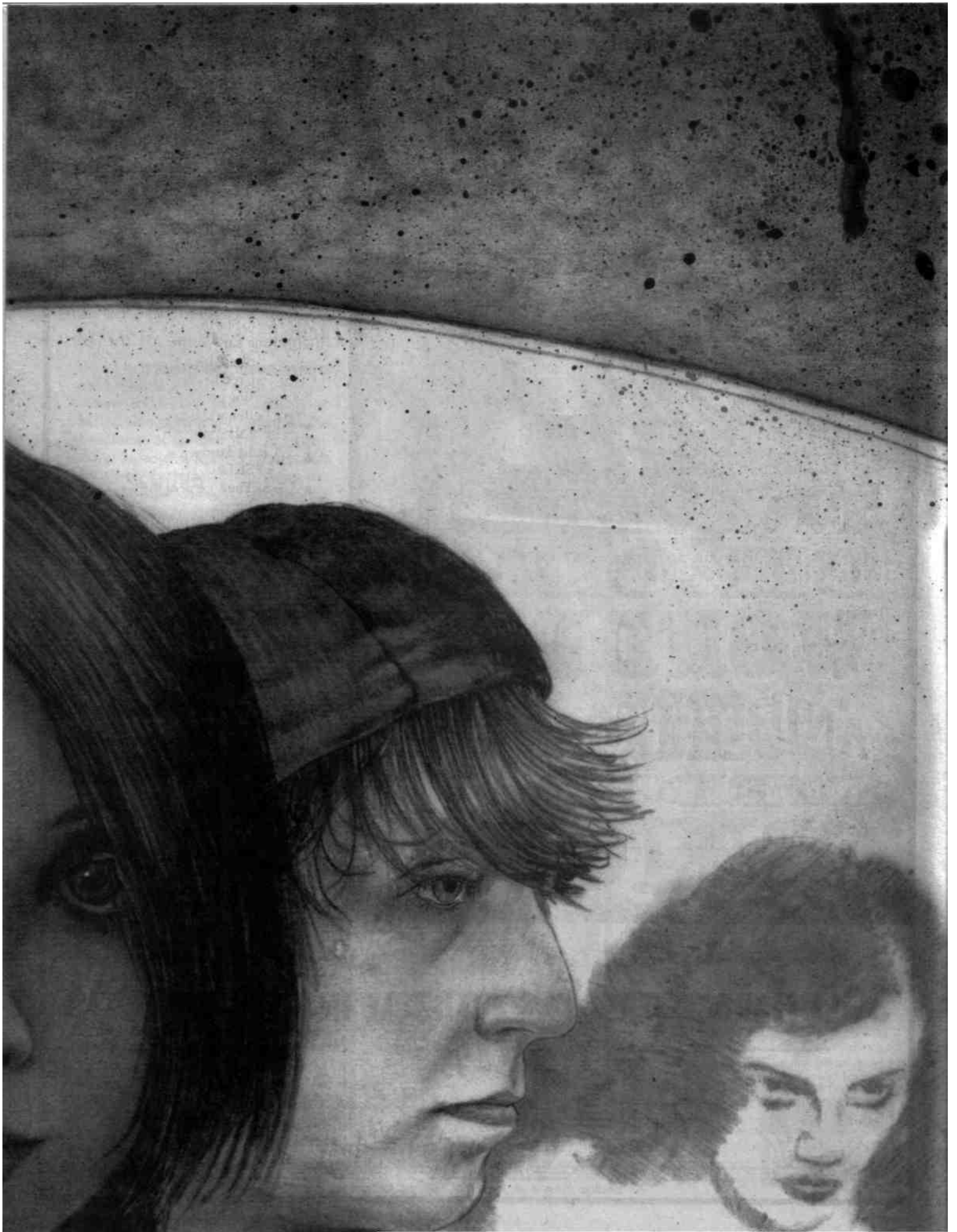
Shop securely online at: www.necropublications.com

Accepting VISA, MasterCard and PayPal.

Make checks payable to Necro Publications.

Bedlam Press is an imprint of Necro Publications.





The Delilah Party

David Nickle

DAVID NICKLE's stories have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, including *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, the *Best of the Aurora Awards*, the *Northern Frights* anthologies, the *Queer Fear* anthologies and of course *Cemetery Dance* magazine. He's a past winner of the Bram Stoker Award and the Canadian Aurora Award, and his novel, *The Claus Effect* (co-written with Karl Schroeder) is available from Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing. He's currently at work on a novel dealing with, among other things, the early American eugenics movement.

Mitchell Owens spent much of his seventeen years a quiet boy, sitting very still in the darkest part of a very dark room. Most people could not figure him out, and as far as Mitchell was concerned, the feeling was mutual.

But his older friend Stefan wasn't most people. He picked up on Mitchell's vibe right away, as Mitchell was still squeezing into the back of Stef and Trudy's Explorer in the parking lot of the Becker's convenience store where they had met three times now. Stefan looked over his shoulder, looked again with his eyes a little narrower, then turned around so his knees were on the seat and his skinny chest was pressed against the headrest.

"Looks like you ate a bug, Mitch," he said.

"Didn't eat a bug," said Mitchell.

"Just an expression," said Trudy, eyeing him in the rear-view mirror. She was haloed in the light of the Becker's sign so from behind her blonde hair looked like the discharge off a Vandegraff generator—black as midnight in the middle of her skull, leaping bolts of yellow on the rim. The rear-view mirror told a different story: her eyes were in full illumination, a blazing source of light.

Mitchell stammered when he spoke up:

"Th-they took away my laptop."

"I see you don't have it with you," said Stefan. "By *they* I assume you mean the police."

"Yuh."

"Bummer," said Stefan.

"You'll get it back," said Trudy.

"Did they follow you?" asked Stefan.

"No."

"Why would they follow Mitch?" Trudy put the Explorer into gear, and tapped the gas so that Stefan lurched against the seat. "Fuck, woman!" he said, and Trudy said, "I've got a name. Sit forward. It's more comfortable."

"Fuck," said Stefan again, and he winked at Mitchell. "Do up your seatbelt, Mitch. Woman—Trudy's—in a mood."

"Fuck you," said Trudy as they pulled out of the parking lot, and at that, Mitchell felt himself smile. He would get the laptop back. Of course he would.

The Explorer pulled right onto Starling with only a little room to spare before it joined the early evening traffic and subsumed itself to its pattern: drive a bit and stop awhile. Watch the light from red to green, red to flashing green, red to red while the other side got flashing green. Wait and go. Go and wait. Mitchell was feeling better and better. The laptop would be his again. It was part of the pattern.

"So they treat you okay?" said Trudy.

"Why wouldn't they?" said Stefan.

"Cops are fucking fascists. They get a kid like Mitch here and they'll just be pricks to him."

"They got your laptop," said Stefan. "You have anything on the hard drive?"

Mitchell didn't know what he meant and said so. Stefan and Trudy shared a glance, and Trudy pulled into the left lane so she could turn onto Bern Street when her turn came.

"We've got some friends coming over," said Stefan conversationally. "From the news group. I think you've met some of them. Remember Mrs. Woolfe?"

Mitchell thought about that. He put the name to a tall woman with glasses and a dark tattoo that crept over the edge of her turtleneck sweater like foliage. "Was she the one who was always sad?"

"Lesley?" said Trudy. "She wasn't sad."

"She just wasn't smiling," said Stefan. "But that doesn't mean she was sad."

Mitchell nodded. Those were two expressions that he was always mixing up. "Not sad. Just concentrating."

"Right."

The Explorer swung through the intersection about a second after the light switched to amber. Mitchell glanced back skeptically. Sure enough, it was red before they'd cleared it. He was sure someone was going to honk.

"So what did they ask you?"

Stefan was half-turned around in his seat, so only one eye looked back at Mitchell. The skin of his forehead was puckered up over his raised eyebrow. He was either being worried or casual.

Mitchell said: "They asked me how well I knew Delilah. They wanted to know if I ever emailed her or knew her in this chat room that I guess she went to."

"Our chat room?"

Mitchell shook his head. "Another one. Not like the one we have. Hers was for wrestling. They asked if I had any pictures of her on my computer or anything."

"Which you don't."

"Pardon?"

"You don't have any pictures of her on your computer," said Trudy. "Right?"

"Oh. Right. I don't."

"And you didn't bookmark the chatroom."

"I use the computer at the library for that."

"Then you have nothing to worry about."

"Why would I be worried?"

"No reason," said Trudy, and Stefan said, "You might have something to worry about if you did something. I mean—"

"No reason," said Trudy again.

"Okay."

Mitchell leaned back in the Explorer's seat so that Trudy's eyes were gone from the rear view mirror and all he could see was the dark roof of the Explorer. He unzipped his jacket because the heat of the car was getting to him. The Explorer turned right at Sparroway Circle, and then turned right again at the entrance to Number Five Sparroway Circle's parking garage. Mitchell did a little *cha-cha* thing on his left thigh with the first two fingers of his right hand as the Explorer made its way through Level One of the garage, which included most of the guest parking, then his fingers made their way to the lock switch as they prowled across the slightly better-lit Level Two. He locked and unlocked the door three times then made himself stop when they pulled into Space 152. Trudy and Stefan pretended not to notice—just locked up the car for good using a button on Trudy's keychain, took him to the elevator which they opened using a card on Stefan's keychain, and got on board. The door closed on them and the elevator started going up.

"School was bad today," said Mitchell.

Stefan pushed his hands into the pockets of his dark leather coat. Trudy bent her head forward like she was looking at her feet, then suddenly turned her eyes to the side so they were looking at Mitchell.

"What are we," she said, "your parents?"

"No." Mitchell's parents were another story. "You're my friends."

When the elevator got to the very top of the building it opened up on a wide hallway. There were only two apartments on this floor—one at either end of the hallway. Stefan and Trudy's apartment was on the right. The other one belonged to a guy named Giorgio Piccininni, but it was basically vacant because Giorgio was in Italy doing real estate or something. There were voices coming from Stefan and Trudy's place and Mitchell thought he heard the sound of their Media Center. He recognized the voice on the home theatre from the news channel and he thought he recognized the voices talking but it was hard to tell.

"I'll wait out here," he said.

Trudy took his arm. "Come on, scaredy-cat," she said. "We went to a lot of trouble to make sure this place was safe for you." Then she pushed the door open the rest of the way and gave him a little push. "Inside."

Mitchell stumbled through the double doors. The main room was high, with a big sleek chandelier hanging down from a ceiling that was two entire floors up. At one end was a kitchen that opened up on a dining room. At the other end was a sitting area, which faced a television set that was

almost as big as the Explorer. Five people were sitting around it, watching the 24-hour news channel. Mitchell couldn't remember who all the people were although he had met them all before—three times in person, and many, many times online in the chat room. Three of them were men and two were women. He didn't think either of the women was Mrs. Lesley Woolfe. The news anchor on television was Gloria Stahl. She was talking about Delilah Franken and her high school sports record.

"Just make yourselves at home," said Trudy.

One of the men turned to the door and waved. He was completely bald and his eyes were jiggly.

"Hey Mitch," he said. "Hey guys. Everything going okay out there?"

Stefan smiled. "You know as much as we do." He walked over and sat down on the arm of the sofa. "More, maybe. What's she going on about?"

The woman nearest Stefan rested her hand on his knee and smiled up at him. "The Police Chief's had another press conference," she said. "He just did the usual: asked that anyone with information about poor Delilah's disappearance should call CrimeStoppers. Didn't have anything new to say."

"Well of course he didn't," said Trudy. She put *her* hand on Mitchell's shoulder. Her thumb touched the back of his neck and he took a sharp breath.

"Can I go on the computer?" asked Mitchell.

The woman by Stefan shook her head, but she smiled or seemed to. "Mitchell Owens," she said, "you *are* a prize."

Trudy's hand slid off Mitchell's shoulder and she took him by the hand. "Come on," she said. "I'll boot it up for you."

"I know how," said Mitchell. But he let her lead him to the sun room anyway. He stood there for a moment, looking down over the flickering lights—the patterns of brake lights and headlights and signs and window lamps. Mitchell looked back when the computer chimed up to its logon screen.

"You are a prize," said Trudy, typing the password which was BLENDER. "Shelly was right about that."

"Ah," said Mitchell. "Shelly." That was her name.

Trudy's eyes flashed again. "Do you like her?"

"What do you mean?"

"Could she—" Trudy gestured in the air with her hands and looked at the ceiling. "You *know*."

Mitchell blinked. "What do you mean?"

Now Trudy's eyes widened and she looked down at him with a tight little slit of a mouth. When she spoke, she whispered like she was shouting.

"You know *what* I mean!"

Mitchell looked over at the computer screen. The wallpaper was new—a scan of Delilah Franken, the one from the police website. Her hair was darker than it should be. She was wearing her graduation gown and she didn't look comfortable in it. He moused over to the START menu and fired up Photoshop.

Trudy seemed to calm down. She put her hand on Mitchell's shoulder and leaned close to his ear. "What are you up to there, Mitchy?"

"Make her happy."

"Oh." Trudy chuckled. "Well go to it, sport."

DO YOU HAVE THE GUTS TO ENTER THE TABARD INN? ARE YOU PREPARED TO READ TALES OF QUESTIONABLE TASTE BY THE NEWEST AND UGLIEST VOICES IN HORROR, SCI-FI, AND MYSTERY? SEVEN PRINTERS REFUSED TO PUBLISH THIS MAGAZINE DUE TO IMMORAL CONTENT. OPEN THE GATE AND ENTER... IF YOU DARE....



SEND A CHECK FOR \$6.⁰⁰ (\$5 for the magazine and \$1.⁰⁰ S+H) PAYABLE TO JOHN BRUNI

468 E. VALLETTE ST.
ELMHURST, IL 60126

QUESTIONS? ASK AT EDGEWOODMAGENT@YAHOO.COM

Mitchell found the JPEG and opened it up. It was a big file and when he zoomed into 100 per cent all he could see was her mouth, a bit of her chin and the bottom of her nose. That was good. It looked like there was a blemish on her chin, maybe some acne because she was so stressed out about graduating, so he cloned some skin from her cheek onto it, then he opened up the *liquify* filter and went to work on her mouth. Delilah was one of those girls who smiled like she was sad, with the mouth turned down at the edges. Mitchell fixed that, edging the pixels at the corners up and up and up. Once he was satisfied Delilah was happy enough, he applied the changes and went to work on her hair, which in the picture was a dingy brown. He magnetic-lassoed it with a one-pixel feather, then went into the *Curves* dialog box and lightened it up and improved the contrast so it looked like she had blonde streaks, which was how she wore it these days. He liked the idea, but not so much the effect: The feather made the background glow too much around her hair, like a halo. But he didn't know how to fix it either. So Mitchell left it the way it was and saved it under another file name. He closed it, then opened the original again and experimented further. He went through the process four more times.

"Wow. She sure is happy."

Mitchell took a sharp breath.

"Really happy?"

He took his hand away from the mouse.

"Fucking overjoyed." Laughter followed. Mitchell turned around.

The whole party, all seven of them, were there. Shelly was dangling a mostly-empty wine glass beside her as she pressed against a skinny grey-haired man, who was leaning against the doorframe beside Stefan, who was bent forward over the back of an office chair, his hands on the arm-rests straddling the bare arms of another woman with short dark hair and light-colored jeans who was sitting there legs crossed, one bare foot with manicured toenails brushing the shoulder of the bald man, who sat on the floor almost cross-legged. Behind them, a blond-haired guy wearing a black T-shirt stood on his toes to look at the computer screen. Trudy was crouched down beside Mitchell, her hands on the desktop and her chin resting on her knuckles. She looked up at Mitchell.

"Happy now?" she said. Stefan laughed, Shelly giggled, and that set everyone else off.

Mitchell looked back at the picture. Delilah smiled back out at him, and he thought he could see why they were laughing. She was smiling wide: too wide, as wide as the Joker did in *Batman*. As he looked at it now, he saw the problem with that. It was unnatural. Delilah had never smiled that way. Not even in grade school. If she did, why she'd rip her cheeks right off her cheekbones and then there'd be nothing but blood and tears. Mitchell guessed it was pretty funny, seeing Delilah Franken smiling like that.

He let his breath out.

"I'm done on the computer," he said. "Can I have something to eat?"

Trudy's knees made a cracking noise as she got up. "Sure thing. Let's go to the kitchen."

The others spread to make a pathway for Trudy and Mitchell out of the sun room. Looking over his shoulder, he saw that they all gathered around the computer, to get a closer look at the picture he made. Mitchell felt an unfamiliar sense of pride. They were looking at his picture—his work. Even if he hadn't gotten the hair right, that was something.

Trudy opened the refrigerator and pulled out a tray covered in Saran wrap. She stood quickly, balancing the tray on the fingertips of one hand while she cocked her hip and planted the other hand there. "Canapes?" she said.

"Canapés," said Mitchell. Trudy had pronounced it like Can Apes.

"You got it," said Trudy. She set the tray down on the countertop and peeled back the plastic. Mitchell took a little roll of prosciutto and melon and bit into it. It was salty and sweet, watery and oily. A nice-enough mix that he took two others.

"So how was school?" Trudy leaned against the stove and crossed one ankle over the other. "You said it was a bad day."

Mitchell took a breath. He didn't think they wanted to hear about anything like that because they weren't his parents. But maybe that was just when Stefan was in the room. Mitchell chewed and swallowed another canapé.

"It was a bad day. They made us go to an assembly. This...this guy from the school board talked to us for about an hour. Some girls were crying. Even though she'd already graduated. They were crying. Can you believe that? Right there in the assembly with everybody looking."

"What did he talk to you about?"

"After that was History of Europe. I hate History of Europe and it sucked. And phys-ed. I don't see why I have to take that when what I want to do is—"

Trudy cut in: "You don't want to talk about that assembly, do you?"

Mitchell put the third canapé in his mouth and sucked on it, pulling the cool sweet melon out from the prosciutto sheaf. More laughter came from the sun room. Trudy pushed herself off from the stove and came closer to Mitchell. She leaned over and whispered into his ear: "So what do you think of Shelly? Think she's pretty?"

"I think you're pretty."

Trudy seemed to freeze for an instant. Then she pulled back a bit, turned to her side and leaned on the island beside Mitchell. "She's pretty, all right," said Trudy. "Stef sure thinks so."

Mitchell took another couple of canapés but he didn't eat them yet.

"She's a year or two older," said Trudy. "Than me. And Stef. That should make a difference."

Mitchell thought about that. "O-older girls can be pretty," he said and Shelly smirked. She put her hand on Mitchell's shoulder, and sidled her hip closer to his. "Yeah," she said, as her hand slid from the shoulder nearest her to the one farthest. "You would think that."

Mitchell swallowed. Trudy leaned her head to one side so it rested on Mitchell's shoulder. He felt stray hairs tickling

his face, like little electric sparks. Trudy's hip was touching his own. "Oh Mitch," she said. "You are so fucked up."

"And that's what she likes about you."

"Hey Stef." Trudy lifted her head to look around, but she didn't move her hand or shift away. "Mitch and I were just talking about you."

Stefan came around the island. He was holding a glass of red wine and smiling maybe. "Me?" He set the wine glass on the counter beside Mitchell, and looked hard into Trudy's eyes. "I'm flattered."

"You're an asshole," she said.

"Why, I oughta," he said, making a limp fist that opened like a flower when he let it drop to his side. Then he laughed. "How you doing, Mitch?"

"Good."

"Really? Good." He reached over and took Trudy's hand off Mitchell's shoulder. "You should save your energy, man."

Trudy raised her eyebrows at Stefan. "She on her way?" she said and Stefan nodded. "Just coming off the highway," he said. "Like, two minutes ago."

"I'm going to go to the bathroom," said Mitchell. Trudy and Stefan stopped and looked at him up and down, then Stefan laughed. "I can see that," said Trudy, smirking. "Go on," said Stefan. "Use the one upstairs. It's quieter."

Mitchell left them in the kitchen. He passed the dining room table where there were more canapés laid out and he took a cracker with some brie cheese on it. In the living room, the Media Center was off the news. Now the screen was filled with a security camera picture from the basement garage, looking at the elevator they'd come up in. The bald man and the woman with paint on her toenails were sitting on the couch. Her feet were in his lap, and he was giving one of them a massage while she twisted the other this way and that at the ankle, like she was stretching it. They watched Mitchell pass by and climb up the spiral staircase to the second level, and didn't take their eyes off him until he went into the main bath.

Mitchell closed the door behind him as the lights flickered on. He lifted the toilet seat and unzipped his fly. He stood there for awhile like that, then zipped up and washed his hands. He caught himself in the mirror, leaning forward, his hands held together under the thin stream of warm water. His eyes were open wide, his mouth small and slack and round, like he was always saying "oh." His dark hair was too long and fell over his forehead, which was still pimply. There were the beginnings of a beard growing on the chin, but you could still see the big pimple underneath the left side of his lower lip. Mitchell looked at his face and thought: what would I see if I saw me on the street? At school? He thought about that, and thought again: *A sad boy*. He made a smile, and looked, and thought: *A happy boy*. He brushed the hair aside from his forehead, and stood up straight, and kept smiling and he thought about that, but finally thought:

Who knows?

Mitchell found a hand towel and dried off then went out. He heard the sound of another door closing downstairs. He stepped to the railing and looked down, as the rectangle of hall light narrowed and vanished on the first-floor tiling. The couple on the couch sat up, and from the kitchen, Stefan said: "Lesley!" and Trudy said: "How'd it go?"

"Fucking nightmare."

Mitch looked down and saw the top of Lesley Woolfe's head and her shoulders, as she made her way to the couch. She twisted her head on her neck so that Mitch could see her throat, wisps of dark hair mingling with body art that was emerging from the collar of a simple white blouse. With one arm, she flung an overcoat onto the lounge by the downstairs powder room. "Fuck," she said again, drawing the syllable out this time, "me."

She sounded sad, but what did Mitchell know?

"Nothing went wrong, did it?" said Trudy.

"Traffic," said Lesley, "was the shits. Wouldn't move faster than a slow walk south of Tenth Line. I was afraid it would wear off and she'd wake up at a red light."

"But it didn't," said Trudy. "She didn't."

"Would I be here if it did?"

Stefan came out of the kitchen with a tall glass of wine. Lesley took it and sipped at it. "The cameras?" she said.

"All taken care of," said Stefan.

"And—?"

"Upstairs," said Stefan. "Right above you."

Lesley started like something bit her, and looked around and then up. Her eyes were wide, then narrow. They weren't smiling. "Hello," she said after a few seconds. She held up her wine glass and tinkled it back and forth. "Want a sip?"

"He doesn't drink," said Trudy.

"I didn't ask you," said Lesley, not taking her eyes off Mitch. "Well, Mitch? How about it?"

Mitchell moved to the spiral staircase and climbed down. He stood face to face with Lesley Woolfe. She stood five inches taller than he did and she still did not smile. But she offered him the wine glass, and he took it by the stem. He swirled the red liquid, looked at it, sniffed it like he'd seen rich men do on television. It smelled a bit rotten, but Mitchell sipped at it anyway. It tasted sharper than it smelled, but it wasn't so bad. He took another sip, bigger this time.

"Now," she said, her eyes widening and her nostrils flaring, "we both die." She paused for a heartbeat. "Poison," she said. "Very painful."

Mitchell dropped the wine glass. It hit the side of a table then clinked on the tile floor, and somehow it didn't break. Mitchell stepped back, staring at the wine spill spreading along the skinny grout lines, holding onto his chest, drawing a breath.

Lesley finally smiled. Smiling, she threw her head back, so the dark geometries etched on her throat were in full view, and laughed, then twisted her head to the side and she smiled even more, and looked back at Mitchell, and said:

"Mmmm, look at him. So scared of dying."

"Why wouldn't he be?" said Trudy. She looked at Mitchell. "She was kidding."

Mitchell had worked that out. About the same time that he worked out that he hated Lesley Woolfe. He bent down and picked up the wine glass, and looked around. The faces looking back at him might as well have been smooth skin, no eyes or mouths or noses, staring in blank, blind disapproval. Like mannequins.

One of the mannequins came over with a roll of paper towels and bent to his feet, spreading them over the spill so the wine stain blossomed in fractal majesty over the bumps and divots. The mannequin turned its head and presented its

blank face to Mitchell. Then it swiped up the paper towel and crumpled it in its hand, and replaced it with a fresh one.

"What's going on with him?" said a mannequin from the living room.

"I think," said the voice of Stefan, "that he's having an episode. Good fucking going, Les."

Another voice: "Is this, like—dangerous?"

"Of course it's dangerous," said Lesley fucking Woolfe's voice. "That's why we chose him. Delectable Delilah. For Dangerous Mitchell. That's the point."

Someone giggled. Someone else said, "shut the fuck up," and someone else said, in a whisper, "will you fucking look at him?" and then the mannequins fell quiet.

Mitchell took a breath and closed his eyes. This had happened before: often enough that he'd been to doctors for it. They had tried drugs and other therapies but mostly drugs, until Mitchell started gaining weight and breaking out and doctors started worrying about his penis maybe not developing properly. His mom finally went to a woman who taught transcendental meditation out of her basement, and Mitchell had learned a mantra, and at bad times he found that helped. So he started to say his mantra, which was a secret, and he said it again and again with his eyes closed until he thought he could open his eyes.

Stefan looked back at him from a dining room chair that he'd pulled over. The rest of the mannequins—the people—were gone. But Stefan was there, arms folded over his skinny chest. Hard to say whether he was smiling or not.

"Where did everybody go?" asked Mitchell.

"Lesley took them across the hall."

"Mr. Piccininni's apartment." Mitchell didn't know Stefan had a key. "What for?"

"A little show and tell," said Stefan, "before the show. You doing okay now?"

"What are they looking at?" said Mitchell.

Stefan motioned over his shoulder to the Media Center. Mitchell looked. It was a view from another security camera. But this one wasn't in the lobby—it looked to be mounted on the ceiling of a bedroom filled with nice dark furniture and with the painting of a waterfall on one wall. There was a big double bed on the far side of the room, covered in a thick comforter. Something was moving under it, just a little bit. Mitchell stepped closer to get a look, but the picture was fuzzy and then someone stepped in front of it and he couldn't see the bed. Then other people stepped around the bed: Shelly, the bald guy... Lesley Woolfe, her arms crossed and chin pressed down against her collarbone so it wrinkled and puckered... Trudy.

Trudy stepped around between Lesley Woolfe and what looked like a dresser, then leaned over the bed. She looked at Lesley and said something, and Lesley shrugged, and Trudy reached over to the comforter, and lifted the edge of it, and with her other hand covered her mouth and her eyes went wide. But she smiled beneath her hand, so whatever she saw must have been okay.

"You're welcome," said Stefan.

"Pardon?"

Stefan leaned over to him. "Look at that grin. You know what's coming, don't you pal?"

Mitchell looked at Stefan, who was grinning broadly. "It was supposed to be a surprise. That's what Lesley wanted

to do. Just bring you in there, and *voilà!* Leave you to your devices. But I know you, Mitch. You don't like surprises. They make you squirrely."

"Squirrely."

Stefan wiggled his fingers by his years. "You know. Buggy. Nutzoid."

"Oh."

"I'd have told you sooner," he said. "But I figured it was better to wait until at least the police had talked to you. You know, just in case. You know the saying: 'what you don't know —"

"— can't hurt you."

Stefan pointed at Mitchell with his index finger, twisting at the wrist, and he winked. "Just lookin' out for you, bro."

Mitchell pointed back at Stefan. "Back at you," he said, and Stefan laughed.

Stefan reached over the back of the sofa and picked up a remote, and turned the Media Center off.

"Just try to act surprised," he said.

"Okay." Mitchell stepped around the sofa and sat down beside Stefan, who inched away but kept smiling.

"You're doing better now," he said, "without the big group here."

"Yeah."

"That's part of it with you, isn't it? Big groups." Stefan shook his head. "Man, high school must just be hell for you."

"Yeah." Mitchell looked into the empty wine glass, which he was still holding onto. "Just hell."

"That where you first met her?"

"Her?"

"Her. Delilah."

"Oh. No. Not high school."

"Grade school?"

"Yeah. Third grade. She was pretty and strong. She stuck up for me when these guys tried to beat me up."

Stefan let out a long, low whistle. "Third grade. That's pretty serious."

Mitchell shrugged, starting to feel impatient. He'd told Stefan about all this stuff weeks ago, in the chat room. "Where'd you meet?" he asked.

"Me?"

"You. You and Trudy. You meet in third grade?"

Stefan grinned and slunk down on the sofa. "Oh no. Not grade school. Not my Trudy. We met through the news group. Started posting on the same topics, you know? Started IM'ing each other. Built up, you know, a rapport. We actually saw each other face-to-face the first time Lesley called a meeting. After fucking AOL shut us down."

Mitchell held the wine glass up to his eye. The distortion at the base of the glass made the very narrow stem seem huge, a concentric storm of glassy circles. The middle, though, was perfectly clear. He could see the fabric of his jeans through it, made tiny by the four-inch lens the stem made. "She's beautiful," he said.

Stefan nodded. "Trudy's a hottie," he said, staring at the blank Media Center screen. "She's also real compatible, you get what I mean. Not every woman knows what to do with a guy like me... But she can be a fucking cunt sometimes. Not like your Delilah."

"My Delilah." Mitchell turned the wine glass onto its side. He examined the stem, looked through it. Everything was squashed down and stretched out: it made the living room unrecognizable.

"My Dee-Lie-La," said Stefan. "She's sweet. So fuckin' pure. Can't fault your taste. Man, she was a sweetie. I can't tell you how it was to hold her, to put my arms over her shoulder...the feel of that sweet butt, the way she went limp when I put the cloth over her face...Knowing, man, knowing she was for you."

"For me."

"I was sorry to let Lesley take her, but that was the deal, and she wasn't for me. Just you. In a few minutes—man, you'll be able to live your every dream."

Mitchell held the glass in two hands, brought the stem closer to his eyes, so he could see the whole world. It looked like nothing he'd ever even dreamed. "She's not a cunt," he said softly.

"What?" Stefan leaned forward. "What are you talking about? You are so fucked up, Mitch. It's what we like about you. I can't tell you how long it took us to find a fucked-up kid like you."

Mitchell bent the stem. Except that it didn't bend because it was glass; it snapped, right at the base. He turned to Stefan, who was right beside him, and lifted what was left of the glass and jammed the stem into the inner tear-duct of Stefan's right eye, past there against something that was probably bone. Stefan shouted "fuck!" and grabbed at him, but Stefan was a fair bit weaker than Mitchell Owens.

A moment later, Mitchell wiped his hands on his jeans and pulled the TV remote out from underneath Stefan's twitching thigh. He turned on the Media Center.

The bedroom was different now. The comforter had been pulled aside, and it was all twisted to the right of the bed. The bald man was sprawled across the under sheet. He was clutching his face and there looked to be blood coming out. He was rolling slowly back and forth. The bedside lamp had been knocked over—or maybe thrown—and beside it, Shelly was slumped, her neck at a funny angle. The blond guy was on the other side of the bed, in the corner, his shoulders hunched and his head down. He was trembling. Mitchell looked at the remote, and pressed a couple of buttons, and he was looking at the parking garage elevator door, which was opening. Mrs. Lesley Woolfe was in there. Her eyes were wide and she looked like she was concentrating. When the door finished opening, she stuck her head out, looking to the left and the right, and then hurried off camera. He clicked again and again, but nowhere could he find any sign of Trudy.

Mitchell looked up. Somebody was pounding on the door to the apartment: pounding and pounding and pounding. Pushing Stefan's head aside, so he was lying on the sofa rather than sort of sitting up, Mitchell went to the door and looked through the peep-hole. "Oh," he said. "You."

He opened the door, and Delilah Franken pushed through. "Oh thank God! Oh thank God!" she said and fell into the apartment, and Mitchell put his arms over her shoulders. She smelled awful, like she'd peed herself, and her streaky-blond hair was matted, and he could see that there was blood on her shirt. "Call the police!" she said. "Call the police!"

LOVE STREET (AND OTHER BLEEDINGS)



Author Paul Dracon is back with another collection of the brutal and surreal horror he is best known for. Illustrated by Alicia Burgess.

Available at:

www.NakedSnakePress.com

www.Shocklines.com

www.PaulDracon.com

PAUL DRACON

Mitchell helped her into the apartment. He steered her away from the sofa, but sat her down in the dining room and stepped away. She looked at him with wide eyes and a frown, like she was mad but not exactly.

"Y-you," she said. "Mitchell... Mitchell Owens? Your mom and my mom were friends. You remember me—right?"

Mitchell nodded. "Delilah Franken," he said.

She leaned forward, wiped a greasy strand of hair from her eyes, and with shaking voice spoke slowly. "Mitchell, I don't know what you're doing here, but I am so glad that you are here."

Mitchell didn't know about that: she didn't look particularly happy. She looked like she was...

Concentrating.

"Now you have to listen carefully," said Delilah. "The people in the next apartment kidnapped me. They're some fucking Internet sex cult. I think they planned the fucking thing, for a long time... I don't know, but that's what I think. But whatever—they grabbed me from behind and knocked me out, and took me to a farmhouse somewhere north of here, and they kept me there for three days. Then they injected me with something and brought me—here. I got away—I hit a lady with a lamp, and scratched this guy's eyes, and a bunch of them just yelled and took off. One of the women locked herself in the bathroom and she didn't seem to be coming out. But I'm afraid she might come..." She looked up suddenly. "Shit. Is the door locked?"

Mitchell went over to the door. "I got to call the police," said Delilah, and Mitchell shouted, "Okay," as he looked through the peephole again. The hallway was empty, but the door on the opposite side stood ajar. "Where's the phone?" said Delilah.

Mitchell didn't answer. He watched for a moment longer, then opened the door and stepped out.

"Oh. Never mind. I see one by the sofa," she said.

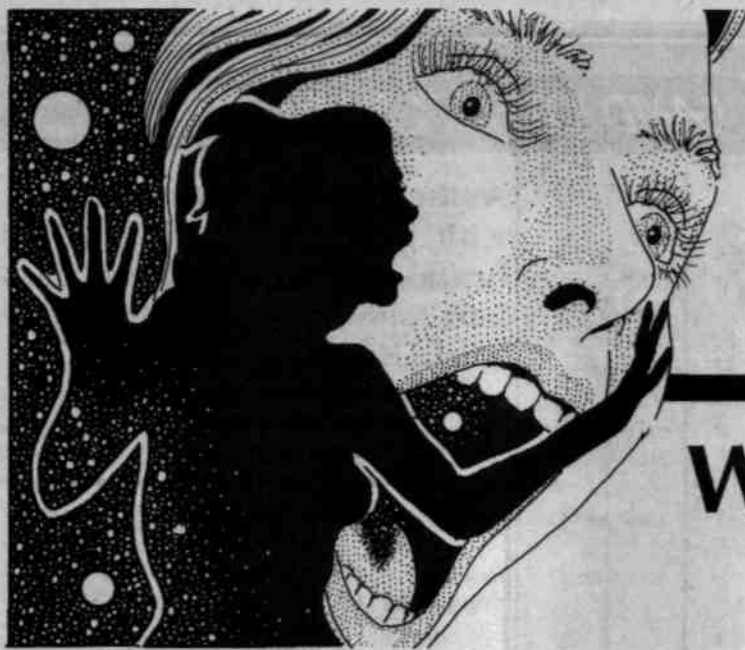
Mitchell shut the door behind him and crossed the hall between the two apartments. He ignored the shout of surprise that came from behind him. It was not a shout that interested him. It was, in spite of what Stefan and Mrs. Lesley Woolfe and the rest of them thought about him and his infatuation, a shout that had interested him less and less over the past few weeks.

He stepped into the vestibule of Giorgio Piccininni's apartment. There was a mirror hanging there. He smiled into it and he smiled back out of it. Mitchell Owens thought he could tell exactly what was inside him, just by looking.

So Mitchell looked away from there and into the dark room in front of him. He started toward the darkest part, and as he went he whispered:

"Trudy?"





PAULA
GURAN

WAVES OF FEAR

Can You Fear Me Now?

THE CELLULAR TELEPHONE and the Internet have made writing about small isolated communities beset by bad things more difficult. I was reminded of this last year when John Shirley was making changes for the "Author's Cut" of *In Darkness Waiting**, a book originally published in 1988. At one point the bad guys take down the phone lines into town to cut off communication to the rest of the world. Since the protagonists of the story are 18 and 20, an age group to whom cell phones are a way of life, that made the lack of mobile telephones obvious even without the telephone lines coming down. Being able to email or IM would also have been a problem. For *In Darkness Waiting* it was pretty easy. The novel's fictional location was in an area in Oregon that no cellular system covers and Internet access is still limited to dial-up. A sentence was added and the problem was solved. Except for some references to pop culture the book was otherwise quite up to date.

Maybe Stephen King's celebrated antipathy to mobile phones, recently evidenced with *Cell*, is grounded in a subconscious realization that many a plot might now have to take the devices into account? Okay, probably not, but those white spaces on the cellular access maps are getting smaller and smaller. Satellite phone and Internet services are becoming more common. Writers will have to get even more creative. In *Jurassic Park II*, for instance, a guy using a satellite phone is eaten by a dinosaur and

the phone is later found in dino-doodoo. Not a solution that can often be used, but it worked there.

Nor is King the first to have cast mobile phones as Bad Things or conveyers of Bad Things. Sinister cell phones have already been plot elements in several films. But for me, the most chilling use of telephony as a monster is still Arthur C. Clarke's story "Dial F for Frankenstein." The story, first published in 1964, begins: "At 0150 Greenwich Mean Time on December 1, 2005, every telephone in the world started to ring." A satellite telephone network has just been switched on and is analogous to a giant brain; the phone system has achieved "some sort of consciousness." It is quickly apparent, as the electricity falters, radio broadcasts cease, and guided missiles are unexplainably launched, that "[f]or homo sapiens, the telephone bell had tolled."

Clark said of the story, in a 2000 interview: "'Dial F for Frankenstein' is dated now because you no longer dial of course, and if I did it now it wouldn't be the world's telephone system it would be the Internet. And that of course is a real possibility. When will the Internet suddenly take over?"

Before the Internet or anything else takes over—in this issue we look at two novels in which a lack of cell phones had to be accounted for. The first, *The Keeper*, is set in a town in a Maine valley where you can't get a signal. The second, *The Farm*, is set in a valley in North Carolina. (Perhaps the lesson here is to stay out of valleys with no cellular service.) The third reviewed book is an anthology,

Lords of the Razr...I mean Razor... in which the one novella in which cellular service might have made a difference is set in 1982.

The Keeper

Sarah Langan

HarperTorch, 2006; \$6.99; 382 pgs.

Bedford is a town in Maine that's been in decline for 50 years. Its last industry, a polluting paper mill, has just shut down, and the population continues to dwindle. There's not much hope left and heavy rains are washing what is left away. Along with a considerable number of rainy days throughout the year, it rains for seven days in a row every year in Bedford. Since the town is situated in a valley the flooding can get bad. Last year the only bridge into town was flooded for a day or so and that's likely to happen again. The rain also mixes with the chemical byproducts of the paper mill that permeate the air and soil. Bedford's not only dreary and depressive, it is toxic.

Bedford has a town loon, Susan Marley, who wanders its streets and invades the dreams—literally—of its residents. She's young for a loon, 23, and was once beautiful. But she's been bedding most comers, running around barefoot and barely dressed in freezing weather, and living on Campbell's tomato soup and Marlboros. But her emaciated body, bloated looks, and foul smell aren't enough to turn some guys off and evidently no one in Bedford worries about STDs. Nor, we must assume, are there any social services that might aid the woman.

Liz, Susan's 18-year-old sister, is beset with not only vivid nightmares of Susan but fears she may be as crazy. But at least she's planning on getting out of Bedford as soon as possible. She's got a scholarship to a college and she knows she'll never be back. Her high school peers shun her, but she's got a boyfriend, Bobby Fulbright. Bobby is fairly normal although he's only 5'4". He's the town doctor's son and a member of one of the only two families left with anything like an upper-middle-class income. High school teacher Paul Martin, who is the closest thing Bedford has to an outsider, has lived there 20 years. His wife has mental problems and he is an alcoholic. He's also the only person to have tried to do anything about the plant closing—although he failed there, too, as he didn't show up at his own rally. He's also the only person other than Liz who thinks of Susan as a human being and the sole individual to attempt to help her. Georgia O'Brian, a local hair stylist, who used to baby-sit Susan and Liz, is a six-foot redheaded unwed mother who lives with her aging father. She once almost had an affair with Paul. The local sheriff Danny Willow is a decent type married to the town librarian. He feels, like most folks, there's something gone sour with Bedford; unlike them he doesn't superstitiously blame the malaise on Susan.

Danny's right. We learn pretty quickly that the town itself is somehow haunted and that Susan is somehow haunted, too. When Susan dies, the town's troubles become cataclysmic. Cut off by the rain there's no escaping whatever it is that's coming and, of course, come it does.

The Keeper is a solid achievement for a first time novelist. Langan's writing is not poetic, but she delivers her story well and even pulls off some vivid imagery. She has a knack for building suspense and draws characters on the edge of sanity particularly well. This is the sort of novel in which you need to care about the characters for it to work. I think most readers will be able to care for Liz and Bobby, although I'm not sure I bought the reasoning behind Bobby's sudden removal from Liz's side at one pivotal point. I think we might have had some feeling for Georgia and her son, but Langan seems to not quite know what to do with Georgia and she sort of disappears.

This book is getting a big build-up from HarperTorch. (The publisher's



efforts to both proclaim the book as "horror" while still trying to distance itself from the word is amusing in and of itself, but I'll probably address that elsewhere.) It is, they claim, a "brilliant debut" from a "sublime voice." There are cover blurbs from Jack Ketchum and Peter Straub. (Both of which are true, but neither of which negate the book's problems.) You are going to see big displays of this book come September 26.

So, let's overlook the hype and try to discuss why this is a good original paperback novel, but is not the Second Coming of Horror. Langan is definitely talented and an up-and-comer, but let's keep the perspective. Understand I do not want to spoil anything, so bear with some vagueness on my part in explaining what I consider some flaws.

Langan, like a good modern horrorist, tries not to deal with outmoded concepts of good vs. evil. Her ultimate message is "Nothing is all bad." Unfortunately the path she takes to that sentiment clearly defines certain acts as "all bad." Individuals have done bad things and dark secrets lurk in every basement, backyard, and bedroom, so even if you don't believe in an objective morality, there's evidence here that some actions are intrinsically "evil" and that people are being punished for it. If we have the dark side, we should also have the light and its possibility of redemption. Forgiveness is present for the Marley family, but the other residents of Bedford, past and present, and the town itself have no chance at salvation.

Stephen King saw the haunted house as a symbol of authoritarianism

and imprisonment and the archetype of the Bad Place. Langan isn't playing that game. She seems to be playing by Dale Bailey's theory that the haunted house is a symbol of everything that has gone awry in the American Dream. Bedford is haunted, we learn, mostly as a result of capitalistic greed.

Yes, there is one Capitalist Evildoer in the past with blood on his hands, but he and his aren't the recipients of the curse, the whole town is. In fact, the fruit of Mr Evil's loins escaped scot-free with their (unbeknownst to them) evil gains years before the town's doom descends.

When the whole story of Bedford is laid out for us, it is a little disappointing. What's ruined Bedford could be said of many places. Moreover, objective morality suddenly pops into the picture because the town has been "forsaken by God." God? We've gone 320 pages without God. Worse, the haunting is as much the fault of the common folks who just wanted to make a living as it is Mr Evil's. How dare they! Langan's lack of historical perspective and simple logic amounts to blaming the victims. It's as if Chernobyl was the fault of the children of Ukraine. Plus, the biggest victim, Susan, was born being what she is for no specific reason. She has no direct link to the badness of the place other than the accident of her birth.

One suspects the author herself may not have been completely comfortable with her own reasoning in some instances. Although Susan is definitely supernatural, she is also supplied with a psychological reason for her madness. The equation doesn't quite work. If the psychological nasties had not happened Susan would still be the metaphysical avatar of Bedford's darkness and still driven to insanity. You realize the Bad Things that happened to Susan happen primarily so Susan can hate Liz and secondarily so the Marleys can have an Awful Secret.

Then there is the town's toxicity, the natural (as opposed to supernatural) result of evil. We wonder how anyone lives here at all. The chemicals in the water have killed all amphibians and the pediatric asthma rate is five times higher than the norm. Remnants of sulfur in the plant, if burned, produce hydrogen sulfide which, when mixed with air irritates the lungs. It also becomes acid rain and can be explosive. Breathing its concentrated fumes can kill you in thirty seconds. One wonders why the

supernatural is involved when what's really needed is intervention by the Environmental Protection Agency.

So, although Langan delivers a good read up to the last dozen chapters or so, when explanations are forthcoming dissatisfaction starts setting in. The big finale is disappointing as there are still a lot of outcomes to be resolved. (In fact, it could have used an epilogue.) *The Keeper* is the sort of book that stays with you, yes, but some of what stays starts raising more questions. Most are small and probably would never occur if you'd come away more satisfied. (Didn't Paul have two sons, Andrew and James? What happened to Andrew? Why were a paper mill and a textile factory put in a valley with only one way in and out? Didn't those industries historically locate where there was access to water? If one is on each end of Main Street then where's the river? Why does the town have its own high school? Why did Susan make Georgia's son take a tumble? Etc.)

The Keeper is a page-turner for about four-fifths of its length and even the final fifth may not bother most readers as much as it bothered me.

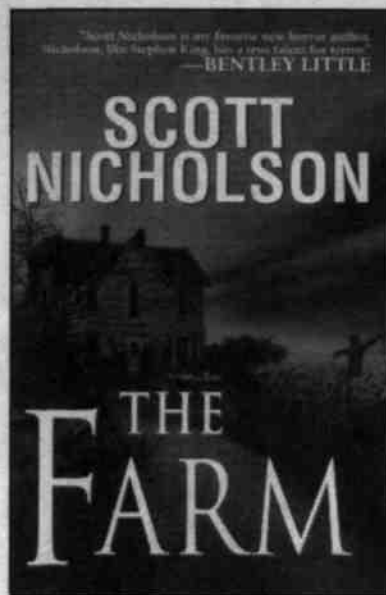
A sequel is already slated for 2007.

The Farm

Scott Nicholson.
Pinnacle, 2006; \$6.99; 400 pgs.

Katy Logan's given up her career to marry Gordon Smith. She and her 12-year-old daughter from her first marriage, Jett, have moved to Gordon's farmhouse in Solom, North Carolina. Katy's trying to be Superwife; Jett is playing at pre-teen Goth. Gordon is a local boy, albeit an educated one. He's a professor with expertise in Appalachian and other religions and thus can easily drop how scarecrows were originally human sacrifices to harvest gods into a conversation or mention Persephone at the odd moment. Gordon is also a descendent of something called the Circuit Rider, some sort of supernatural entity who evidently appears periodically to kill folks—or rather one folk. When Jett is frightened in the barn by a tall dark man with a sickle, it doesn't take long to figure out where the plot is going. The one wild card is that Gordon's first wife, Rebecca, seems to be haunting the house.

But Nicholson doesn't go entirely where one would expect. Murderous carnivorous goats are an original touch (surely he was tempted to title this *The Goats!*) as are group heroics from some



local ladies and a paranoid organic farming stoner.

Jett is a great, if sit-comish, character flawed only by the age assigned by the author. As long as you picture her as about 14, you'll appreciate her savvy and sass. (Although I doubt that even at 14 she'd be acquainted with Fellini, to whom she refers at one point.) She's familiar enough with drugs to believe in hallucinations rather than supernatural manifestations and smart enough to call her real Dad when things get too weird.

Before it is all over there is at least one dead body too many and a finale that's...well...so over-the-top it becomes a satire of horror. That one extra body left in the barn puts a little too much "real" into what otherwise can be seen as enjoyable surreal excess. Excess? Other than a horde of those people-munching goats (now crazed on marijuana), a ghostly headless horseperson, a supernatural dude, a psychopath, and submachine gun fire, it is, as Nicholson puts it "an orgiastic wad of insane magic."

The reader can't really buy into the mystery of why Katy ever married Gordon in the first place—the excuse of "stability" just doesn't ring true—and the supernatural boogeyman has a tendency to chat rationally with the locals. Add to that the frequent movie-references and humorous delineations of the characters, and you get the feeling that Nicholson intends the novel to be more of a "B"-movie than a seriously chilling feature. On the other hand, there is a human wacko and those goats really are pretty scary.

This is Nicholson's fifth novel and by sticking with his now-trademark Appalachian locales he's found a workable vein in the horror mine. He's even learned to sort out Primitive Baptists, Free Will Baptists, and Southern Baptists. It's not literature written for the ages, but it's fun stuff.

Joe R. Lansdale's Lords of the Razor
Edited by Bill Sheehan and
William Schafer

Illustrated by Glenn Chadborne
Subterranean Press, 2006
\$100; 280 pgs.

Joe R. Lansdale's creation the Lord of the Razor debuted in "The God of the Razor," a story first published in *Grue* #5 in 1987. The god showed up in Lansdale's 1987 novel *The Nightrunners* (and I seem to recall Batman facing off against him-somewhere). "God of the Razor" leads off this anthology and the character is its theme. "Tall and black...like obsidian rock...eyes like smashed windshield glass and teeth like polished stickpins." He wears a top hat with a band of razor blades. His coat and pants are made of human flesh and his pockets bulge with gnawed human fingers to snack on. A pocket watch dangles between his legs and he wears human heads for shoes. There's a straight razor with arcane symbols carved into its ivory handle that makes its way into human hands. Once it makes even the tiniest of nicks, that's an opening for the Lord of Razor to enter you. And once that mother's got your brain and soul you start making bloody sacrifices to him...you really don't want to know the gory details.

Except, of course, you *Cemetery Dance* readers just love the details. So, ten writers each contribute a story with varying amounts of details. A new Lansdale novella featuring the God of All Things Sharp then ends the anthology.

Sometimes revisiting an earlier creation results in a tale that can't quite live up to its predecessor. Here, however, the new story is superior to the 1987 story. "The God of the Razor" is a typical horror set-up: man goes to creepy old house at night and sees a creepier flooded basement with rats and a psychopath shows up. The crazed killer has an impossibly large antique straight razor in his hand and a story about the God of the Razor. Blood ensues. There's some stylish writing and, of course, the establishment of an ingenious mon-

ster—but the characters exist solely to hang the story on.

"Lord of Shadows," the new story, is the work of a mature writer who understands what "character driven" means. The two main characters are only slightly exaggerated. (After all, a Lansdale tale is almost always somewhat "tall.") They live in the very cruel world of boys where just wearing glasses is enough to make you a four-eyed faggot booger eater and occasional punching bag.

Leroy doesn't need an instant brother named, dear Lord, Draughton, but he doesn't have much choice. Draughton's father murdered Draughton's mother with a straight razor then killed himself, and the orphaned kid is now part of Leroy's family. We soon encounter that razor and much blood will be shed, but we also understand how easy it is for the Razor God to prey on the weak and rejected. The next time the moon is full we might think pretty hard of the King of Shadows with "his strange voice of broken glass and tumbling razor blades, two pounds of gravel and the screech of a dying cat."

Lansdale also smoothes out some bumps in his mythology and the new nuances sharpen the story's edge...so to speak.

Despite the high quality of Lansdale's story, it's not the best in the anthology. That's no slight to Lansdale as Bradley Denton's "Blackburn and the Blades" is one of the best stories of the year. Denton's "moral killer," Jimmy Blackburn, plays Satan to Lansdale's Razor God in this accomplished novella. Blackburn wants to make it to Chicago, a big city where there's plenty of dark corners for him and his dog, by New Year's Eve 1983. But first he needs some decent wheels. He takes a side trip to the Quad Cities (Davenport/Bettendorf/Rock Island/Moline) in Iowa where he finds a sweet '76 Thunderbird. He sets about acquiring the cash to pay for it by relieving some of the area's richer residents of a few items he can quietly pawn. While in a pawnshop he gets drawn into a situation that leads to his confrontation with the god of the slice. Denton handles the deadly intrusion of the supernatural into Midwestern normality with a matter-of-fact approach that blends pathos, humor, and a great deal of truth. The author seldom disappoints when he writes a story about Blackburn, a serial killer you can't help but like. Not surprisingly, Blackburn proves a most suitable match



for Mr. Cut—even when he's wielding a chainsaw.

Stephen Gallagher's "The Butterfly Garden" offers up another twisted childhood world and there's just enough warp to it to make it work rather wickedly. When a young girl is left with a strange family she must resort to prayer to give her the strength to survive. Don't read this one too quickly or you'll miss some subtle clues.

Thomas Tessier's "Back In My Arms I Want You" is not shabby either. It's a psychopath story but it's told in a chillingly matter-of-fact manner that makes it all too believable and therefore effective, even if you have read a great many psychopath stories.

The late Hugh B. Cave's "Brief Stay in a Small Town" is one of the furthest from the idea of the core idea of the God of the Razor, but it works in a less bloody way. The antagonist lays aside his razor and "vacations" in a small Maine fishing village. He disguises himself as the town minister and goes door-to-door cutting deeply with lies as he dispenses stories of infidelity in order to watch the pain that results. The real minister's spunky kids know their theology, though, and know how to deal with the problem. It's an old-fashioned story and therein lies its fatal flaw: even in small fishing villages women don't stay home all day anymore. Pretend it is set in the 1950s. (One cannot help but wonder, though, if this anthology has been more than two years in the making—Mr. Cave died in 2004—or if this story's first sentence, and maybe fourth from the last, were altered to make it suitable for inclusion.)

Beth Massie's "Fence Line" starts out strong with a white trash teenager having a[nother] baby she doesn't want. She goes into the woods to dispose of the infant and runs into one of the old witchy ladies that live there. The story ends strongly, too, with a memorable image. I'm just not entirely sure the middle part with the witches holds up as well as its start and finish.

"The Edge," by Ardath Mayhar, reads like dark folklore that's bubbled up from a southern swamp. It is one of those stories that leaves an impression that will last longer than you might expect at first reading.

Whether intentionally or not, Gary Braunbeck seems to try a little too hard to write like Lansdale in "Old Schick." (He even includes a drive-in.) When an early 1970s Marine with experience as a meat cutter meets up with the Lord in Southeast Asia, survives, and returns home a hero, you pretty much know what to expect, and Braunbeck lives up to expectations.

Chet Williamson attempts a P.G. Wodehouse pastiche that falls short of the mark. Chris Golden's "The Art of the Deal" is lackluster and a little silly. PD Cacek's "The Monster" is passable but a mite tedious. All three stories are professionally competent, they just aren't much more.

Lords of the Razor is one of those \$100, signed limited editions of 500 copies. The best stories will, no doubt, eventually turn up in other collections, but it will be a shame if 500 copies are all that are ever seen of it.

*Yes, mentioning *In Darkness Waiting* is a plug of sorts. It and, more recently, Shirley's *Cellars* with an introduction by Ed Lee, are from Infrapress. I'm Infrapress. You can find out more about those books and others by Dennis Etchison, Peter Atkins, F. Paul Wilson, and Stephen Dedman at www.infrapress.com. And as long as I am plugging, John Shirley has a new novel, *The Other End*, from Cemetery Dance Publications coming out in August. It's not horror, although there are some horrific elements, but it you've ever gotten fed up with fundamental religionists and their view of the end of the world as we know it—this book's for you.



NEW VOICES

JEREMY ROBERT JOHNSON

interviewed by Steve Vernon

JEREMY ROBERT JOHNSON is a novelist and the author of a multitude of acclaimed short stories and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize three times in 2000, 2002, and 2006.

His fiction is as sharp and slick and incisive as a straight razor right across your eyeballs. His first book *Siren Promised* was a collaborative effort between Johnson and long-famed genre artist Alan M. Clark, (and shame on any of you CD readers who don't recognize that name). It's a tale of addiction and legacy and rebirth, thick with dank mildewy imagery, a nice undercurrent of what is owed and what is needed and what must be sacrificed, a sense of pacing and plot and an air of tension that grows and twists like a tumorous knot. I don't know if Mr. Johnson sold his soul to the devil on a moonless midnight crossroads, but he's got a taste for nightmare imagery.

Siren Promised was released by Bloodletting Press in 2004. It is currently out of print.

Johnson's second work, *Angel Dust Apocalypse*, is a different kettle of dead fish entirely. The stories in here push the boundaries of genre fiction, ranging from the absurd to the surrealistic to the outright mad. His story "The League of Zeroes" will haunt you, "Working At Home" is a cross between pulp science fiction and outright nightmare, and "The Sharp Dressed Man at the End of the Line" ought to have been written by somebody named Ellison.

Angel Dust Apocalypse was released by Eraserhead Press in 2005 and is available at Shocklines and Amazon.

CD I first read your work in that big, fat gorgeous picture-book-of-the-damned, *Siren Promised*. So come on, 'fess up, before I break

out the cattle prod and sponge bath. How'd a young fellow from Portland, Oregon, hook up with a great illustrator like Alan M. Clark?

JRJ Well, we'd both been frequenting this website, kill-themanatees.com, and we happened to have linked up in this Oregon group hauling speedboats down to Florida...hold on...just having a James Frey moment... *must tell truth...*

Okay, here's the real version:

I guess, like most things in my life, it was a combination of dumb luck and tactless bravado. I was living in Eugene at the time, one of Oregon's two writing Meccas along with Portland, and I was blessed to have signed up for community college classes with both Nina K. Hoffman and Liz Engstrom. I'd sold a few short stories at that point and really wanted to buckle down and learn the craft. So I attended a Ghost

Story Weekend with Liz, this really lovely event where you camp out and write a story in two days and then all the writers read them by candle-light. It's a great time and I believe Liz is still doing it.

During the event, on my way to go fishing off a train trestle (where I nearly snagged an ocelot), I stopped and spoke with Liz for a while and asked her who'd done the illustrations for a book of hers. It was Alan Clark, who she then went on to tell me was this southern-fried madman who kept mummified animals in his studio and was obsessed with painting evil doctors. I was intrigued.

I checked out his website and, of course, totally loved his work and started to recognize him as the guy who'd done all those CD covers. Then, somehow, I got it in my head that he was probably dying to read some of my work, and just didn't know it. Yes, I was "that guy." I asked Liz if she could introduce me and she said, "Just call him." Which sounded crazy to me because I was still in this phase where I believed all published writers and artists lived in gated mansions full of coke and hookers. Just call him? Are you nuts? But I did it.

So somehow (after a vaguely awkward phone call where I said things like "You really know Joe Lansdale?"), Alan was gracious enough to take me on a tour of his estate and show me a ton of his incredible work, and even listened to me read a couple of my short stories. Why he chose to be so angelic, I've no idea.

And on top of that, he liked my stories enough to ask me if I'd want to collaborate with him on his new Pain Doctors book. And while we worked on that together we really hit it off and realized we had this great manic energy between us and didn't want to stop working. Thus, *Siren Promised*.

CD So how's the feedback on *Siren Promised*? Have readers responded well? Do you have any future work planned with Alan M. Clark?

JRJ I always have to knock on wood before answering a question like this, because so far the feedback on *Siren Promised* has been outstanding. The reviewers have been able to see past the emotional brutality of it and really seemed to get the story of hope and perseverance that's under all the dark, nasty business. Readers always end up telling us that once you start it you can't stop until it's over; that it's very cinematic; that they love the art. Some people have been asking for a sequel, although I don't know if I could stomach putting these characters through any more pain. And our compatriots in the field have been pretty glowing in their response, including the great intro from Simon Clark and a blurb we actually got yesterday from the ever-incredible Tom Piccirilli. Pic's *A Choir Of Ill Children* is the best Southern Gothic I've ever read, so having his blessing on our surreal take on that sub-genre means a lot.

One unexpected reader response is that now people I've never met want to do drugs with me. Clark and I were both pretty frank about our history with drugs and alcohol in the beginning of the book, and addiction plays a crucial role in the story. So now I've gotten a couple of emails from people saying they can't wait to party with me. And one guy offered to mail me some recreational psycho-actives he'd made in his tub. I guess I should have indicated that I'm pretty reformed now. I mean, I run marathons. I've got an awesome kid nephew to be a role model for. So while part of me appreciates that spirit of camaraderie and

sharing, and the fact that they loved the book, I have to politely decline. Besides, it's a huge stretch to call *Siren Promised* a pro-drug novel.

As far as future work with Alan goes, I'm excited to announce that I'm headed to Eugene this month to do a lengthy book re-design session with him for the paperback version of *Siren Promised*. The Bloodletting Press edition is the prettiest book I've seen in a long time, but it's almost sold out and we wanted to make a less collector-oriented version for the general readership; for people who just want the experience of the thing. I'll be writing a new Afterword for it, and we'll be re-orienting the intricately designed text and images so they'll still be effective in a smaller form, and that's a real project. But with Clark, it's always fun. We'll take some croquet breaks, down a bunch of soda, maybe play some Xbox. It's like a really weird clubhouse atmosphere at his place. Mummies and bones and horrific paintings everywhere. It's the Clubhouse of the Damned.

CD I took a long look through your bibliography. It looked to me like your earliest work was published in the year 2000, making you a true author of the 21st century. Tell me a bit about those early years in writing.

JRJ The early early years are interesting because of what a morbid fixation I had from the beginning. I was crazy for books and got bored with the kid's stuff around seven years old and managed to convince my mom to buy me King's *Cycle of the Werewolf*. Then *Salem's Lot* in the second grade and so on. I can still remember my first embarrassing public "arousal" which happened in the fifth grade, as a result of the human/wolf transformation sex scene in the middle of McCammon's *The Wolf's Hour*. What I'm trying to say is that I was a hopelessly horror-bound kid from the get go. And



those early writings, man... zombies, shotguns, vampires, lunatics, rabid dogs. I still have a lot of it in storage and it's hilarious. And I'd like to note that I'd written a zombie orca long before *The Rising* hit. And it could fly. Put that in your pipe, Keene.

Then there was my renegade writer phase. I became obsessed with Hunter S. Thompson, Carlos Castaneda, Kesey, Welsh, Burroughs, Mailer. Drugs. That whole image. Dropped out of college to write. To travel the world. I ended up in my parent's garage and various shitty apartments getting high and occasionally typing out the sort of stuff you'd hesitate to call "stories." It was writing, but it wasn't stories. I tried to sell that stuff to various lit journals, and never did.

Then there was the "holy-shit-my-life-is-out-of-control-and-this-has-to-change" phase where I shut myself off from the world for a number of reasons and decided I was either going to commit to this writing thing or... I don't know. And luckily I'd started to read more about the craft itself and started doing some better work. Things with rising conflict and first sentences that I hoped would hook people.

The work still didn't sell. I moved to Eugene, got back into drugs. It was a rough time and I was pretty disheartened. I had one story, "Liquidation" that I still kept on the market. Editors had come close to buying it, so I kept flogging it.

Then the Lizard Prophet came. I wish I was making this up, because it is ridiculous, but here's how it happened. I was at an outdoor rave called Galactic Tribes outside of Eugene, blasted on ecstasy and acid, and pretty much laid out on a dirty piece of carpet on the forest floor. I was staring at the sky when suddenly a great purple rift appeared and my consciousness was sucked into it. I was transported through blackness and over a craggy ice wasteland until I stopped before a figure sitting cross-legged on a floating chunk of glacier. It was an Eskimo with a lizard's face. He told me that I was one of the World's Great Storytellers. Then I blacked out.

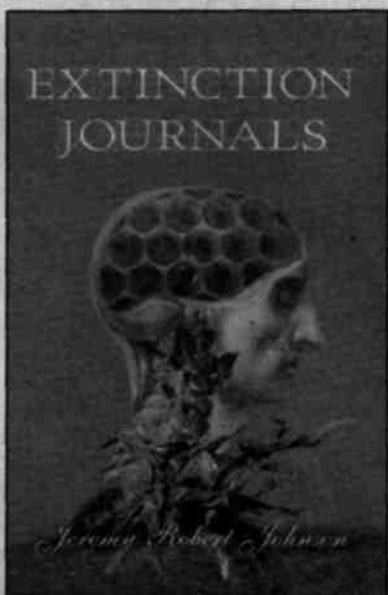
The next day I had struggled my way back home and the only piece of mail waiting for me was an acceptance for "Liquidation" from the New York lit magazine *Happy*.



I freaked out. It was a sign. Universal providence, whatever. Plus, a sale.

Later I got sober enough to realize that the Lizard Prophet probably didn't exist, but I still took it as a sign. From that point on I re-doubled my efforts, finally had a sale on my cover letters, and was lucky enough to start really learning about writing from Nina and Liz and Alan and Bruce H. Rogers. Eugene was definitely the right place to be at that time.

CD Wow man. I suddenly feel like letting my freak flag fly. Heavy vibes, sinking me down. Somebody give me an upper. Ow! Not an uppercut. Okay, let's get serious again.



I know that nobody really "becomes" a writer, but what did you do before you became a published writer? Were you a beach bum? A tattoo artist? A geek in a carnival show? Inquiring minds don't really need to know, but tell us anyway.

JRJ In chronological order I was a landscape maintenance guy, (mostly raking things up), cart pusher at Fred Meyers, (a step below bottle boy), served five years as a video clerk for a mom and pop joint in Bend called Movietyme, and then five more years in various banking positions including, somehow, client rep for agricultural loans. I still know way too much about dairy mastitis.

I would love to do tattoos but I don't have the artistic ability for it. The tattoo of Alan Clark's "No Bones Will Be Found" that covers my right forearm is almost complete. Twenty-nine hours of needle time so far and it's looking fantastic.

CD On the homepage of your website you describe yourself as an author of bizarro fiction. So what's up with that? I thought Bizarro was that fellow with the chunky white complexion and the Superman suit? Tell us what bizarro means to you. Why do you think you qualify as a bizarro writer?

JRJ Well, someone wanting to hear the party line on Bizarro should check out the FAQ over at mondobizarroforum.net or the Bizarro page at my site. Carlton has really done a great job of laying it all out there. Instead of repeating the propaganda I'll tell you what it means to me.

Bizarro is a batch of great writers (including Carlton Mellick III, Andre Duza, Steve Aylett, John Lawson, Kevin Donihe, D. Harlan Wilson, and Chris Genoa) who've come together under a label to try and dig out a niche for themselves and their admittedly very strange work. It's a way to let fans of weird cross-genre fiction (or even no-genre fiction, stuff that truly fits only under a Bizarro banner) know that there are a troop of folks out there making it. Before we were all out there on our own, doing guerilla marketing and trying to connect with the people who liked our fiction. Now that we've

coalesced it's easier to become known as a source for "the weird." It's tough to wholly classify as a genre, too, although I now can't think of Carlton Mellick III's work as anything but Bizarro.

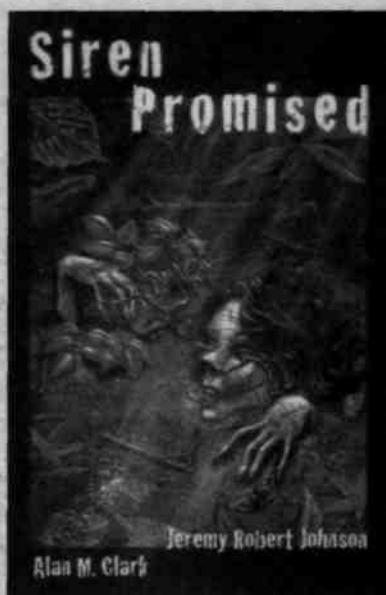
As far as it being a "movement" I think that's way off target and a total waste of time. I think lit movements come from great fiction made by individuals, the similarities come out of the zeitgeist, and the media labels it after the fact. To announce a movement in advance is pretty presumptuous. But some of the more bombastic folks who've attached themselves to the Bizarro title would like you to believe it's this great and holy literary fire that will clear mediocre fiction from the world, which is crazy talk, and I don't dig it. Hopefully that will die out soon and we can all just write books. Once our crew gets more work out there I feel like the Bizarro label will be better defined. Right now it's just sort of a dream we're going to chase down and try to make babies with.

Am I Bizarro myself? Sort of. I'm like the white sheep of the Bizarros. I have a decent cross-over in the horror audience. I publish in horror mags, lit mags, wherever I can. I write mystery, "literary" work, thrillers, dark comedy. Some days I don't feel like I'm Bizarro enough and Carlton reminds me to read my reviews. Because, as it turns out, people think my work is much stranger than I perceive it to be. I guess my often surreal or gonzo bent pushes my work into that "weird" category.

CD All right. Tell us the truth. I understand Chuck Palahniuk is a bit of a fan of your writing. How'd this come about, and what has he got to say about you?

JRJ Well what he said, and I know this without looking at any sources because I've memorized the quote and stopped just short of having it permanently tattooed, is "A dazzling writer. Seriously amazing short stories, and I love short stories. Like the best of Tobias Wolff. While I read them, they made time stand still. That's great."

Now that's a dynamite blurb from a guy who seldom gives them out, and has probably been 99% responsible for any cross-over sales I get in the non-



genre market. I mean, with a heavy metal cover and a title like *Angel Dust Apocalypse*, the book is a thousand miles away from Oprah-ready, but Chuck's advocacy has really opened it up for a whole new audience. I can't thank him enough and just hope that the book lives up to the reader expectations that his blurb puts out there.

How'd it happen? I can't lay out the exact details of how Chuck ended up checking out my work, but I can say that he's long been a literary hero of mine and that he and his website (chuckpalahniuk.net aka The Cult) have been central to my thriving and surviving as a writer. Right before I wrote the second story I ever sold I'd read Palahniuk's *CHOKE*, which really expanded my perception of how stylized and funny something could be and still have this very dark emotional core. That was a big influence. Then, when I was working as a farm loan guy I discovered The Cult and started lurking there constantly, taking in all these incredible lessons in the minimalist craft that Chuck was providing each month. And I noticed the more I used the tools from his essays, the better my stories were turning out and the quicker they were selling. Soon after that I managed to sell my collection, and through some level of miracle got that quote from Chuck. Then I bought a banner ad for the book at The Cult and got this huge response, something like a 400% increase in readers each month.

The train is still in motion, so I owe a great deal to Chucky P. I've also got

to give a shout out to Dennis Widmyer, the guy who created The Cult, which has now become this huge resource for writers. I'd probably still be working farm loans if it wasn't for Chuck and The Cult.

CD What else can we expect from Jeremy Robert Johnson in 2006?

JRJ I've got a line-up of antho contributions and magazine appearances scheduled. And I'm on a mission to get the word out about Craig Davidson, whose *Rust and Bone* is some of the best work I've read in a long time. Seriously knockout fiction.

The next really big thing, for me, will be the release of the *Siren Promised* paperback on my new Bizarro imprint (trumpets please) Swallowdown Press. That will hit in May of '06, just in time for World Horror in San Fran.

The second Swallowdown Press release, *Skullcrack City*, will be available in the next half of the year. I'm not saying much about it yet, but it'll be my first solo novel and a fun book for fans of minimalist crime noir, surrealism, and a very unconventional take on the brain-eating zombie trope (in fact I'd hesitate to call them zombies but somebody told me that phrase is money in the bank—God Bless Romero).

Wastelands Within, a three-author collection with myself, horror editor/writer Michael Heffernan, and the amazing (read *Radiant Dawn!*) Cody Goodfellow—is currently unscheduled but sitting before a very interested publisher. Cody's work in it is fantastic and I can proudly say that it also contains my most gruesome story, my most experimental story, and the most heartfelt story I've ever written. So I hope that hits in '06.

I've got a couple of marathons scheduled, which is deeply grueling but equally rewarding, and I'm also going to see if I can buoy up any cinematic interest for my fiction. And I know I'll read a lot, and write a lot in '06.

Beyond that, you'd have to ask the Lizard Prophet.





A Flood of Harriers

Jeremy Robert Johnson

W'e're on the reservation now, so the blasting bass from the stereo goes into silent mode and the car drops to exactly whatever speed it says on the road signs. You come through here calm and quiet, especially if you look like me. The Kah-Tah-Nee rez is mostly Paiute and there isn't an Indian alive that's going to give the look of love to a ginger-haired white dude with a mohawk. Not on a sweat-river-down-your-back heat-blast of a day like this. Not in this place, where the meth and the booze have jacked-up and sludge-brained the populace.

The Kah-Tah-Nee rez is a charmer. Greatest frequency of drunk driving accidents—check. Highest child mortality rates in the state—check. Corrupt cops—big old check. Some punk kid like me caught a bullet to the face last year during a traffic stop. Spooked witnesses said the kid wouldn't kick up any bribe cash. Got uppity. Got his brains plastered to the tempered glass behind him. Cop caught a temporary suspension, then got pinned by the Feds for meth traffic while on that little vacation.

You drive the exact speed limit through here, hold your breath and pray to the Gods of Invisibility. *Dear Gods, Please let me and my lovely girlfriend Sage pass this gauntlet until we are among a group of people that our ancestors didn't attempt genocide against. Let no tire pop. Let my speed remain a smooth constant. Let my presence go unknown. Amen.* The impulse is to speed until you clear the rez, to rush towards the comforting sight of the next concrete Wal-Mart behemoth. But don't. It's not worth it. Picture bits of your own skull stuck in the upholstery, that nice tan bucket seat turned dark red.

Slow down. Enjoy the drive. Sage looks beautiful in the seat next to me. Five years together and she's still a stunner. She's reading a *Glamour* magazine so she can get angry at it. She's one of the new breed of feminists that likes to constantly decry the effects of the skinny, blonde, big-breasted, All-American Beauty Myth, while, of course, trying as hard as she can to look exactly like the girls in the magazines. Awareness, even awareness coupled with anger, isn't always power. Not that I'm complaining; I get nervous when her armpits start to show stubble. I tell her otherwise of course, because I admire her attempts at personal growth, but when it comes down to it I prefer the shaved-and-primped porn star look. I don't really want to stick my dick in some idealistic, earthy Sasquatch.

"Look at this shit, Darren. They've got this girl posed, passed out in the gutter with her panties around her ankles. You want to tell me what this has to do with selling pumps? Seriously."

I could say something in response, about rape fantasy as a commodity and the saturation of shoe-fetishism in American porn, but it's boring preaching to the choir. She and I both

read the same AdBusters, go to the same town hall meetings, use the same compost pile, get the same e-mails from lefty groups pretending they aren't socialists. So I say nothing, just shake my head from left to right and purse my lips and huff a breath out through my nose to let her know that I'm with her in her parade of constant disgust.

I can't let her know, ever, that I jerked off to the ad before we packed the car up this morning. Sleaze presses my monkey-brain buttons. The cerebellum doesn't always offer a counter-move. Let her think I'm enlightened.

Sage slurps up the last of her 32 oz. iced cappuccino through a red plastic straw and turns to me with unexpected urgency.

"I have to use the bathroom."

"What? We just stopped back at the top of the pass, and you'd already drank most of your coffee by then."

"I'm not arguing with you about the size of my bladder. I just need to go. Bad. Whatever the next stop is."

"Shit, Sage, that's in about forty miles, outside of South Barker."

"What about one of the stores up ahead?"

"No. Remember, we don't stop here. Ever."

"We're going to have to, Darren. My bladder infection isn't all the way gone yet and I seriously need to go. Don't be a control freak."

"I don't stop at the rez."

"Why? Are you a racist? You afraid you're going to get scalped? Whatever your hang-up is, you need to can it and find me a bathroom."

I don't tell her my reasons. Never have before. Never needed to. She might peg me for the scared little white guy I am. Besides, not even counting today we've got about nine hours of driving tomorrow before we make it out to the Burning Man festival, and I want to keep this car clean of tension.

"Okay, I'll stop at the next restroom."

That earns me a series of soft kisses on the spot next to my right ear and a hand sliding up and down my thigh.

"Thank you, baby," she says. "Find it quick."



State park facilities. Sunny day. Lots of traffic passing by. Ramp for fisherman to slip their boats into the Sheenetz River. Two outhouses, one for men, the other, women. Looks clean enough. Why not?

My compact blue Ford sedan stirs up dust as I pull a quick right turn into the rest-stop. My bladder's starting to

feel a bit full, too, and this stop will let me make the rest of today's drive in one haul.

Hop out and stretch. Let the slight, warm wind blow across my lower back and dry some of the sweat puddled there. When the lower half of my shirt touches my back again it feels cool and wet. Goosebumps, and the hairs on my arms are up.

Sage is putting make-up back into her purse, and then bringing it with her as she steps out of the car. She also stretches, giving me a good look at her long legs, barely encumbered by a short black skirt. The wind must have caught her, too, because now I can see her nipples through the thin white fabric of her tank top. I'm starting to wish that this little rest-stop had more trees so we could hide away for a moment and have a nice travel-fuck. She smiles at me like she's thinking the same thing, then ducks her head like she's shy. Too cute. The girl can press my buttons.

She starts to walk towards the bathroom and I finish my stretching with a wide, open-mouth yawn and look down at the river. The sun is bright off of the water, white-silver, and the area downstream from the dock is dotted with dried brush. The opposite side of the river is walled in by a sheer, tan stretch of rock, high enough that a jump from it would guarantee shattered legs. At the far right border of the park I see an old, leafless tree with a trunk wide enough to cast a few feet of shade.

There's motion from inside that shade, then a voice, loud and deep across the park.

"Hey, girl! I want your ass! Now!" Then laughter. More shapes moving. Five shapes, all visibly in motion now, as if they'd been invisible in their stillness before, sitting beneath that tree. Waiting.

We should get back in the car. Now. Right fucking now.

I hear the women's bathroom door close behind Sage. Too late; the girl's on a mission. Not going to let a catcall bother her.

Focus on the dark space by the tree. There are five of them. All men. All seated or resting on the ground. Still laughing, watching me. Two are shirtless and wearing old blue jeans. One guy, lying on the ground towards the back of the shade, is morbidly obese. When he laughs his girth barely moves. His lungs and diaphragm must be so small under all that fat.

One of the shirtless guys stands up. He's looking right at me. This can't be sustained. This will lead to something. Act casual. Move your feet. Soon the men's bathroom door is behind me and I've latched it and there are enough flies buzzing around in here to block out the noise of the men laughing outside. I try to stay in motion. I piss quick through a fear-shrunken dick and then squirt a couple drips of antibacterial cleanser onto my hands and rub them together. Even in this heat, my fingertips have gone cold. My head feels like there's a wool hat of electricity over my skull and I can sense my heart is kicking double-time. You couldn't find a drop of spit in my mouth with a microscope.

There are men outside this small bathroom yelling that they want my gorgeous girlfriend's ass. The best odds say that they are Indians, and I'm a skinny white kid with a red mohawk. This is like being a Nazi and wearing a yarmulke into the heart of Israel.

The world has just gone real. The pleasant harmonic fuzz of daily life has been stomped to the concrete with atomic bomb speed. I'm fucked.

I hear Sage stand up in her bathroom and buckle her belt. Shit.

We're fucked.

I unlock the bathroom door and grab the handle. For a split second I can't seem to push it open and at that moment I know that one of them, one of the men from the shade, is going to keep my door held tight and not let me out and the others are going to step into my girlfriend's stall when she opens her door and then they'll have her and they can lock themselves in with her and rape her and beat her down and cum on her and piss on her and I'll have to listen from inside this shitty bathroom, surrounded by a legion of flies, and I'll hear everything, every last moment, separated from her by a thin wall, and when they're done...

But then the door does open, as if the wind across its surface had given it a moment's extra weight, and I'm thanking God until I see that the man who was looking at me earlier is now headed my direction.

I stand in front of Sage's bathroom door. Five of them. *Goddamnit.* How can I stop five of them? Only one is headed towards me. I'm shaking but trying not to let it show. Things are moving so fast that it seems my brain is a second behind, disconnected, not altogether worth having. Hard to think. Fight or flight? Never fought a day in my life and I can't run and leave sweet, delicate Sage here. What other options?

He's ten feet away now. The other four men in the shade are standing, expectant. Can I take this one guy if he starts swinging? Would the other four leave me be if I beat this guy? Right. The guy's definitely an Indian, dark skin marked in all directions by inch thick scars. Oily black hair smattered with dust. Lip scar from a cleft restructure. Moon-surface pock marks from cystic acne. The booze on his breath hits me at five feet away. This guy's a wreck, and he's not wearing shoes. The sight of his bare feet pulls the breath from my chest. Something about seeing his feet caked in dust.

At three feet away he speaks up. "Hey, man, I need to talk to you." He's talking loud enough for his friends to hear. I'm their entertainment.

"Okay, yeah." Say as little as possible. Don't puff your chest out. Don't let this escalate. Be ready if he swings.

"Sorry, man, but you can't have that here." His right hand points up at my head. His left hand hovers near a slim shape in his pocket. "People 'round here are crazy. They see you with that hair, you could get hurt." He's smiling a three-tooth smile, happy as hell to watch me twitch. "Not everybody's like me, man. People 'round here get crazy. You know that's a tribal haircut, right?"

"Right." I don't think telling him that I'm trying to go for a Mad Max/Travis Bickle look is going to mean shit to this guy. I'm a target, regardless of hairstyle. I could have stopped in here with a fully shaved head and he would have asked me if I was a Nazi. He's looking at me with one eye, his other floating slightly to the left, un-focused.

"You Scottish? You sound Scottish?"

I must sound Scottish when I'm about to piss my pants, or maybe it's the red hair. For just a second I'm thinking that this is my way out, that I'll tell him I'm Scottish and we'll kick back with some beers and joke about how the English

fucked both of us over and that'll be that. Brothers-in-arms. But what if I can't sustain an accent?

"No. I'm not Scottish." This response leads him to step closer towards me. His left hand slides into his pocket, towards the thin rectangular shape. His breath is heavy and thick in my nose now, like dumpster breeze on the wind. Old eggs, gallons of cheap, pissy lager. His focused eye is locked on mine.

"I'm not scared of you, man. I just left Reno, with the Paiutes there. Proud people. We made sacred shirts so I wasn't never afraid. We did the Ghost Dance. Got into some trouble, though, knowwhatImean?" He gestures to the inch thick scars on his body, what appear to be stab wounds interspersed among faded prison tats. A crucifix with the word "Wokova" across its horizontal arm. Another on his left shoulder reads "FBI" and beneath it "Full Blooded Indian." Doesn't he know Full Blooded Native American would be more PC?

He's covered in these marks, black ink and flesh wounds. He knows what it's like to fight. If something starts, I'm decimated.

The door clicks open behind me. Sage steps out, her make-up refreshed. Her innocence makes my heart ache. She's been dolling up for what could be our last day on Earth. The look she gives me says she's been listening to our conversation, though, and now she's ready to get the hell out of here. I slip her the car keys and am waiting for the guys to come rushing towards us.

The men in the shade whistle at her. Mr. FBI in front of me doesn't even look at her. All his attention's on me. He smiles again. "Pretty girl. What's she doing with a guy like you?"

I hear the passenger door close behind me and knowing that Sage is in the car gives me a moment's relief. She isn't locking the doors though. Doesn't she know she's in danger? Or is she being brave and leaving it open for me? Shouldn't someone else be pulling into this rest stop soon?

"Cat got your tongue? Rude, man. Rude. Listen, don't stop here again. My friends are about to go crazy on you. But I told them I wanted to talk to you first. I got this watch I need to sell."

Should I reach for my wallet? Could be my quickest shot at getting out of here. I tell him I could use a new watch, and he tells me that he'll have to give it to me later but I can buy it right now. I don't ask him the price. I know what it is.

I hand him all the cash in my wallet, three hundred in twenties.

As he takes the money with his right hand his left slides from his pocket. Before I can retract my arm he's grabbed my hand and he's slashing across the top of my forearm with a dull silver box opener. The pain is sharp and immediate and the sensation of the blade touching bone turns my stomach.

He's still got my hand and he pulls me in close and spits on my face. His saliva is hot and it's in my right eye and trickling to the corner of my mouth. He's whispering to me in my left ear and in my right I can hear the men in the shade laughing and shouting.

His breath feels damp on my face. "You NEVER come back through here. Ever. This is our land, stupid white bitch. This is our place."

Blood is running in a steady stream from my arm to the dust below. Muddy spatter is hitting the front of my sneakers. Sage, thank God, is still in the car. I can hear her screams through the glass.

Mr. FBI's hands are on my chest now, pushing me back and down and I'm turning even as I hit the dirt, to scramble back to the car and get in and lock it and bail out of this place we never should have been.

Sage has already got the key in the ignition, and she hits the auto-lock just as my door closes. I start the engine and begin to pull out of the lot in reverse. Going forward would steer me by the shade tree and that's not a chance I can take.

Mr. FBI is standing behind my car now, box opener in one hand and my cash wadded in the other. Sage sees the gash in my arm and her screams gain volume. I can't take her freaking out right now. I yell back, "Quiet! I've got to get out of here!" Mr. FBI is smiling at me, laughing. I start to back up and he kicks my bumper. I feel the kick through the seat of my car.

I start to back up again and now he's dancing.

We did the Ghost Dance.

He's chanting something and inscribing small circles in the dirt with his feet. As quickly as the dance began, he's done and steps to the side. He's letting me go.

The exit to the place is on a slight incline and my right tire catches the soft shoulder, almost spinning my car into a drop that would pull us end over end to the river below. Back to where they are.

Sage is crying now. *OhmyGod, ohmyGod, ohmyGod...*

My arm is still dripping, and I can see dust in the wound. The dust of that place.

This is the beginning of our vacation.



When you lose your friends here, at the Burning Man festival, you lose them for days. The desert shifts time around you. The dust storms, the wind, the drugs, the sense of having drifted into a separate reality, all of these things break down the way your brain used to function. By the end of your first night you've seen an all-male gangbang, watched two dwarves get married at the foot of a giant temple, snorted enough Charlie to make Scarface jealous, fondled a theremin dressed as an alien, and fallen asleep at the foot of a door to nowhere. This all before you see your first sunrise.

No surprise that the place is tough on relationships.

Sage was pretty shaken up in the first place, and no matter how much I tried to get her to relax, the Kah-Tah-Nee rez scenario keeps her freaked out. Paranoid. I'm the one with seventeen stitches. I'm the one who can still feel the spit on my face (*Looks like he's got Phantom Saliva Syndrome, Doc*). I'm the one who had to ask his parents to wire extra travel cash. But Sage is the one making this into her deal. Her trauma.

And we did not come here for trauma. We came to party. But she could barely party anyway, with her "friend of Bill W." bullshit and her twelve steps and her insistence that we stop and meditate every hour and absorb the peace of the desert. I'm not here to get centered. I'm here to escape into the chaos.

So that's what I bought. One big fistful of chaos.

I've never seen mushrooms like this. The guy that sold them to me said his name was Scheme. I told him that was a tragically dodgy name for a drug dealer. He told me \$30 bucks could buy me a ticket to outer space. Said the 'shrooms

came from the Moapa reservation and were used mainly for religious ceremonies. The idea of my drug money eventually trickling back to the Indian population pissed me off, but I've seriously never seen mushrooms like this, so small with such a bright purple tint. Besides, they burn The Man down tonight, and there's no way I'm going to be within shouting distance of sober for that social call.

It's about three hours till the big wooden Man gets blazed and I want to be peaking when he topples over into his own funeral pyre. I've got no girlfriend obligations, no friends to slow me down, a CamelBak full of filtered water, a dust mask, and warm clothes on.

Sage put clean bandages on my arm tonight, moments before she decided to take off with her new yoga friends, Dale and Kristin. She was getting ready to leave our tent and I leaned in to kiss her. She pulled away.

"What?" She's been hyper-hesitant towards me since our bad time at the rest stop. I can't figure her out.

She speaks, carefully, like she's been thinking about this for our whole vacation. "Well... I'm having a strange feeling about you now, like something changed since you got hurt. You looked so scared. You just didn't look like the guy I thought I knew. And I feel like luck or God or whatever is all that got us out of that place. I don't think you could have protected me." She breathed out heavily like she was about to tell me I had terminal cancer. "I just don't feel safe with you anymore."

Sage kissed me on the forehead like I was some lost puppy about to get the gas chamber treatment, and then she stepped out of the tent and zipped it up behind her. If she would have stayed I'd have told her that I don't feel safe anymore either.

I'll try and find her at the center of The Burn tonight. We can straighten things out.

But first, I've got some mushrooms just dying to be ingested. I dig into the Ziploc bag and pull them all out, all the little bright purple stems and caps. Best to eat them quickly, the whole batch at once. They tend to taste like the shit they're grown on.

I'm chewing, and they've definitely got an earthy taste, but it's one I can't quite place, or at least I don't want to, because the flavor most reminds me of the dust I huffed down when Mr. FBI cut me and pushed me to the ground.

Stranger still, the wound in my arm begins to throb as I swallow the last bite of fungus. But the throb isn't my heartbeat. The rhythm is not my own.

1 1 1

The drums can eat your blood. The drums can eat your blood. They move in circles. Sing words I can't understand. Try to melt into the dirt. Try to crawl inside. We are swallowing everything. This whole desert runs on gasoline. We are not separate. All plunder. All rape. We are reptiles. We will eat your children. Keep your drums. Keep them away. Have a blanket, let it soak into you, join the stitches and I'll skin you alive. Unravel. Consume. Swallow.

Try to breathe. This dust storm can't last. I'm surrounded. Can you hear them? Where's Sage? She's shrinking away. Gone. I'm cold. I'm naked. Why am I naked? Thirsty. The Man is burning somewhere; I can see the flash of the blaze through the dust, light gone soft in the storm filter. They're

around me. Every direction. I can't keep them away. I can't make them BE QUIET!

This dust is ancient. A wall one thousand feet high, pointing at the moon. He appears like a cloud. The dead are alive again. We were one but you ate us to nothing. Wokova, your dance will bring the flood. Your armor will make us safe. We are all around you. Pull you back through yellow-black. We'll keep you alive till sunrise and eat your tongue to steal your lies.

Dancing in circles all around me. The sky is opening up and the spears are raining down. They will eat my heart. The drums are finding their way home. I can't stop throwing up. I bit my way through my stitches to try and set the drums free. My blood is still pulsing on the ground. Tiny eyes in the soil. Watching. Waiting. Shit. Help me. Sage? If I'm still naked when the sun rises I will be burned black. Burnt to dust. Floating. Breathe me out.

The land will return. The water will be made of flesh. Wokova is coming. The Earth will breathe again. Wokova is risen. Balance will return. The drums can eat your blood. The drums can eat your blood. The drums...

1 1 1

You can try to imagine it. You can picture what it must feel like to walk naked back to your camp covered in the dust of the playa, with a bloody arm and your own vomit dried on your chest. You would know how hard it would be to get the well-meaning hippies to leave you alone, to not drag you back to a med tent. Or you could imagine the fear that you see on the faces of people who came here for bliss, the people whose trips you are utterly devastating with your wrecked appearance. You can grasp all that.

You might even be able to understand what it's like to hear drums that can't be real coursing through your bloodstream. You might be able to picture the phantom blurs of bodies dancing in circles around you as you shamle home. Could be a trick of the light, right?

But is there any way to truly understand what it's like to unzip the flap to your tent and find the girl you love lying there dead? To understand that she's gorgeous and naked there, with her legs spread, so much so that you're instantly aroused despite the fact that her eyes are wide open and staring at nothing and there's old vomit pooled in her mouth and caked in her flowing hair? When you smell the booze on her breath, the stink of the alcohol that she'd sworn off by oath and will so many years ago, would you know that she'd found something to make her feel safe again? And would you be surprised to find you can only think one word?

Would you ever understand what it's like to be there at the foot of the dead, bathed in new sun, whispering the word "Wokova" like a holy prayer?

1 1 1

.45's come cheap. I'm just glad that Scott's brother still lived in Aston. His place was an easy stop on the way back towards Kah-Tah-Nee. Even when I was little, Scott's brother Dean always had crooked guns. No numbers. Said he bought them at truck stops from cranked-out drivers doing a little extra traffic on their long hauls. Didn't say much more than that.

Even now, when I show up at his place still covered in dust and withering away inside of a gray velour track suit, he isn't the talkative type. He notices that my sleeve is crusted to my arm with blood and says he knows a doctor who can fix things without reporting them. I shrug it off. What can I tell him?

I'd see your doc, Dean, but this open wound is the only thing keeping me from hearing the drums. In fact, it was healing up and I cracked the scab open this morning, just outside of Modesto on I-5. Didn't want to see the shapes dancing around my car anymore so I took my house key and raked the wound until the blood started flowing again.

Nope. I just keep quiet and buy the gun and feel its oil soaking into my skin.

I'm confused by Dean's question as I leave.

"Hey, Darren, don't you need to buy any bullets for that?"

I keep quiet.



The sign tells me I'm now entering the Kah-Tah-Nee reservation and I start to cry. Last time I saw a similar sign Sage was sitting there next to me, sipping on her coffee, planting sweet kisses in the soft spot by my ear. Now she's gone, cooking away in a little tent in the desert until the wind spreads the smell of her and other campers come calling.

And I'm back here, smelling gun oil in my nervous sweat and hearing the drums inside my blood. The wound has scabbed over again and the drumming is so loud I'm having a hard time staying focused on the road. I can try and think in the space between the drums, but I keep losing the plot and these words keep repeating in the place of logical thought.

Wokova.

Balance.

Revenge.

Fifteen miles. Seven. Almost there. These drums are smashing around in my head. I feel heat on my lips and chin and realize I'm bleeding from both nostrils. Bloodshot eyes stare back at me through a vertigo haze that makes me feel like the world is on permanent tilt.

My body is in the grasp of tremors, shaking to this rhythm that was never mine. The sun drifts behind a mountainous ridge and dusk floats down, spreading gray light across the Sheenetz River. I can see the rest stop. My pulse is the sound of long dead tribesmen calling down the flood.



They are still here. The men in the shade. But now they aren't laughing. Can they hear the drums too? Apparently Mr. FBI is their permanent mouthpiece for tribal affairs, because he's stepping forward with his box cutter in hand and saying, "Man, you get in an accident or something? You deaf? I told you not to come back to our place."

The drums are so loud now. Can they see me shaking? With the sun gone there is no more shade, just dim light and dark shapes. I feel a drop of blood slide off of my chin. The four-hundred-pounder shouts out from beside the tree.

"You lose your pussy somewhere, little man?"

I raise the gun up with my ravaged arm. They register it quickly and appear more angry than scared. I level off at Mr. FBI and he doesn't flinch. I'm not the first sick white man to aim a gun at him. He's resigned to it. He looks straight at me with his one focused eye.

"Pull the trigger, man. Because when you do, my friends will fucking kill you, and I'll be free."

The dancers are around me now. They're surrounding Mr. FBI and me, and they seem real. The drums get louder, too loud, and I grind my teeth together and I can feel the enamel cracking, my teeth splitting down the middle and now there's this pain that accompanies each beat of the drum, this soaring red fire that courses up my gut every time another invisible hand falls to a skin pulled tight, and there's only one way to make this stop before it tears me to shreds.

Wokova. Balance. Revenge.

They watch me as I lift the hand that isn't holding the gun and plunge the fingers into the wound on my forearm. I'm scraping. I'm digging. Get the sound OUT.

The wound opens and instead of dripping to the ground the blood sprays out fast, too fast, and too much of it, forming this thin mist that spreads quickly through the air.

We are all in it now. The dancers. The Indians. Whoever I've become. We are all standing in this red mist, breathing in the drums. We are breathing my blood, our lungs pulling a lost pulse from the sky.

Wokova. Balance. Revenge.

REVENGE.

I aim at Mr. FBI's head and pull the trigger on the .45. His good eye goes wide as the hammer falls on nothing.

Click.

I pull the trigger five more times, letting each empty click echo through the sound of the drums.

Revenge is here. And it is theirs.

They are upon me in seconds, all of them. The sound of the drums, the mist we are breathing in, the sight of the gun, all of it has brought forth an old rage. Not anger and booze and cheap, easy hate.

Rage.

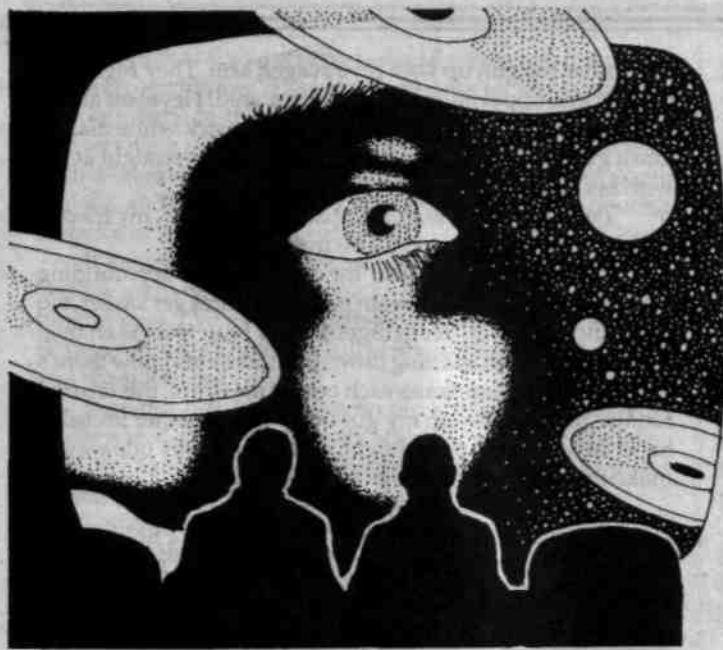
Box cutters become talons. Fists become great stones. Their ancestors dance around us while they consume me. My teeth crack against smooth river rock. They float away, broken bits of white bone flowing over red clay. A fist grabs the front of my dusty mohawk. Claws enter my scalp at the top of my forehead and then I feel fingers sliding under my skin and pulling up, pulling back. I can feel them sawing it free and my head drops down to the river stones as the men raise my scalp in the sky. They drink the blood that drips from the shank of skin and hair. They are chanting a name. *Wokova. Bringing a flood to cleanse the Earth.*

Mr. FBI is chewing at the back of my neck, tearing at the skin with his few remaining teeth.

They are becoming as hungry as we are.

And I can see by the light of the new moon that the waters of the old river are rising fast.





MICHAEL
MARANO

MEDIADROME

WELL, ROGER EBERT, the man who co-wrote *BEYOND THE VALLEY OF THE DOLLS*, and so introduced hundreds of thousands of hippie pot-smoking draft-dodging moviegoers to a drug-crazed, decapitating hermaphrodite spree killer (complete with a decapitating sword and an orally inserted handgun), has gotten on his high horse again. Just as he did with *I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE*, which is a bleak, brutal and brilliant movie (and not by a long shot the vile and sexist piece of shit he claimed it to be), Ebert has condemned the Australian horror movie *WOLF CREEK* on moral grounds, calling it a "sadistic celebration of pain and cruelty..." He also saw fit to attack the film for its opening on Christmas Day, as if that were the choice of the filmmakers, not the distributors. *WOLF CREEK* is not a celebration, it is a *depiction* of pain and cruelty. If there is sadism attached to the flick, it is as equally directed to the characters in the film as it is to its audience. It is an indicting of sadism. This movie hurts to watch, and it should. Ever see a car wreck? A bad one? Part of your brain shuts down, as some Pollyanna-like corner of your innermost self tries to convince you that the bag of red-soaked laundry in the road isn't a human being, even though it's looking up at the sky and screaming. Moments of *WOLF CREEK*—not because of their gore, but because of their intensity and sickening honesty (that's a good thing, by the way)—reminded me of

that partial brain shut-down caused by the desire to not see a suffering thing as human; that partial brain shut-down wants to let your cowardly ass shirk the ugly and burdensome chore of empathy. The pain and cruelty of *WOLF CREEK*, which are intense and hard to take, have a purpose: they create a sense of bleakness and hopelessness vast as the Australian Outback in which the film is set. "Bleak and Hopeless" may seem kinda trite as exercises in and of themselves. But *WOLF CREEK*, despite its basic slasher movie structure, uses bleakness and hopelessness to shoulder you with empathy for the film's victims of pain and cruelty. Yeah it's full of hideous brutality, but it's brutality that matters. Some people can't handle that.

The stink of doom in this movie is suffocating. These are human beings being butchered, and the movie never lets you forget that. The *SAW* movies let you forget that, by way of their silly *DR. PHIBES* riffs. *HOSTEL* let you forget that, by way of its dumb fuck frat boy revenge fantasy climax that could only work due to a string of remarkably dumb coincidences. Just about every fucking piece of shit remake of a horror flick coming out these days lets you forget you're watching human beings die. Did you care, one way or the other, if anyone in *HOUSE OF WAX* died? Didn't think so.

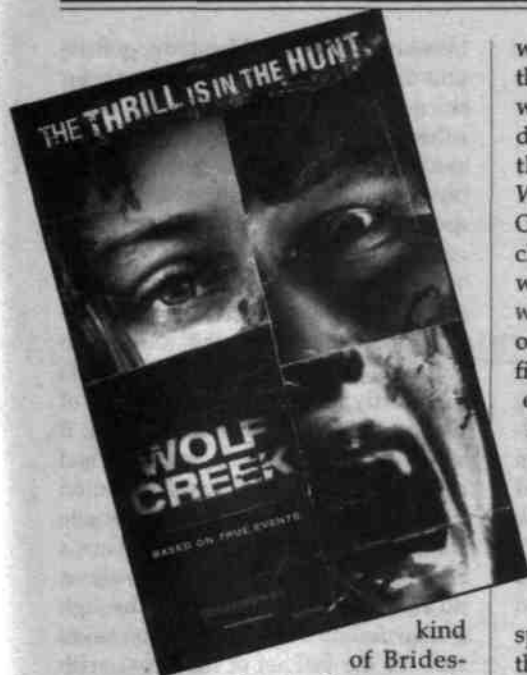
WOLF CREEK, thematically, is a return to the dark and steel-toed-boot-

to-the-teeth tone that made movies of the 1970s so brutally effective. Was there a ray of hope in *STRAW DOGS*? In *ELECTRA GLIDE IN BLUE*? *THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE*? *DEATHDREAM*? *BLACK CHRISTMAS*? Hope is for pussies. Empathy takes guts. See *WOLF CREEK*, and see if you're brave enough to care.

† † †

I hated the first *UNDERWORLD* movie. Hated it. What I'm about to tell you is true. The morning after I saw *UNDERWORLD*, I dreamed I'd just bought a special edition VHS of 1931's *DRACULA*, starring Lugosi, and I was very happy that I had gotten hold of it. As I pulled the cassette out of the box, it trailed chewed-up and perforated videotape out of its plastic innards. I was heartbroken. I tried re-spooling the tape into the cassette, but it was so badly damaged, it started coming apart. I felt cheated and hurt and depressed that such a bitchin' old school vampire movie I loved was lost to me.

UNDERWORLD inflicted that dream. I hate post-Anne Rice vampires. Everyone sits around and looks fabulous and bitches each other out and plays mind games over centuries. Heaven forefend they should, y'know, go out and bite some people on the neck and enjoy being evil. When was the last time we saw a vampire have fun being evil? Chris Sarandon in *FRIGHT NIGHT*? If I were a vampire living, or un-living, that



kind of Brides-head-with-fangs existence, I'd take me a nice noontime walk and be done with it. Yeah, *UNDERWORLD* nominally had werewolves, too, but they were really just hairy vampires—a little less bitchy, but just as annoying. *UNDERWORLD* wasn't about a war over who controls a monster empire. It was about who controls the supply of Ecstasy on Friday night. It was a fashion show too stupid even to be an object of parody in *Zoolander*.

And when I'm promised vampires fighting werewolves, I wanna see fangs and claws. I wanna see flesh and fur fly. The vampires and werewolves in *UNDERWORLD* fought with guns. *MATRIX*-style. Lame, lame, lame! Yeah, the characters of *UNDERWORLD* may seem all cool, but behind the façade, they're still the kids who wrote scary poetry in study hall with the strains of *The Cure* in their heads and the red marks of dodge-balls sun-setting on their foreheads. Van Helsing should be the guy to take down vamps, not some big pimply seventh grader out to take their lunch money.

Soooo...you can imagine I had my daggers out when I went in to see the sequel, *UNDERWORLD: EVOLUTION*. I am absolutely astonished that I didn't loathe this movie the way I would a throat full of leeches. I don't think *UNDERWORLD: EVOLUTION* is a good film, but it's so much better than *UNDERWORLD*, it made my head spin like Linda Blair's. The downside is, you can't understand *UNDERWORLD: EVOLUTION*

without having seen *UNDERWORLD*. Still, the opening of *UNDERWORLD: EVOLUTION*, which is a flashback to 1200 AD, finally delivers what we were promised in the first movie—*VAMPIRES AND WEREWOLVES BEATING THE CRAP OUT OF EACH OTHER!!!* Fangs, claws, blood, fire—it kicks butt. So, within the first five minutes of *UNDERWORLD: EVOLUTION*, with a serious case of vampire-werewolf-fight blue balls finally relieved, I was already more entertained than I was by the entirety of the first *UNDERWORLD*.

For the most part, *UNDERWORLD: EVOLUTION* is nothing but a bunch of dumb action sequences strung together, and that's OK for a dumb movie. There are a lot of scenes in which vampires talk in slurred speech because their fangs are making them sound as if they have mouths full of Linkin' Logs. You do not know what ANYBODY'S motives are until about three fourths of the way through the movie, and when the motives are provided, it's sort of as an afterthought. *UNDERWORLD: EVOLUTION* has an actual story arc. A crappy story arc, true, full of worm-eaten logic and nonsense. But a story arc, nonetheless.

Having said all that... I gotta ask, kiddies: what is a vampire, these days? Is it a state of undead monstrosity, or is it just a fashion statement? There's one scene in *UNDERWORLD: EVOLUTION* in which Kate Beckinsale says to her hungry and newly hybridized vampire/werewolf boyfriend: "You better watch out! Or you'll be forced to feed on humans, and you don't want THAT on your conscience!"

My reply to that is: "WHAT THE FUCK?"

What kind of silly, stupid paradigm shift of vampirism does this signify? Vampires feed on humans. That's what they do. That's why they're fun to watch in monster movies. I don't mind a little Larry Talbot-like guilt or angst, but jeez! Don't expect me to shell out my hard earned bucks to watch vampires who don't like being vampires sitting around feeling sorry for themselves. It'd be kinda like paying to see a *JAWS* movie featuring a vegetarian Great White.



Peter

Jackson's *KING KONG* is a betrayal of a towering cinematic achievement. Sure, it betrays 1933's *KONG*, but that's forgivable, because nothing, not even Dino De Laurentiis' 1976 Disco-era, Rick-Baker-sweating-in-a-suit debacle could kill Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's great and noble beast of pop-culture myth. No...this 200 million-dollar Baby Huey of a pic betrays Jackson's and his wife and writing partner Fran Walsh's brilliant, un-produced 1996 screenplay for *KONG*, which is so good, I couldn't read it in one sitting; I had to set it aside to get my breath before reading again.

You can Google up that script. It's been a staple of wistful Internet "what could have been" fantasies over the long years that Jackson's *KONG* was in Development Hell. Now that a Jackson-directed *KONG* has hit theaters, it will continue to be such a staple for many years more, with a different "what could have been" melancholy shrouding it. Set pieces from that script are in Jackson's final version, but the mythic core of Jackson's and Walsh's 1996 script is so undone that these set pieces as filmed fall, literally, as flat as a broken-backed Brontosaurus trout-flopping over a cliff.

There is no valid mythology behind Jackson's *KONG*. Don't misunderstand. There is a mythology behind the movie—it's just the wrong one, horribly conceived and applied. And that precious 1996 *KONG* script shows that

the need for the right kind of mythic underpinning was something that Jackson and Walsh understood. The 1996 script played up something glossed over in the 1933 original: Kong is a *god*. And since the story is set in the 1930s, Jackson and Walsh contextualized their Kong-as-a-god concept in a way that would have done *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright proud. They made Kong a Cthulhu-like divinity, the fetish object of squamous and vicious cults. *IA! CTHULHU! IA! KONG!* How they treated Kong-as-a-god, with unclean idols littering the South Pacific, was a masterstroke of imagination. It may seem shitty to rail on Jackson for not filming his movie the way I'd like to have seen him make it. By that same token, it would be valid to say that the original KONG sucked, because it was in black and white and had no CGI. But the mythic ferocity of 1933's KONG, along with the well-applied theme of "Beauty and the Beast" and the plain old-fashioned Greek hubris of filmmaker Carl Denham's ambition to bring the greatest spectacle ever seen back to the rot of Civilization had a almost goddam spiritual set of subtexts that reached deep into the tar pits of 20th century imagination and stirred things up real good. Jackson's mythology, the one he finally used, subverts the validity, the pacing, the plot and the themes of the movie he finally produced.

The myth in question, is, of course, not Cthulhu Kong. Not Beauty and the Beast. Not Civilization vs. Nature. Not the role of spectacle or any of the other things that made the original KONG so enduring. The myth Jackson applied, knowingly or not, is the myth of Jackson the fanboy auteur, and his love of the original KONG. This misdirected myth destroys all that KONG, 2005 could have been. Jackson, the fanboy auteur, a Force of Nature that gifted us with the LORD OF THE RINGS movies, has blinded Jackson, the craftsman. Fanboy auteur and craftsman... in the case of KONG, they are two powers that work against each other.

Jackson the craftsman has no control over the material, because the fanboy auteur has too much control over it. The *details* of KONG are perfect, but the movie as a whole has no emotional impact, micro-managed into the dust. Jackson has the status to throw

in everything he wanted to, and as a result, the movie is cluttered and has no arc that FEELS like anything.

Examples? Let's take the horrendously mis-cast Jack Black as maverick filmmaker Carl Denham and the "Heart of Darkness"/Skull Island-as-Conrad's-Africa mess that farts up the middle of the picture. Jack Black is, simply, awful. He has no presence, no levels. Not for a heartbeat did I believe that this was a guy with the will and the vision to hack into the jungle to create cinema the way Cooper and Schoedsack did. The character of Carl Denham in KONG, 2005 is figured as some kind of avatar of Orson Welles. As Black himself told *Science Fiction Weekly*: "I did channel [Welles] a little bit because I know that's what they had envisioned



for the character." Recasting Carl Denham from a Cooper stand-in to a Welles stand-in is a masterstroke. The idea is there, but the execution is not. Jackson the craftsman could not get the right performance out of Jack Black, or even recognize how wrong the guy is for the role, because Jackson the fanboy auteur would not let him.

And how does Jack Black's rotten performance as a Welles avatar tie in with the botched "Heart of Darkness" sub-plot? Welles' dream project at RKO (the studio that made the original KONG) was... "Heart of Darkness." The Welles riff and the Conrad riff could have blended together (and in the context of what Jackson has set out for

himself, *should* have blended together) and run as a backbone throughout the movie. But the film is so, as I said, micro-managed, that the two themes can't work together. They're grafted onto this behemoth of a movie in which *nothing*, no major theme, vision, style, emotional arc or PLOT flows together.

As a result, this three-hour butt-numbing snooze-fest is, in fact, five movies, none of which has much relation to any other. The movie starts brilliantly, as a brutal depiction of Depression-era desperation. Then, it switches into Denham doing a botched movie pitch to studio big wigs, a muted kind of 1930s screwball story that made me think of W.C. Fields' NEVER GIVE A SUCKER AN EVEN BREAK (only without an absurd climactic car chase through a crowded metropolis... Jackson saves that for the last act of his KONG, with Adrien Brody doing a Jackie Stewart AFX slot car racer impression with a Model T). Then, it's "Heart of Darkness", which I liked... for a while. But the agonizingly overdone and useless character development for guys who are to be abruptly ripped from the movie as dino fodder or just forgotten (much in the way the Skull Island natives were, when Kong crashed through the gate) is unforgivable. Then, it's THE LOST WORLD, with action scenes so drawn out, they became boring. The bronto charge, a tip of the hat to Cooper and Schoedsack's elephant charge in CHANG, is in the 1996 KONG screenplay, and it reads beautifully. But the scene as filmed drags to absurdity, overdone to death by the blind uncontrolled whims of Jackson the fanboy auteur. Ditto, Kong's battle with three T-Rexes, which is a major fuck up, because saving Anne (nicely played by Naomi Watts) at that point in the narrative is the moment the gal is supposed to bond with her hirsute suitor. Then, for a final movie unconnected to the mini-movies that came before it, we finally get Kong in New York, and who cares? By this point, Jackson has blown all narrative flow. The wretchedly forced visual poetry that Jackson tries to invoke stops the movie dead, because the movie has no emotional legs to stand on (at one point, the movie's visual poetry literally falls on its ass).

Just as it could be argued that with the first two Episodes of his STAR WARS

flicks, George Lucas was hopelessly addicted to effects to the detriment of his films, so could it be argued that Jackson has become addicted to length. Like Marlow and Kurtz in "Heart of Darkness," Jackson the craftsman and Jackson the fanboy auteur are each other's doppelgangers. Unfortunately, it was the craftsman who croaked on that boat in the Congo. "The horror! The horror!" I wish. "The Boring! The Boring!" is what we got.



Fruit Chan's *DUMPLINGS* is a masterpiece, and I don't throw that word around lightly. *DUMPLINGS* is destined to be one of the greatest cult movies to have come out of Asia since...I dunno...maybe the old glory days of Sonny Chiba.

What the Hell is *DUMPLINGS*? A horror movie, sure. But Lillian Lee's scalpel-precise-yet-chainsaw-brutal script is also: a character study; a film that uses the same middle-class woman's pressure points of anxiety that in the West we see exploited in Lifetime made-for-TV flicks; a pit-bull-to-the-genitals satire; a grotesque in the classic sense of the word (in which parodic subjects are exaggerated to the point of...well...grotesquery); a story of women's friendship that in the West would star Goldie Hawn and Diane Keaton (if you squint right, scenes from *DUMPLINGS* could be spliced into *BEACHES* without the seams showing). Krikey, *DUMPLINGS* might even qualify as a musical, if certain moments of singing and recurring leitmotifs could be classified as "numbers."

To give you an idea of the kind of amoeboid Rorschach blot that is *DUMPLINGS*, an amoeboid-i-ness and Rorschach-i-ness that is due to the film's feverishly "breakable" nature... one scene that had a friend of mine utterly freaked out had me doubled over laughing myself sick, because it had such a brutal core of satire and the grotesque. Both are valid responses to the scene, just the same way that looking at the same inkblot, one person can see a puppy, while the other sees a duckling. That *DUMPLINGS* can bitchslap out of two movie fiends such visceral, if opposite, responses is a testament to how deliciously diseased this flick is.



DUMPLINGS, as a bubbling cauldron of different elements, throws its audience into a "OMIGOD! WHAT THE HELL AM I WATCHING?" kind of trance that dovetails beautifully with the almost surreal *mise en scène* created by Chan and his cinematographer Christopher Doyle, who is—no kidding—one of the greatest cinematographers ever, maybe the best since Geoffrey Unsworth.

Doyle and Chan are unable to lineup an uninteresting or non-beautiful shot. It's one thing to look at a movie and say, "Hey, that's nice photography!" But the way Doyle works with his directors is unique, I think. The way Doyle shoots, and this may sound like hyperbole, but it's not, makes the photography central to the film's nar-



ative. Doyle makes the progression of images, the use of colors, the framing of shots, as much the backbone of a movie as the script. Look at his work in Wong Kar Wai's *2046*. Could that story have been told in the way it had to be told without...I dunno...Doyle's use of the colors red and green? The only cinematographer I can think of whose work is as integral to the flow of a movie the way that Doyle's is might be Luciano Tavoli, who can reign in and collaborate with insane geniuses like Michelangelo Antonioni and Dario Argento in ways that allow those nutjobs to produce their very finest work. That Doyle is now shooting Shyamalan's *Lady in the Water* gives me a tiny ray of hope for that flick. If it sounds like I'm exaggerating here, or if it sounds like I'm being a dickweed of a film critic, making up irrelevant bullshit so I sound all cinema savvy, let me just point out that the climax of *DUMPLINGS*, the no-holds-barred emotional turning point of the narrative upon which all that came before and that comes after hinges, is shot by Doyle and Chan *upwards through a glass mixing bowl*. The shot doesn't distract from the climax. It's not a showy, "Hey, lookit me! I made a tableau!" moment. It all makes a perversely artistic sense that only two guys as smart and brave as Chan and Doyle could pull off.

No discussion of *DUMPLINGS* is worth its dipping sauce without mention of Hollywood's scantily-clad-red-carpet-standard Bai Ling, or, for that matter, her co-star, Miriam Yeung. The mind-crunching subversiveness of casting thirty-ish squeaky clean pop star Miriam Yeung as a trophy wife and harridan-in-training is as sick and yum-mily twisted as, in a few years, casting Britney Spears as Mrs. Bates. And as for Bai Ling... well... before *DUMPLINGS*, she'd never really done anything special for me. I'd just sit in the theater and say, "Hey! It's Bai Ling!" Her performance in *DUMPLINGS*, mingling the sick, the twisted, the lunatic, the sexy, and the pervertedly *endearing*, is a career-defining role. Auntie Mei is a lovable snack-munching monster, dusted with gluten flour, surrounded by Maoist kitsch and wearing the kind of outfits that make her look like Hong Kong's answer to Johnny Bravo's spandex-wearing mom. She's banal, but in a horrifyingly loveable way. Bai Ling's

Auntie Mei is one of the great sickos of Horror cinema, and her performance alone would be worth the rental of *DUMPLINGS*, even if the entire flick weren't staggeringly brilliant.

The feature-length version of *DUMPLINGS* is available in North America as a bonus disc included with the Lions Gate DVD of *THREE... EXTREMES*. I do have to say that I find the ending of the short version of *DUMPLINGS* a bit more satisfying than that of the feature. The good news is, for the price of one rental, you can see 'em both.



I love bad movies. There's a joy to watching a work of genius like *FIRE MAIDENS FROM OUTER SPACE*, *ROBOT MONSTER* and even that abominated adaptation of the comic strip *Dondi* starring David Janssen, Patti Page, and Walter Winchell, directed by Albert Zugsmith, the guy who made *SEX KITTENS GO TO COLLEGE*. No, I didn't make that up.

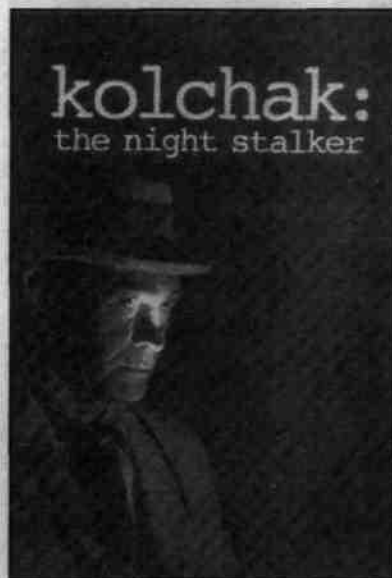
Uwe Boll, no that's not Pig Latin for something dirty, it's a guy's name, Uwe Boll, has made some of the worst films ever made, most notably, the video game adaptations, *HOUSE OF THE DEAD* (which inexplicably has spawned a sequel) and *ALONE IN THE DARK* (which inexplicably was screened for critics). Typically, Boll's movies can't even be enjoyed as bad movies.

I'm still wounded by *ALONE IN THE DARK*. Memories of the flick make my teeth bleed. Within a few days of its release, *ALONE IN THE DARK*, easily the worst film I have ever seen at a press screening, was ranked the 12th worst movie of all time. This is amazing. Because unlike other movies ranked that low, *ALONE IN THE DARK* had at that time literally only been out for a matter of hours, and had never been featured on *MYSTERY SCIENCE THEATER 3000*. While the prints of the film were still damp, it was in the same league as *MANOS: THE HANDS OF FATE*, *YOU GOT SERVED*, and *FROM JUSTIN TO KELLY*.

People compare Uwe Boll to Ed Wood, which I think is cruel and unfair. Ed Wood, for all his faults, loved movies. His love for movies shows in each and every misguided scene in *PLAN 9*, and has since 1994 been mythologized by the legacy of Tim Burton's brilliant Ed Wood bio-pic.

ALONE IN THE DARK showed not the slightest love for movies, not the slightest understanding of what makes movies fun. Each individual scene in *ALONE IN THE DARK* was bad enough to ruin an entire film. Boll has made other movies, but *ALONE IN THE DARK* is the only one I have been able to finish watching. That is, until *BLOODRAYNE*, which... surprise!... is based on a video game.

BLOODRAYNE is just a bad, boring, crummy movie, and is thus a huge improvement over Boll's other work, but still not so bad that it's good. *BLOODRAYNE* is watchable. That's all, which is sort of an anti-climax. Audiences might get a chuckle out of Sir Ben Kingsley as an 18th century vampire lord, who bellows lines like "BRING ME MY THRALLS!" from under a bad Salieri wig. And with Kingsley also barking wretched lines under another bag wig in *A SOUND OF THUNDER*, this could be a new movie trend. Michael Madsen, also in a bad wig, looks like a hung over roadie for Lynyrd Skynyrd. Kristanna Loken, the female terminator from *TERMINATOR 3*, looks real cute in skimpy leather as the title character Bloodrayne, a half-human vampire hybrid who...who... I don't know what she does. I forgot the movie after half an hour. But I fear that Uwe Boll will not be forgotten. As of this writing, Boll has five movies in production. *BLOODRAYNE*, as a movie that is simply just bad and forgettable, might prove to be Boll's enduring masterwork.



When I was growing up in the wild and crazy 1970s, primetime featured outsiders and misfits saving the day. Columbo. McCloud. The Snoop Sisters. Jim Hutton as Ellery Queen. Even people who worked within the system were defiant mavericks, like Kojak and Quincy. Now who solves crimes on TV? Flavorless, boring, empty automatons who make Joe Friday look like Holden Caulfield. The androids on the *LAW AND ORDER* shows and the *CSI* shows are so integrated into *THE SYSTEM*, that it seems like *THE SYSTEM* itself solves the crimes, not people.

And back in the 1970s, the greatest primetime misfit of all was Carl Kolchak, played by Darren McGavin in the short-lived but passionately well-remembered show *KOLCHAK: THE NIGHT STALKER*. Kolchak wasn't a cop, he was a reporter. And he didn't solve crimes, he hunted down supernatural menaces, like werewolves, vampires, headless sword-wielding bikers and the biggest monster of all, post-Watergate cover-ups of the threats in question, perpetuated by the kind of androids who are now the heroes of primetime TV.

Kolchak: The Night Stalker not only had monsters, it had brilliant humor in the form of Kolchak's tormenting interaction with his long-suffering editor, Tony Vincenzo, played by Simon Oakland. And let's not forget supporting players, Miss Emily and Ron Updyke. If you were a kid in the 1970s, *KOLCHAK: THE NIGHT STALKER* was pivotal. Now, thanks to Universal Home Video, you can own all 20 episodes of *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* and remember the days when heroes wore crumpled suits, and weren't the suits themselves.

Bitter Old Punk MIKE MARANO has a piece titled "Going There: Strategies for Writing the Things that Scare You" coming out in the forthcoming revised edition of *Writing Horror*, edited by Mort Castle, coming from Writers Digest. He also has a piece on Timothy Dalton's Bond films in an upcoming Bond-themed Smart Pop anthology from BenBella. He's cranking up to five reviews a week. Distract him at dawnsong@mind-spring.com.

"Brilliant, unflinching, and unforgettable. PRESSURE will blow you away."

— J.A. Konrath, bestselling author of *Rusty Nail*

PRESSURE

A novel by Jeff Strand

Children

They first met in boarding school at age twelve. Alex Fletcher, shy and scared. Darren Rust, always furiously scribbling away in a private journal. Though the two formed a bond, Alex discovered Darren's morbid curiosity about death. A curiosity that turned into something much more sinister.

Friends

They crossed paths again in college and became the best of friends. But Darren was looking for more than a friend. He had dark, ghastly urges squirming around in his head, and he believed he saw the same things — the urge to hurt, the urge to kill — in Alex. He was looking for somebody who understood. A partner.

Enemies

Now Alex has a wife and a daughter. And Darren is back. He's hiding. He's patient. His mind is twisted in the worst possible way.

And he's seeking a soul mate.



PRESSURE features a Foreword by *New York Times* bestselling author **Michael Prescott** and an Afterword by **Jeff Strand**.

PRESSURE will be released **July/August 2006** in the following editions:

- Trade hardcover (not signed) **\$25**
- 150 signed hardcovers **\$50**

Order now — no payment requested until book is ready to ship.

EARTHLING PUBLICATIONS • P.O. Box 413 • Northborough, MA 01532 (USA)

www.earthlingpub.com • earthlingpub@yahoo.com

"PRESSURE is an deeply unsettling psychological thriller that probes the darkest recesses of the mind — as expressed in the disturbing relationship between two childhood friends who grow up to be more than enemies... Relentless, gripping, and frightening. An outstanding novel, impossible to put down."

— Douglas Preston, *New York Times* bestselling co-author of *Relic*, *Dance of Death*, and *The Book of the Dead*

"This dark and mesmerizing novel left me shaking. From its amazing opening line to its nerve-wracking final chapters, PRESSURE is a raw nerve, an open-wound of a narrative wherein Strand deals with some of the bleakest and most disturbing aspects of the human psyche. One of the richest, most compelling, and memorable novels I've read in the past 5 years."

— Gary A. Braunbeck, Stoker Award-winning author



OTHER GODS

Stephen Mark Rainey

STEPHEN MARK RAINEY is author of the novels *The Lebo Coven* (Gale/Five Star), *Balak* (Wildside Books), *Dark Shadows: Dreams Of The Dark* (with Elizabeth Massie, HarperCollins), *Blue Devil Island* (upcoming from Gale/Five Star Books), and *The Nightmare Frontier* (upcoming from Sarob Press); three short story collections; and over 90 published works of short fiction, which may be found in magazines and anthologies such as *Cemetery Dance*, *The Best of Cemetery Dance*, *The Book of Dark Wisdom*, *Dark Discoveries*, *Inhuman*, *Robert Bloch's Psychos*, and many others. For ten years, he edited *Deathrealm* magazine and has edited the anthologies *Deathrealms* (Delirium Books), *Song of Cthulhu* (Chaosium), and *Evermore* (with James Robert Smith, Arkham House). Mark lives in Greensboro, NC, with his wife Peggy and three puddy tats. Visit him on the Web at <http://home.triad.rr.com/smrainey>.

"Dad, can you help me?"

Ravelle's voice sounded distant, weak, desperate. Unless she truly had nowhere else to turn, she wouldn't be calling him now. She knew that things had been bad for him. Just not how bad.

He could barely manage the words without choking. "I wish I could, honey. But I can't. There's no way."

The long silence tore at his heart more cruelly than if she had begun sobbing. "I understand," she whispered at last, and the connection died with a disenchanting sigh. He stared at the receiver for a moment, then gently placed it back in its cradle. Cutting his daughter's throat could not have been more difficult than what he had just done.

Tomorrow, Ravelle would be out on the streets of DC with nowhere to go. Her baby dead, her brain a wasteland.

Unable to pay her rent, she was being evicted from her apartment. She'd been on crystal meth for at least a year. Her HIV hadn't blossomed into AIDS yet, but it couldn't be much longer before she started getting sick. For all practical purposes, she was as dead as the stillborn baby she'd had two months earlier. As dead as his wife, Liz, who, eight months ago, had opened her wrists with a razor blade when she discovered she had inoperable cancer.

Jimjim hopped up into his lap as his eyes gazed blindly into the darkness beyond his window, and he absently stroked the old tabby's head. The cat was 17 and had lost three pounds in as many months. Thyroid, probably. Not much time left for the old fellow. He had belonged to Mom and Dad before they had passed on, Dad two years ago, Mom only a few months later.

God's conspiracy with the angels to deprive Bradford of all he held dear seemed to be going ahead full-tilt. No other explanation for it; random forces of nature stood a

better chance of spawning new life in his living room floor than they did of barraging him so relentlessly with loss after loss, death after death, for two solid years, starting with his father's heart attack. It was all too deliberate, too calculated.

"Ah, bullshit," he whispered, trying to keep from wallowing in self-pity, telling himself that life sometimes dealt rough hands, and neither God nor the Devil had diddly to do with it. On his desktop, a stack of bills leered spitefully at him; he had been trying to figure out which ones he could pay and which he could not when Ravelle had called. Because Liz had committed suicide, her life insurance had paid him nothing. Now, behind on his house payment, his car payment, and his credit cards (which were nearly maxed out), he could see only a dark, endless gulf on the horizon, and he was accelerating wildly toward it.

He could offer nothing to Ravelle even if he wanted to. Everything he had given her already had gone up in smoke. If he should sign over to her the rest of what he owned, she would sell it all within a day, just to feed her drug habit.

Not habit. Dependence. She was an addict, the meth as much a part of her constitution as her blood and bones.

He swiveled around to the desk, and Jimjim slipped awkwardly to the floor, no longer able to leap gracefully. The cat skulked off toward the kitchen, and Bradford took up his pen and scribbled out a check to the mortgage company, hot acid rising in the back of his throat. This all but cleaned him out, and the other bills would more than claim his next paycheck.

He could make half his car payment, so maybe the bank wouldn't take it away. Yet. He had just started to write the check when the phone rang. Surely, not Ravelle again.

"Hello?"

At first, he heard only hollow nothingness; probably a damned telemarketer or bill collector. But it was after ten—later than customary even for those nuisance callers. After a few more seconds of silence, he heard a low mumble, distant and unintelligible, probably male.

"Hello, who's this?"

The mumbling rose a little, still too garbled for him to make out words. The voice was slow, deep, its cadence almost hypnotic. He said nothing and just listened, wondering if it was someone trying to be funny or a problem with the line. The phone bill was *almost* paid up; he doubted they would be looking to disconnect him quite yet.

The voice continued to murmur and mumble, and the longer he listened, the more unsettling he found it. Eerie. Soon, he realized that the hair on the back of his neck had risen—the very fact of which shocked him back to his senses,

and he grimaced at the idea that his imagination might rattle him so.

"Sorry, can't hear you," he grumbled into the mouthpiece, then hung up with a perturbed sigh. It was just that he was alone in his dark house, depressed, the shambles of his life piled up on the desk like a stone tower about to collapse; afraid that God had deserted him, leaving him adrift in waters where the devil swam like a ravenous shark.

He stared at the phone for a few minutes, half-expecting it to ring again. When it did not, he opened the desk drawer to find a couple of stamps for his envelopes.

But they were all gone.



"God never places on us a greater burden than we can carry. Many times, it seems so, but that's because we simply don't understand how much strength he truly gives a person of faith."

"I used to believe that," Bradford said, massaging his forehead, keeping his hand over his face so he wouldn't have to see the pastor's beatific expression. "But I don't think I have that much faith anymore."

"Even a little can go a long way, Nile."

"Yeah," he sighed. "But faith hasn't helped me pay my bills or get a better job. Or helped to save my daughter. Or my wife." He glanced up and saw that compassion had replaced the virtuous smile on Bill Ryder's face. Bradford liked Reverend Bill; his kindness was genuine, born of deep faith, free of doubt or baggage. Knowing Bradford had been hurting, he had dropped by to see him, even though it had been months since Bradford had darkened the sanctuary doors on Sunday mornings.

"I know it seems as if the world has fallen apart," Ryder said gently. "But Nile, all that's happened in your life will work out, even if you can't see it now. Of course, I can't tell you that things will soon get better for you. But God's timing is perfect. Often, we don't realize it until we are far enough along in our spiritual journey to glimpse the bigger picture. God *wants* you to call on him, so that he may share your burden. And he will. That much I can promise you."

"If anyone could make me believe that, Bill, it's you. But for every prayer I offer, I'm hit with some new blow. I'm just spent."

"I think you've fallen into the old trap of thinking that God helps those who help themselves, and you're trying to get by on your own strength. You have pride, and you're reluctant to commit fully to your faith because it means surrendering a part of yourself. It takes courage to humble yourself before God." Ryder held up a consoling hand. "You know I'm not saying this to be judgmental."

"I know that. Hell, you're probably right. Oh, sorry. But it's just that every time I think it can't get any worse...it does."

Ryder smiled sympathetically. "It's when we're at our lowest that God can raise us up. Only then do we find out who we really are inside. If you have faith—even a thimble full—God will be there for you. That's his promise."

Bradford sighed and glanced at his watch. Nearly five. "Well, Bill, I appreciate you dropping in. I know you've got a busy schedule, and I reckon I've burdened you enough."

"No burden," Ryder said, taking the not-so-subtle hint and rising from his chair. "I don't just sit in my office writing sermons all day. Well, sometimes on Thursdays." He chuckled, then clamped a hand on Bradford's shoulder. "My calling is to help those who are in need. And I know yours is genuine."

"Thanks, Bill. You know I appreciate it."

"I know. I know you do."



Eating alone, his food seemed tasteless, dull. He was tired of macaroni and cheese anyway. The only thing at his table with any flavor was the cheap scotch, and as he drained his glass, he contemplated pouring a third for dessert. But no, he decided; he'd feel it in the morning, and he could hardly afford dull senses at the office, not while he was building this damned client database that seemed beyond endless. At least at work they appreciated him. "Securitek's best data engineer," his boss called him. Marginally gratifying, but so much better if being indispensable paid more in tangible benefits.

He and Liz had seldom sat down to elaborate dinners, but they had always eaten together in the evening, and at this time of day, the pain of loneliness felt like talons closing slowly around his chest. Learning she had ovarian cancer had been such a shock, for both of them; his finding her bloodless body in the bathtub had been double that and more. He never thought she would have had it in her to do such a thing, even to spare him the burden of her inevitable decline—the reason given in her final note. But why choose such an awful way of ending it all? Why not just take pills or something?

Self-punishment for their daughter's plight. Her way of hurting him for his inability to help Ravelle. Or her.

The phone rang. He let it ring twice more before he grudgingly pushed back his chair and went to pick it up.

"Hello?"

Silence. Then a soft, meaningless mumble. Slow, deep, hypnotic. Same caller as the night before.

He tried to say, "Sorry, wrong number," but no words would come to his lips. He just stood there and listened to the rhythmic glossolalia for countless minutes until, eventually, it trailed away and hollow silence again filled the earpiece.

Sometime later, he found himself back in his kitchen chair, gazing at his half-empty bowl through a prism of tears. He glanced back at the phone, saw the receiver resting in its cradle. He didn't remember having hung it up or sitting back down.

Didn't matter. The caller hadn't wanted to talk to him. Perhaps it was someone hurting even worse than he, just trying to reach someone. Anyone. Maybe looking for help.

Or, more likely, just someone playing a prank.



On the third day, he understood.

His wrists had begun to ache and his fingers felt numb from pounding keys day in and day out. Carpal tunnel, probably; wouldn't surprise him, as several computer geeks he knew were suffering from it. His office phone rarely rang,

JOIN A WRITERS CULT . COM THE MOVEMENT



the cult
www.chuckpalahniuk.net

A Writer's Cult is best-selling author **Chuck Palahniuk's** (FIGHT CLUB, HAUNTED) official website. Catering to a strong demographic of readers, "The Cult" has continued to gain buzz during its six years on the net as not only the largest author website in the world, but as a growing resource for budding writers.

FEATURES: Daily Speedwriting Challenges
BENEFITS: A new challenge every day will build the Chuck-sized muscle of a daily writing habit.

FEATURES: Writer's Workshop
BENEFITS: Improve your craft as you master the delicate but deadly art of give and take in the best peer review workshop on the net.

FEATURES: Master's Program
BENEFITS: Instructor-led writing intensives put you in daily contact with both rising stars and established names in the starry firmament of literary fiction.

EXTRAS: Author Interviews, Workshop Essays, Original Fiction, Anthology Project, Free Public Forums, Palahniuk Tour Dates, Extra long Spring Breaks, Year-Round Stocking Stuffers, Elves and Mistletoe at Christmas.

For a Limited Time: Readers of Cemetery Dance Magazine receive a **10% discount** with our Premium Membership Special! Just enter the word "dance" in the space for 'Promotional Code' when you register today.

THE ONLINE HOME FOR ASPIRING AUTHORS

CHUCKPALAHNIUK.NET

but he usually welcomed it, even if it was nothing special; it drew him away from the keyboard for a few precious minutes. Now, his mind so absorbed with his project, the ringing startled him away from the figures on his monitor. Even before he placed the receiver to his ear, he knew what he would hear.

A soft, mellifluous voice, mouthing syllables that could mean nothing to anyone. Yet he knew now that they were intended specifically for him, even if he didn't understand their meaning.

"Who is this?" he managed to whisper. "Why do you keep calling me?"

The cadence of the voice changed slightly, as if in answer to his question. Still nonsensical, the words crept softly through his auditory organs, touched his memories, stirred his dreams. Then, as if thrilled by an electrical current, he sat up and listened intently. The voice was like an old, beloved song, bringing forth images, sensations from his past.

He saw Liz as she had been when they were married: young, beautiful, alive. *Happy*. Where had she gone, the woman he loved so much, even as her body succumbed to disease? Where was her spirit now?

Could this voice on the phone belong to *her*?

No, he thought; not her. But something that had known her. That now knew him.

"Nile?"

The voice repeated his name twice before he realized it was his boss, Jim Kirtley, speaking to him.

"Nile? You all right?"

He swallowed hard and looked up at the older man in the gray suit. Kirtley's cool blue eyes, usually hard and unreadable, briefly revealed something akin to compassion. But the moment passed so quickly that Bradford wasn't sure whether he'd imagined it.

He nodded absently. "Why do you ask?"

"You're crying."

He felt his eyebrows arching, and he ran his fingers across his cheeks. They were wet.

He looked at the phone and whispered disbelievingly, "My God."

Kirtley cleared his throat. "Do you need to take a little time off, Nile?"

After a long hesitation, he shook his head. Then he almost chuckled aloud, pointed to the phone, and said to Kirtley with conviction, "My God."

† † †

He began to look forward to the calls, to crave them. And they came; at home or at the office, it didn't matter. With each contact came a new sense of peace, of healing, of transcendence. The mysterious, mumbling voice no longer seemed alien or eerie, but familiar and reassuring.

It offered him all the things his old God was supposed to offer.

His troubles didn't suddenly vanish. He still felt pressure at work, missed his wife, grieved for his lost daughter. But he no longer felt completely alone and abandoned. Ignored by the one to whom he had prayed so fervently.

There could be no mistake; this god was *not* the one he had tried to find all his life, the one his church and his pastor and all the rest of Judeo-Christian society worshipped.

Everything within his soul assured him that this deity was something else altogether. Perhaps unknown to any other person or culture. Maybe he was the first to ever commune with it. He had no idea if it even had a name. Indeed, the voice on the line had yet to speak one comprehensible word to him, but its intimate focus on him promised to reveal everything he needed to know. He had called out to God, yes, but his prayers had been intercepted – and answered – by another who truly knew his needs. And how to fulfill them.

Why, O Jehovah, O Yahweh, O Great I Am, might you not be up to so simple a task?

According to Bill Ryder, God had promised to be with him in his time of need. But in his experience, it simply had not been so.

Which, then, was the false god?

† † †

Late one morning, the ringing of the phone had a different timbre, a terrible urgency about it. When Bradford picked up the receiver, he knew he would not hear the soothing, magical voice of his savior. Instead, the coarseness of Felix Rodriguez's voice almost made him cringe.

"Nile, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Felix. Why?"

"Why? Because you haven't come into the office for a week and no one has heard from you since the first day. Are you sick?"

"No."

"Nile, it looks like you're being fired. Kirtley even went to bat for you, but I don't think it's going to do any good. Everyone's tried to be understanding, but you can't just vanish like this without checking in."

Bradford felt a twinge of apprehension, but refused to dwell on what the news meant. "Well," he said slowly, deliberately, "I guess it's their loss. Know what I mean?"

"Frankly, no," Rodriguez said. "Everyone realizes you've fallen on hard times. And we all know how hard you've worked, how valuable you are here. But no one is expendable, and I'm afraid your number's up on this one."

For another long minute, his voice failed him. This was his career they were talking about, the last remaining shred of the life he'd known for so many years. "I wish I could explain it to you, Felix," he finally said, his voice cracking. "But I can't. I'm changing. Hell, the whole world is changing for me. I'm sorry it affects others, but I have to do this."

"What's changing? What are you talking about?"

"Maybe one day you'll understand. Or maybe not. I don't guess it's all that important. Except to me."

It was Rodriguez's turn to fall silent. Then: "I don't know what to say, Nile. You've obviously made your decision and you're all right with this. Well, then. I wish you the best. I've tried to be your friend."

"I know. I know you have. And I appreciate it."

"Goodbye, Nile."

His caller hung up, and the click on the other end sounded like a door slamming. This was it, then. He had committed himself. When he replaced the receiver, he stood there for several minutes, hoping to hear the more familiar,

SOME SECRETS SHOULD REMAIN BURIED...

NATE KENYON
BLOODSTONE



"[A] tale of classic horror."
—*Library Journal*

"An impressive panoramic sweep that shows the horrors manifesting subtly and insidiously through the experiences of a large cast of characters..."
—*Publishers Weekly*

"Strong writing, well-developed characters and a gripping story...a captivating novel."
—*Book of Dark Wisdom*

"Echoes of early Stephen King...crisp prose and straightforward storytelling makes *Bloodstone* a must-read!"
—*Brian Keene*

"A stunning debut...striking and vivid...a very dark, very disturbing ride."
—*Tim Lebbon*

"A white-knuckler of a page turner."
—*Douglas Clegg*

FIVE STAR / THOMSON GALE



NATEKENYON.COM

\$25.95 | Hardcover

Available at Amazon.com, Shocklines.com or wherever books are sold

comforting ring, the soft voice reassuring him that all was well, that he had done the right thing.

He glanced around the living room, at the dirty dishes stacked on the coffee table, the newspapers piled carelessly by the door. The layers of dust on top of the furniture. Regardless of the changes he was undergoing, he could not let the old, mundane world completely fall apart. He must take care of this. He *would* take care of it.

At the corner of his eye, he glimpsed something—a shape that seemed out of place. It took him a minute to figure out what it was; but when he realized what he was seeing, his heart nearly stopped, and a current of fear arced up and down his back.

A pale shape at the window, a featureless oval pressed against the glass, as if peering in at him. Watching him with no eyes, but fully aware of his presence. He took a shaky step to the right, and the thing shifted slightly to follow his movement.

The phone rang, and his hand zoomed out to grab the receiver. He heard the hollow silence, followed by the rhythmic rush of soft, mumbled syllables. The sensation was heavenly, exhilarating, and now he turned back to the window with renewed confidence.

The pale shape had pulled away from the glass, and for an instant, just long enough for him to be sure he wasn't hallucinating, he saw Liz passing by the window, her face turned toward his, her sapphire eyes lit by that glimmer of love he'd seen on the day they were married.

Yes, he thought; the world was changing, being rebuilt. The voice in his ear assured him of this.

"Thank you," he whispered, knowing the other understood his gratitude. For all that was happening, losing his job, that last part of his old world, was a small price to pay. A very small price.



Considerable effort later, Bradford's house had become a thing of beauty again. Thoroughly cleaned, top to bottom. Dishes, windows, and mirrors washed; carpets vacuumed; trash removed. He felt a small measure of pride as he put away his dust rags, knowing that his world was on its way to becoming a tolerable, comfortable place again.

Thanks be to the God.

Twilight had fallen, and he was just turning on the living room lamps when a faint knock at the front door surprised him. No one had visited since Bill Ryder the previous week, and he expected no one now. Through the etched glass in the door, he could see a pale shape in the glow of the porch light, which reminded him of the image of his wife at the window, and he involuntarily shivered. Could his God truly restore life to the dead? Jehovah had done it for his son, but he had apparently gone out of that business centuries ago. The new God, however, seemed more inclined to perform miracles.

Drawing a deep, hopeful breath, he opened the door, only to exhale suddenly, as if he'd been punched. But warmth quickly spread from his chest, through his entire body, as his eyes fell on his daughter, Ravelle, whose figure blazed beneath the porch light like a radiant angel.

"Oh, my," he whispered. "Oh, Ravelle."

She took a step forward, and her eyes searched him up and down. "Dad, I had to come home."

He opened his arms and she fell into his embrace, her slender arms encircling his waist. She squeezed him tightly, but he barely felt it. With tears burning in his eyes, he drew her inside and ran a hand through her dark brown hair. It was damp and stringy, and her skin felt clammy.

As she drew away from him, he realized now that her face appeared gaunt, her eyes sunken into shadowed hollows. Her wan complexion emphasized the purplish color of her lips.

Tears streamed down her eyes as she whispered, "Dad, I hurt so bad. I think I'm sick. Really sick."

Something lurched inside him, and his breath caught in his throat. He finally managed to whisper, "I can't believe you're here...like this."

"I don't have anywhere else to go," she said with a whimper. "Will you let me stay? Please?"

He looked past her, toward the door. He could feel his disappointment painting itself on his face. This Ravelle was part of his old world.

She had once been so lovely. Like her mother.

Until she had wasted herself.

"How did you get here?" he finally asked in a flat voice.

"Caught a ride with a couple of truckers," she said, her eyes on the floor. "I don't have any money. Nothing. Dad, I hurt so bad. Here." She pressed a hand to her abdomen. "Please help me."

He could not pull his gaze away from the door, his mind reeling with bewilderment, with frustration. *This could not happen to him now.*

Realizing something was wrong, Ravelle stared deeply into his eyes, searching. "Dad, what is it?"

He could not answer her, for his mind was frantically trying to grasp his new God's plan. There had to be a plan. It was the way of things.

"Dad...where are you?"

His whirling mind finally began to slow. From deep in his memory, the words from an old poem crawled out and passed before his mind's eye. Unable to do otherwise, he leaned close to his daughter and recited them in a soft voice.

"And all my days are trances.

And all my nightly dreams

Are where thy dark eye glances.

And where thy footstep gleams."

It seemed ages that his memory stretched, reaching back, trying to place the origin of the verse. Only when the back of his daughter's head smashed the glass of the mirror on the wall did the name of *Poe* finally come to him. Her screams peeled loudly until his grip on her throat tightened, and then her voice became a dwindling, dying gurgle.

Even when her slight body sank to the floor and no more sound came from her mouth, the echoes of her helpless cries pierced his eardrums. But it was his own scream of realization—of revelation—that rose in harmony with the ringing of the telephone.



"CEMETERY DANCE is one of the best . . .
I read it as soon as it comes in. Great stuff!"
— STEPHEN KING



Published our 50th issue in Fall 2004. Two-time winner of the World Fantasy Award and Winner of the International Horror Guild Award.

Each bi-monthly issue is packed with almost 100 pages of short stories, novel excerpts, columns, interviews, news and reviews! Plus stunning full-color covers and amazing interior artwork! Regular columns from the likes of Ray Garton, Thomas Monteleone, and many others!

Appearances from the likes of Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Clive Barker, Peter Straub, Richard Matheson, David Morrell, Poppy Z. Brite, Richard Laymon, Jack Ketchum, Edward Lee, Joe R. Lansdale, and hundreds of others!

News From the Dead Zone by Bev Vincent — the only regularly-published feature column devoted exclusively to STEPHEN KING — featuring insider information on all SK news . . . Past, present, future!

Subscribe today!

- Three-year sub (18 issues) — \$75
- Two-year sub (12 issues) — \$50
- One-year sub (6 issues) — \$27

Name: _____

Card #: _____

Address: _____

Exp. Date: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

Signature: _____



WE
NOW
ACCEPT
PAYPAL!



www.cemeterydance.com
order@cemeterydance.com

Cemetery Dance Publications
132-B Industry Lane
Unit #7
Forest Hill, MD 21050

410-588-5901 (phone)
410-588-5904 (fax)



JOHN PELAN

COLLECTING MODERN HORROR

WELCOME BACK... A reader points out that one of my original selections for our list has yet to be discussed... Daphne Du Maurier's *Echoes from the Macabre*. Du Maurier is best-known for her novel *Rebecca*, but has also achieved a degree of immortality for her story "The Birds," perhaps the most accomplished tale of normally-innocuous creatures suddenly running amuck. There's a good deal of confusion regarding her collections that contain the word "macabre" in the title. There are two different books, one is the British edition *Echoes from the Macabre*, published by Gollancz in 1976 and the other is the illustrated *Classics of the Macabre* published nearly a decade later. If you're interested in having a signed Du Maurier in your collection, the latter book was offered as a signed limited of 250 slipcased copies. These days it will probably run you around \$250-\$300. The illustrations by Michael Foreman are indeed atmospheric and suitably creepy, but you only get six stories: "Don't Look Now," "The Apple Tree," "The Blue Lenses," "The Birds," "The Alibi," and "Not After Midnight." Not a bad tale in the lot and at least two that are deservedly called "classic."

Now let's turn to the earlier book. We lack the striking illustrations of Mr. Foreman, but we make up for that in added content. *Echoes from the Macabre* includes all of the former selections save for "The Alibi" and adds "The Pool," "Kiss Me Again, Stranger," "The Chamois," and "The Old Man." Irritat-

ingly enough, you have to buy both books to get all the stories. However, if you can live without "The Alibi," then by all means the earlier volume is the way to go. Despite the book's status as a major collection by an author who is close to being a household name, the book remains surprisingly inexpensive, certainly well under our \$50.00 threshold.

Another title on the list that we've sort of neglected to discuss is Frank Owen's *The Wind that Tramps the World: Splashes of Chinese Color*. This splendid little volume is remarkably inexpensive even today, so much so that I'm going to suggest that you'll likely want both this book and the follow-up volume *The Purple Sea: More Splashes of Chinese Color*. These stories are framed in such a beautiful style that it becomes difficult to call them "horror"; however, there's no question that the titular piece of the first book is horror and the thematic sequel, "The Twinkle of the Camel's Bell" is a vampire tale. Several other pieces also appeared in *Weird Tales* or the companion magazine *Oriental Stories*. Owen's contributions to the genre of weird fiction are slight, but well-worth seeking out. Another volume of Owen which is omitted from our list due to price is the Gnome Press *The Porcelain Magician*; sort of a "best of" with fourteen stories. This is the kind of book that you might get lucky on at a convention where a dealer will take an offer for it. Fine copies tend to list at over \$100, but Owen is so obscure

now, that many dealers would probably take less.

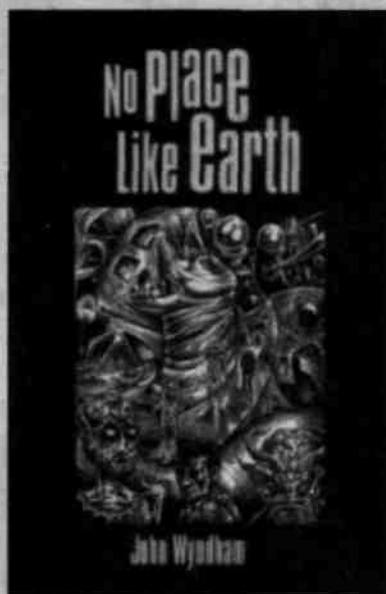
Another volume that we haven't talked about as yet is Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find or The Complete Stories*. While I cited the former as the title to include on our list, it is becoming far more difficult to turn up (even the UK 1st is becoming scarce). You're better off with *The Complete Stories* in any event, and you might get lucky and find a first printing for cheap in your general bookstore. The book went through numerous printings in hardcover and shopping on-line you'll see copies from \$10-\$500! It isn't a rare book by any means, just one you'll have to hunt for if you're seeking a bargain.

Of course, some of you may dispute whether or not we should consider Ms. O'Connor's Southern Gothics to be horror? I'd argue that the grotesquerie and pathos of her characters often transforms her work into horror. So too, I'd consider several of the novels of Harry Crews to be horror as well as Dalton Trumbo's anti-war tour de force *Johnny Got His Gun*. I think it safe to say that without Flannery O'Connor, Southern literature would be a much poorer place today and the work of authors from John Farris to Elizabeth Massie might not be as vital. O'Connor's influence was profound and if you've put off buying this selection for your collection, now's the time to remedy that oversight.

This leads me to mention a (relatively) new book that lies outside our time frame, but that you might be interested in acquiring. One of the greatest horror novels of the last fifty years is indisputably *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy. Reviews of McCarthy's work are everywhere, so I'm not going to go into a lot of detail save to say that he creates the most believable evil character I've run across and the most surreal evil character I've encountered and manages to make both work in the framework of his novel. The problem for years with *Blood Meridian* was that it was a damned expensive book in hardcover. His *Border Crossing* trilogy has seen dozens of hardcover printings, but if you wanted *Blood Meridian*, you had to pay over \$300.00 or settle for a trade paperback. However, now there's a pleasant alternative, The Modern Library has issued a nice hardcover for around twenty bucks; go get one, you won't be disappointed (you may be appalled and shocked, but you won't be disappointed).

Talking of McCarthy (one must consider him to be among the most collectible authors in the US), I'm reminded of an e-mail I received a month or so back asking "Which authors should I invest in?" Now quite frankly, this sort of thinking makes my skin crawl... I buy what I like and hope that most of you do as well. Obviously, there are titles where the demand is going to exceed the supply and I'll snap those right up if the price is reasonable or the book is by an author I collect in depth. Such a volume would be Ramsey Campbell's *The Decorations from Alpenhouse Apparitions*. This is a gorgeous volume with eleven engravings by Ladislav Hanka and signed by both author and artist. Now this isn't a bargain book by any means... The tariff on this slender volume is \$190.00. However, if you're a Campbell completist, you'll want one and you'll be pleased by the book's exquisite production values. Is it a good buy? Well, there's certainly a lot more than 250 serious Ramsey Campbell fans in the world. How many are well-heeled enough to shell out nearly \$200.00 for a short story? I'm not sure, but my guess is that the book will vanish in short order.

As much as I hate to talk "investment," the signs are pretty clear, when an author has a substantial following



and the print run of a title does not come close to meeting the demand, prices will go up. Among modern writers pretty much anyone that's being published in the mass-market is not going to have any trouble at all selling out a limited edition. The CD novellas are a great example: there's not quite enough of them to meet the demand. As for individual authors, people that develop a very enthusiastic fanbase and have a relatively small volume of work available like Mark Samuels, Brian Keene, Rhys Hughes, Jeffrey Thomas, Don Tumasonis, and (however immodestly) myself are likely to see their books appreciate in value.

You'll note I use the caveat of a "relatively small body of work." There's a reason for this: very few people are going to decide today that they want to be Stephen King completists. Not that that wouldn't be a worthy pursuit, but to assemble such a collection now would be astronomically expensive and very difficult to do. If you weren't collecting King years ago and aren't a millionaire, chances are you are out of luck. On the other hand, if you start on an author that's been published in hardcover for less than a decade, you probably have a very good chance of getting everything without completely breaking the bank. There are some exceptions — my buddy Brian Keene comes to mind as someone whose publishers wildly underestimated the demand for his books, with the result being very high prices on his early titles.

Another good example is Mark Samuels. There were only 250 copies of his first book produced, but you might still be able to find one. Based on the strength of his work, I shouldn't be at all surprised to see his books avidly collected in years to come. Another great example is Caitlin Kiernan — a decent-sized body of work, but most titles are accessible to the new collector getting on board. Even her most expensive book won't break the bank. The main point is to collect what you like because you like it! The "investment" will likely take care of itself if you're spending a good bit collecting modern horror.





DOG PERSON

Scott Nicholson

SCOTT NICHOLSON lives in the rural Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, where he eats possum, drinks moonshine, and occasionally sets down a tall tale while wearing dirty longhandles. His novels include *The Farm*, *The Home*, *The Manor*, *The Harvest*, and *The Red Church*. Look for his story "Good Fences" in *Shivers V*. Visit www.hauntedcomputer.com for dubious folk wisdom and even more dubious writing advice.

The final breakfast was scrambled eggs, crisp bacon, grits with real butter. Alison peeled four extra strips of bacon from the slab. On this morning of all mornings, she would keep the temperature of the stove eye just right. She wasn't the cook of the house, but Robert had taught her all about Southern cuisine, especially that of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Before they met, her breakfast consisted of a cup of what Robert teasingly called a "girly French coffee" and maybe a yogurt. He'd introduced her to the joys of an unhealthy start to the morning, along with plenty of other things, the best of the rest coming after sundown.

Even after two years, Alison wasn't as enthusiastic about the morning cholesterol infusion as Robert was. Or his dog. About once a week, though, she'd get up a half-hour early, drag the scarred skillet from beneath the counter, and peel those slick and marbled pieces of pig fat. The popping grease never failed to mark a red spot or two along her wrist as she wielded the spatula. But she wouldn't gripe about the pain today.

Robert would be coming down any minute. She could almost picture him upstairs, brushing his teeth without looking in the mirror. He wouldn't be able to meet his own eyes. Not with the job that awaited him.

Alison cracked six eggs in a metal bowl and tumbled them with a whisk until the yellow and white were mingled but not fully mixed. The grits bubbled and burped on the back burner. Two slices of bread stood in the sleeves of the toaster, and the coffee maker gurgled as the last of its heated water sprayed into the basket. Maxwell House, good old all-American farm coffee.

She avoided looking in the pantry, though the louvered doors were parted. The giant bag of Kennel Ration stood in a green trash can. On the shelf above was a box of Milk Bones and rows of canned dog food. Robert had a theory that hot dogs and turkey bologna were cheaper dog treats than the well-advertised merchandise lines, but he liked to keep stock on hand just in case. That was Robert: always planning ahead. But some things couldn't be planned, even when you expected them.

Robert entered the room, buttoning the cuffs on his flannel shirt. The skin beneath his eyes was puffed and lavender. "Something smells good."

She shoveled the four bacon strips from the skillet and placed them on a double layer of paper towels. "Only the best today."

"That's sweet of you."

"I wish I could do more."

"You've done plenty."

Robert moved past her without brushing against her, though the counter ran down the center of the kitchen and narrowed the floor space in front of the stove. Most mornings, he would have given her an affectionate squeeze on the rear and she would have threatened him with the spatula, grinning all the while. This morning he poured himself a cup of coffee without asking if she wanted one.

She glanced at Robert as he bent into the refrigerator to get some cream. At thirty-five, he was still in shape, the blue jeans snug around him and only the slightest bulge over his belt. His brown hair showed the faintest streaks of gray, though the lines around his eyes and mouth had grown visibly deeper in the last few months. He wore a beard but he hadn't shaved his neck in a week. He caught her looking.

Alison turned her attention back to the pan. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not much to say." He stirred his coffee, tapped his spoon on the cup's ceramic rim, and reached into the cabinet above the sink. He pulled the bottle of Jack Daniels into the glare of the morning sun. Beyond the window, sunlight filtered through the red and golden leaves of maple trees that were about to enter their winter sleep.

Robert never drank before noon, but Alison didn't comment as he tossed a splash into his coffee. "I made extra bacon," she said. "A special treat."

Robert nodded, his eyes shot with red lightning bolts. He had tossed all night, awakening her once at 3 a.m. when his toenails dug into her calf. He must have been dreaming of days with Sandy Ann, walking by the river, camping in the hollows of Grandfather Mountain, dropping by the animal shelter to volunteer for a couple of hours.

Alison moved the grits from the heat and set them aside. The last round of bacon was done, and she drained some of the bacon grease away and poured the eggs. The mixture lay there round and steaming like the face of a cartoon sun. She let the eggs harden a bit before she moved them around. A brown skin covered the bottom of the skillet.

"Nine years is a lot," she said. "Isn't that over seventy in people years?"

"No, it's nine in people years. Time's the same for everybody and everything."

Robert philosophy. A practical farm boy. If she had been granted the power to build her future husband in a Frankenstein laboratory, little of Robert would have been in the recipe. Maybe the eyes, brown and honest with flecks of green that brightened when he was aroused. She would have chosen other parts, though the composite wasn't bad. The thing that made Robert who he was, the spark that juiced his soul, was largely invisible but had shocked Alison from the very first exposure.

She sold casualty insurance, and Robert liked to point out she was one of the "Good Hands" people. Robert's account had been assigned to her when a senior agent retired, and during his first appointment to discuss whether to increase the limit on his homeowner's policy, she'd followed the procedure taught in business school, trying to sucker him into a whole-life policy. During the conversation, she'd learned he had no heirs, not even a wife, and she explained he couldn't legally leave his estate to Sandy Ann. One follow-up call later, to check on whether he would get a discount on his auto liability if he took the life insurance, and they were dating.

The first date was lunch in a place that was too nice and dressy for either of them to be comfortable. The next week, they went to a movie during which Robert never once tried to put his arm around her shoulder. Two days later, he called and said he was never going to get to know her at this rate so why didn't she just come out to his place for a cook-out and a beer? Heading down his long gravel drive between hardwoods and weathered outbuildings, she first met Sandy Ann, who barked at the wheels and then leapt onto the driver's side door, scratching the finish on her new Camry.

Robert laughed as he pulled the yellow Labrador retriever away so Alison could open her door. She wasn't a dog person. She'd had a couple of cats growing up but had always been too busy to make a long-term pet commitment. She had planned to travel light, though the old get-married-two-kids-house-in-the-suburbs had niggled at the base of her brain once or twice as she'd approached thirty. It turned out she ended up more rural than suburban, Robert's sperm count was too low, and marriage was the inevitable result of exposure to Robert's grill.

She plunged the toaster lever. The eggs were done and she arranged the food on the plates. Her timing was perfect. The edges of the grits had just begun to congeal. She set Robert's plate before him. The steam of his coffee carried the scent of bourbon.

"Where's the extra bacon?" he asked.

"On the counter."

"It'll get cold."

"She'll eat it."

"I reckon it won't kill her either way." Robert sometimes poured leftover bacon or hamburger grease on Sandy Ann's dry food even though the vet said it was bad for her. Robert's justification was she ate rotted squirrels she found in the woods, so what difference did a little fat make?

"We could do this at the vet," Alison said. "Maybe it would be easier for everybody, especially Sandy Ann." Though she was really thinking of Robert. And herself.

"That's not honest. I know you love her, too, but when you get down to it, she's my dog. I had her before I had you."

Sandy Ann had growled at Alison for the first few weeks, which she found so unsettling that she almost gave up on Robert. But he convinced her Sandy Ann was just slow to trust and would come around in time. Once, the dog nipped at her leg, tearing a hole in a new pair of slacks. Robert bought her a replacement pair and they spent more time in Alison's apartment than at the farm. Alison bought the groceries and let him cook, and they did the dishes together.

The first time Alison spent the night at the farm, Sandy Ann curled outside Robert's door and whined. He had to put the dog outside so they could make love. They were married four months later and Robert was prepared to take the dog with them on their honeymoon, an RV and backpacking trip through the Southwest. Only a desperate plea from Alison, stopping just short of threat, had persuaded Robert to leave Sandy Ann at a kennel.

"You got the eggs right," Robert said, chewing with his mouth open.

"Thank you."

He powdered his grits with pepper until a soft black carpet lay atop them. The dust was nearly thick enough to make Alison sneeze. He worked his fork and moved the grits to his mouth, washing the bite down with another sip of the laced coffee.

"Maybe you can wait until tomorrow," Alison said. She didn't want to wait another day, and had waited months too long already, but she said what any wife would. She bit into her own bacon, which had grown cool and brittle.

"Tomorrow's Sunday." Robert wasn't religious but he was peculiar about Sundays. It was a holdover from his upbringing as the son of a Missionary Baptist. Though Robert was a house painter by trade, he'd kept up the farming tradition. The government was buying out his tobacco allocation and cabbage was more of a hobby than a commercial crop. Robert raised a few goats and a beef steer, but they were more pets than anything. She didn't think Robert would slaughter them even if they stood between him and starvation. He wasn't a killer.

"Sunday might be a better day for it," she said.

"No." Robert nibbled a half-moon into the toast. "It's been put off long enough."

"Maybe we should let her in."

"Not while we're eating. No need to go changing habits now."

"She won't know the difference."

"No, but I will."

Alison drew her robe tighter across her body. The eggs had hardened a little, the yellow gone an obscene greenish shade.

Sandy Ann had been having kidney and liver problems and had lost fifteen pounds. The vet said they could perform an operation, which would cost \$3,000, and there would still be no guarantee of recovery. Alison told Robert it would be tough coming up with the money, especially since she'd given up her own job, but she would be willing to make the necessary sacrifices. Robert said they would be selfish to keep the dog alive if it was suffering.

"Want some more grits?" she asked. Robert shook his head and finished the coffee. She looked at the fork in his hand and saw that it was quivering.

Sandy Ann ran away when Alison moved in. Robert stayed up until after midnight, going to the door and calling its name every half-hour. He'd prowled the woods with a flashlight while Alison dozed on the couch. Sandy Ann turned up three days later in the next town, and Robert said if he hadn't burned his phone number into the leather collar, the dog might have been lost forever.

Sandy Ann was mostly Lab, with a little husky mix that gave its eyes a faint gray tint in certain light. The dog had been spayed before Robert got it at the pound. Robert's mother had died that year, joining her husband in their Baptist heaven and leaving the farm to their sole heir. Sandy Ann had survived thirty-seven laying hens, two sows, a milk cow, one big mouser tomcat that haunted the barn, and a Shetland pony.

Until today.

Alison's appetite was terrible even for her. Three slices of bacon remained on her plate. She pushed them onto a soiled paper napkin for the dog.

"Four's enough," Robert said.

"I thought you could give her one piece now."

"It's not like baiting a fish. A dog will follow bacon into hell if you give it half a chance."

Robert finished his plate and took the dishes to the sink. She thought he was going to enter the cabinet for another shot of bourbon, but he simply rinsed the dishes and stacked them on top of the dirty skillet. His hair seemed to have become grayer at the temples and he hunched a little, like an old man with calcium deficiency.

"I'd like to come," she said.

"We've been through that."

"We're supposed to be there for each other. You remember April eighth?"

"That was just a wedding. This is my dog."

Alison resented Sandy Ann's having the run of the house. The carpets were always muddy and no matter how often she vacuumed, dog hair seemed to snow from the ceiling. The battle had been long and subtle, but eventually Sandy Ann became an outdoor dog on all but the coldest days. The dog still had a favorite spot on the shotgun side of Robert's pick-up, the vinyl seat cover scratched and animal-smelling. Alison all but refused to ride in the truck, and they took her Camry when they were out doing "couple things."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Alison asked. She had tried to draw him out. In the early days, Robert had been forthcoming about everything, surprising her with his honesty and depth of feeling. Despite the initial attraction, she had thought him a little rough around the edges. She'd been raised in a trailer park but had attended Wake Forest University and so thought she had escaped her breeding. But Robert reveled in his.

"Nothing left to say. Maybe later."

"We can go down to the farmer's market when you get back. Maybe we can get some sweet corn for dinner. And I've been looking for a Philodendron for the living room."

"I won't feel like it."

"Robert, I know it's hard. Talk to me."

"I am talking."

"Really. Don't shut me out."

"Never have."

She slammed her fist on the table, causing her flatware to jump and clatter. "Damn it, don't be so stoic. You're allowed to grieve."

Robert wiped his hands on the kitchen towel that hung from the refrigerator handle. "Thanks for breakfast."

He went past her to the hall. She heard him open the closet door and rummage on the upper shelf. One of the snow skis banged against the door jamb. She had convinced Robert to try skiing, and they'd spent a weekend at Wintergreen in Virginia. He'd twisted his ankle on the first run. He said skiing was a rich kid's sport and it had served him right to try and escape his breeding.

Robert came back to the kitchen, the rifle tucked against his right shoulder. A single bullet made a bulge in his pocket, the shape long and mean.

"Have you decided where to bury her?" Alison had always thought of Sandy Ann as an "it," and had to consciously use the feminine pronoun. Alison wanted to show she cared, whether her husband appreciated it or not.

"She's not that heavy, or I'd do it near where I was going to bury her. I'm figuring behind the barn. She loved to lie in the shade back there."

Alison hated the back of the barn. It was full of barbed wire and blackberry vines, and once she'd seen a snake slither through the tall weeds. The garden lay beyond it, and she tended a bed of marigolds there, but she associated shadows

DON'T HAVE NIGHTMARES
READ DARK TALES
www.darktalesmagazine.com



ON SECOND THOUGHTS...

7 Offley St, Worcester WR3 8BH, UK
details@darktales.co.uk

ISSN 1742-061X

with unseen reptiles. Sandy Ann would sometimes watch from the edge of the garden while Alison worked, but the two rarely communicated when Robert wasn't around, though Alison often left bacon for it by the back steps.

The grease from breakfast coated Alison's throat, and her chest ached. Robert went through the back door onto the porch. Alison followed him, trading the heavy smells of the kitchen for the tart, dry October morning. The mountains were vibrant in their dying glory, umber, burgundy, ochre.

Sandy Ann was sleeping in a hollowed-out place under the steps. The dog lifted its head at the sound of their feet. It must have smelled the bacon in Robert's hand, because its dusty nose wiggled and Sandy Ann dragged itself into the yard.

The sun glinted in the tears that ran down Robert's cheeks. "Good girl," he said, giving the dog a piece of bacon. The dog swallowed it without chewing and ran its rough tongue over its lips, ears lifting a little in anticipation of more. Robert moved the bacon to his rifle hand and scratched the dog on top of the head.

"Come on, girl, let's take a walk." He headed toward the woods.

Sandy Ann looked back at Alison, eyes dim and hiding pain, brown crust in their corners. She held out the bacon in her hand. Unlike the other pieces she had fed it, this one wasn't sprinkled with rat poison. The dog licked its lips once more, exhaled a chuffing sigh, then followed Robert, the yellow tail swinging gently like a piece of frozen rope.

Robert led the way across the yard, holding the bacon aloft so the dog could smell it. He and Sandy Ann went through a crooked gate and Robert leaned the rifle against the fence while he fastened the latch. He looked back at the porch. Alison waved and bit into her own bacon.

They started again, both of them stooped and limping. They reached the trees, Robert's boots kicking up the brittle leaves, Sandy Ann laboring by his side. The last she saw of him was his plaid flannel shirt.

She should chase them. Maybe she could hold the bacon while Robert loaded the gun. After all, she had cooked it. And, in a way, she was replacing Sandy Ann. If Robert ever got another dog, it would be Alison's home and therefore it would be the dog that would have to adjust, not the other way around. She didn't think they would get another dog, not for a while.

Sandy Ann was just a dog, and Alison wasn't a dog person. She was the practical one in the relationship. She could have driven Sandy Ann to the vet, even at the risk of getting dog hair in her car. The vet would have drawn out a nice, clean needle and Sandy Ann could drift off to sleep, dreaming of fast squirrels and chunks of cooked meat and snacks by the back porch of home.

Maybe Robert needed the catharsis of violence. Perhaps that would be his absolution, though surely he couldn't view the dog's infirmity as his fault. After all, it would have aged no matter the owner. Sandy Ann, like all of them, would die and go to whatever heaven was nearest. Robert's way might be best after all. One split-second and then the pain would end.

Alison went inside and poured herself a half cup of coffee and sat at the kitchen table, looking through the window. The sunlight was soft on the stubbled garden. Some of the mari-

golds clung to a defiant life, their edges crinkled and brown. Collard leaves swayed in the breeze like the ears of small green puppies. The shovel stood by the barn, waiting.

Her coffee mug was to her lips when the shot sounded. The report echoed off the rocky slopes and the hard, knotty trees. Alison didn't know whether to smile or pout against the ceramic rim. The house was hers.

When Robert returned, she would have tears in her eyes. She would hug him and let him sag onto her, and she would lead him to the couch. She would remind him of all the great memories, and let him talk for hours about the dog's life. She would kneel before him and remove his boots and wipe the mud from them. He would have no appetite, but she would cook for him anyway, maybe something sweet, like a pie. If he wanted, he could have some more of the Jack Daniels. She would turn on the television and they would sit together, the two of them in their house.

Her house.

Alison finished her coffee. The remaining bacon was covered with a gray film of grease but she ate it anyway, her stomach finally unclenching.

She washed dishes, a chore she loathed. She rinsed the pans with hot water. Later in the evening, she would vacuum, try to remove the last traces of Sandy Ann from the living room carpet.

Something clicked on the porch steps. She wondered if Robert had decided to come back to the house before he began digging. Either way, Alison would be there for him. She would shovel until she raised blisters if he would let her. Alison wiped her hands on her bathrobe and hurried to the door, blinking rapidly so her eyes would water.

The scratching sound was at the door now, as if Robert were wiping his boots on the welcome mat. She braced herself for Robert's crestfallen expression, the caved-in look of his eyes, the deep furrows at the corners of his mouth. She would never have inflicted such suffering if it weren't for the best.

Alison opened the door. On the porch, Sandy Ann stood on bowed legs, working her dry lips. The dog lifted a forlorn paw and dropped it with a click of nails. There were spatters of blood across the dog's snout.

One shot.

Robert couldn't have missed.

Not from so close.

Could he have...?

No, not Robert.

But it was the kind of choice Robert would make.

His only choice.

A dog person to the end.

"Robert?" she called, voice cracking, knowing there would be no answer.

Alison's ribs were a fist gripping the yolk of her heart. Her legs were grits, her head popping like hot grease on a griddle. Her spine melted like butter. She sagged against her house and slid to a sitting position. Sandy Ann whimpered, limped over, and ran a papery tongue against her cheek.

The dog's breath smelled of bacon and poison and unconditional love.

CITY SLAB

URBAN TALES OF THE GROTESQUE

www.CitySlab.com

Horror Magazine

GO AHEAD. ADMIT IT! YOU WANT SOME!

How about a little spice with your horror? We've got seventy-two slick pages (twenty in color) brimming with fiction, articles, art and models.

"Some really solid, spooky fiction here. My advice?
Get off your own personal slab and go buy a copy!"

-Jack Ketchum

"City Slab magazine has a wonderful sense of naughtiness to it. This is achieved not only with edgy urban horror fiction, interviews and artwork, but with beautiful, scantily clad young models - something I always appreciate. *I'm there!*

-Ray Garton

NOW ON SALE!

Issue Number NINE

With fiction by: Ray Garton

Plus articles on:

"The Real Grave Robbers"

&

Japanese Horror

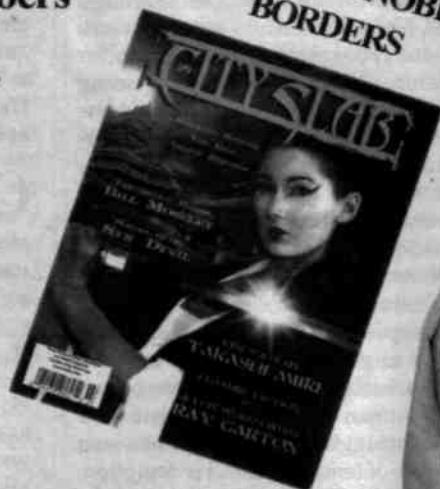
Takashi Miike

FOUR ISSUE
SUBSCRIPTIONS

\$20.00

SINGLE COPIES

\$6.00



See us at:
TOWER RECORDS!
BARNES & NOBLE
BORDERS



CHECKS OR MONEY ORDERS TO:

City Slab Publications

1705 Summit Ave. #314

Seattle, WA 98122 U.S.

Or visit us at:

WWW.CITYSLAB.COM

The Fifth Dimension

The Twilight Zone Interviews

Final Installment — Earl Hamner, Jr.

conducted by William P. Simmons

THE CREATOR/PRODUCER of family favorite Emmy Award-winning series *The Waltons* and *Falcon Crest*, Earl Hamner is perhaps best known as the author of *Spencer's Mountain* and *The Homecoming*, narratives strongly entrenched in a tradition of conservative values, rustic settings, and salt-of-the-earth characters that served him in such good stead in television. Dig deep enough beneath the rural slopes of Walton Mountain and another geography becomes apparent in this word-smith's repertoire—worlds of dark miracles and witchcraft, vengeful cars, and ring-a-doing girls. For besides exploring the semi-autobiographical adventures of *Spencer's Mountain*, Hamner has walked uncharted territories of nightmare and dream with stories of everyday folks in isolated communities grappling with their baser instincts as they struggle to survive the unknown.

The Twilight Zone has long evolved from a science-fantasy television series into a cultural phenomenon. While this may be attributed to the careful attention that the series' producers, actors, set designers, and technical men lavished on each episode, the primary reason for the success of this grand-daddy of imaginative television remains the phenomenal variety of its authors. Each week imaginative seers ushered viewers into borderlands of reality and the outré. The *Zone's* writers merged fables, modern myths, and brazenly political/social stories into a unique approach to experiences and characters that were fantastical while speaking lyrically and at times harshly on culturally relevant matters of racism, mob mentality, and the communist scare. And while the creative center of the series is often (and rightly) attributed to Rod Serling, Richard Matheson, Charles Beaumont, and George Clayton Johnson, the influence of Earl Hamner is somewhat overlooked. One of the major core of influential *Zone* scribes, Hamner

contributed eight episodes of high quality and emotional power before going on to work in cinema and the theater. While such work earned him Emmy awards and respect amongst his peers, the primal, powerful fables that he wrote for *The Twilight Zone* are essential reading/viewing for lovers of believable characterization, convincingly rendered "realistic fantasy," and immediacy of setting.

Writing "The Hunt," "A Piano in the House," "Jess-Belle," "Ring-a-Ding Girl," "You Drive," "Black Leather Jackets," "Stopover in a Quiet Town," and "The Bewitchin' Pool," Hamner contributed some of the series' most memorable (and one of its worst) episodes. From the undeniable suspense of "Stopover in a Quiet Town" and the archetypal folkloric symbolism of "Jess-Belle" to such less successful attempts as "Black Leather Jackets," Hamner's development as a storyteller is evidenced throughout Serling's series. No one can read Hamner's work without recognizing his affection for humanity, its fears and hopes, focusing on people with roots to the land and one another, and caring as much for the surroundings and emotional environments in his scripts as for the people his accessible style and understanding of the rustic fantastique evoke. His stories are living portraits of sense and sensibility, his characters and symbolically rich complications speaking to who we are, who we fear we might be, and who we wish we could be. In short, his lyrical prose poems to the human spirit are testaments to a species struggling to find itself between extremes of temptation and redemption. Hamner himself speaks with the simple eloquence of a folktale yet the artistry of a professional storyteller, and in this interview relates to CD his opinions of the *Twilight Zone*, his craft, and his life.

† † †

CD How did you become involved in the *Twilight Zone*?

EH I became involved in the *Twilight Zone* because of my friendship with Rod Serling. I met him when our careers were just beginning. While we were students we both sold scripts to a radio show called Dr. Christian (the only show on radio where the audience writes scripts!). Rod went back to college at Yellow Springs, Ohio, and I went back to my school, The College of Music of Cincinnati, now known as the Media Division of the University of Cincinnati. After graduation I was hired as a staff writer at the legendary radio station, WLW in Cincinnati. Later when I resigned from that job to devote full time to writing novels, Rod took it. Years later when we would run into each other at functions in Hollywood, Rod would introduce me as the "man who gave him his first job." Gracious of him and typical of the man. When I first came to Hollywood I sent Rod some TZ ideas. He accepted two of them and my career in Hollywood was underway.

CD What challenges as a craftsman and storyteller did it offer? How did work on this series influence/prepare you for such subsequent projects as *The Waltons* and *Falcon Crest*?

EH The TZ affected my career in that I needed an assignment in Hollywood in order to establish my name as a film writer. Prior to that I had only written novels and radio scripts and I needed to show a film credit (Hollywood snobbery—film is EVERYTHING). The first TZ assignment did the job and also enabled me to pay the rent at a time when the family fortunes were very low. It also offered me an opportunity to tell a kind of story I had not written before. As much as I admired Edgar Allen Poe and James Sheridan Lefaneu it had never occurred

to me to write in this genre. Prior to this I had written almost exclusively about autobiographical material telling stories that began "Once upon a time..." Much like the character in the movie *Zorba the Greek* who tells all the old Greek legends but changes the ending so that 'they then went to the seashore and lived happily ever after.' Even *Medea* ended that way in the *Zorba* version!

CD How did working for TZ affect your writing?

EH In "The Hunt" I was able to write about two characters based on composites of my grandparents. They called each other "old man" and "old woman," much as Will Geer and Ellen Corby did on the *The Waltons*. It gave me the opportunity to stand these two characters up on their feet, so to speak, to see if they were viable, believable, interesting, and of course they proved to be.

CD What were your primary artistic or thematic goals for the scripts you contributed to the *Twilight Zone*?

EH I don't believe I had any particular primary artistic or thematic goals. Now that you've got me thinking about such things I realize that I am not a writer with an agenda. Writing is what I do. I go to my office every week day. I keep banker's hours and when I get to an office I simply sit down and write. I know that I am working on a story, book or play, have a general idea where it is going and am interested to see if my characters will take me where I think they will. I don't set out to prove anything or to deliver any particular message. I take an hour for lunch and a ten minute nap around three o'clock. This is not to say that I don't enjoy writing. I love every minute of it, even those moments when the words don't come as rapidly as I think they should. Often I write at night. Sinclair Lewis once observed that nothing exceeds the elation that comes at four in the morning when you are dressed in a shabby old bathrobe the cigarette ash tray beside the typewriter is full, and suddenly the words begin to flow. Like Lewis I enjoy writing at night. At such a time I feel that I reach new heights of perception and expression, but much of what I have written after sundown and a glass of wine or two has to be rewritten.

CD How closely did you work with other writers and producers on *The Twilight Zone*?

EH I did not work with any of the other writers. There was no reason to because it was not a series where scripts were written in collaboration. I would have welcomed the opportunity to write with the other guys because each of them is an extremely gifted person. I worked mainly with Rod and Buck Houghton—an opportunity I would wish on any young writer. After my first assignment I would deliver my script to Rod and he would say, "What would you like to do next?" I would tell him a fragment of an idea and if he liked it he would send me off to work. Then if there were notes or suggested changes on the script I had delivered I would receive them from Buck. I cannot recall ever receiving a note that was not thoughtful and insightful and productive. Buck was an original. He was besotted with words and I don't think I ever heard him utter a cliché.

CD What was your most memorable experience in *The Twilight Zone*? What would you say was your greatest achievement?

EH An experience I remember fondly was being called by Herb Hirshman who was producing the hour long version of the TZ. He said that he was short of scripts and wondered if I had an old script lying around that could be adapted or rewritten in a hurry. He needed it in a week. I replied that I didn't have anything lying around, but that I would write him an original script and deliver it the following Friday. I don't think Herb believed me, but I gave him a general idea and he said, "Go to it." The result was "Jess-Belle."

Herb was a gentleman, a fine director, and we became good friends. I had the good fortune to hire him for many episodes later on a series I created and produced—*Falcon Crest*.

My worst experience in connection with the TZ was learning on a radio broadcast that Rod had just died. I knew he was ill, even knew what hospital he was in and planned to call. It was a Saturday night and I planned to call the following day. I still regret that I waited.

CD A rural sensibility informs many of your writings. Is this an intentional aesthetic choice for a certain effect or simply a dimension of your personality and upbringing?

EH If a rural sensibility runs through my work it is due to

my formative years being spent in the backwoods of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. The time was the Twenties and Thirties when "rural" was different from "rural" today. Frequently it meant lack of creature comforts such as electricity, telephone, indoor plumbing. But it also meant other deprivations such as inferior schooling, isolation from enriching cultural events, and a narrow view of the universe. Rural living also carried with it, especially in my case, parents and grandparents who passed on such admirable pioneer values as self-reliance, respect for one's elders, a reverence for our elected officials, love of God and country. Rural living also brought us into a closeness with nature and the natural world. My Grandmother would take us children for walks along country roads and she could identify over a hundred different plants by name. We gathered honey from wild beehives. I cut our own fire wood and hauled it home. We raised hogs and chickens and kept a cow for milk and butter. We learned from the experiences of our daily lives. I remember once when I was a little boy going with my father to take our mother cow to visit a neighbor's bull. When the bull mounted the cow I asked my father what they were doing and he said, "Fucking." I asked what are they doing that for and he said, "That's how they make calves." There seemed to be no need for further discussion. Like most everybody else in the community we were poor. Only in my later years did I realize that we were richer than we knew.

CD How do you feel that your earthy, morally conscious characters benefited or harmed your story telling?

EH After my series *The Waltons* had been on the air for several episodes someone came to me and said they had admired "the message" I had delivered in the last night's episode. I was mystified and a little shaken until I realized that because I was writing about decent, law abiding, religiously oriented people that there might be unintended messages in stories about them. It had not been my intention. I believe it was Samuel Goldwyn who said, "If you want to send a message, call Western Union."

CD To what extent are the characters and situations found in your work extensions of your own personality or history?

EH That is hard to say, but I can say this: A strong element in my developing my writing skills came from a book called *Six Lessons In Acting*, by Stanislavsky. Studying the book was an assignment in an acting class I took at the Media Division of the College of Music of the University of Cincinnati. One lesson is called "Memory of Emotion" in which the author suggests that we do not need to kill another human being to know how it feels to kill. He advises us that by remembering how we felt in a situation where we accidentally or intentionally took a life, be it a wild animal or a farm animal we might remember the emotion and build on it to achieve an honest reaction in acting or writing. Remember the emotion he advised, magnify it to match the situation you are writing or acting and you will achieve honesty.

CD Do you feel that your participation in *The Twilight Zone* and *The Waltons* has overshadowed your other work?

EH I do feel that *The Waltons* and *Twilight Zone* have overshadowed my other work. They will probably write "HERE LIES MR. WALTON" on my tombstone. Not really, I am going to be cremated and my ashes tossed in the Pacific. Still a good many people know and have read my books, enjoyed my other television shows and I am a big hit with the kindergarten crowd because I wrote the film adaptation of *Charlotte's Web*. (I think a good many parents use the film as a baby-sitter. Better than *The Fear Factor!*)

CD How did you approach the tales you scripted for *Twilight Zone*? Did you approach them differently from other projects? If so, in which ways and why?

EH No difference. Writing is my business. I have written novels, nonfiction books, television scripts, obituaries, radio drama, radio documentaries, advertising copy, publicity releases and continuity for famous singers such as Andy Williams. When I was a staff writer at NBC I even wrote copy for Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. "How about a big hand for the one hundred and four members marching band from Quincy Illinois High School!" I have written everything but match book covers.

CD "The Bewitchen Pool" is often criticized as one of the less successful *Twilight Zone* episodes. What

is your opinion of it? Did it achieve its goals?

EH I am very attached to "The Bewitchen Pool." I was not taken with the old actress who played the Grandmotherly type who gave the children comfort and support which they needed and did not find at home, but I feel that it made an interesting observation about the lengths we (children, all of us) will go to find love.

CD Similar to cinema, the collaborative process of television often alters the original product of the writer. How often have you found this taking place in your career? Did it ever occur in *TZ*?

EH The only time that an original product of mine was altered was not a collaboration but a curious event that I still do not understand and mark as one of the greatest disappointments of a writing career that spans over fifty years. I was called by a producer and asked if I had some special project I would like to do. I did have such a project. It was one I had saved for a special event. It was a book my mother and I loved called *A Lantern In Her Hand*, by Bess Steeter Aldrich. It is a story about a woman who yearned for achievements in the arts but who instead devoted herself to raising a family. Eventually her longings are satisfied through the achievements of her children. I wrote an outline which was approved. I then wrote a first draft script and turned it over to the producers. Only a day or so passed before I received a phone call from my agent saying that "another writer had been assigned to my script" and that my services were no longer required. I watched a little of what eventually was aired but it was sickening. My script had been gutted, the casting was, in my opinion, inappropriate. I was sickened and to this day I cannot understand how and why such a fine script was reduced to pap. The only consolation was that my mother did not live to see her favorite book defiled.

CD What are the responsibilities of a writer?

EH I always like Spencer Tracy's answer to the actor's responsibility which was "Know your lines and don't fall over the furniture." I think a similar answer might apply to the writer's responsibility: Meet your deadline and don't bore your reader.

CD What episode of *The Twilight Zone* are you most proud of? Most unsatisfied with?

EH The episode of the *TZ* I am most proud of is "Jess-Belle. The one I like least is "Black Leather Jackets." I was trying to write a love story about a human girl and a boy from an alien world. It did not work. I suspect I did not have the skill or the ability to dramatize the subject well and so I think the episode failed.

CD What were the greatest challenges you faced when attempting to become a professional writer? What were some of the greatest stumbling blocks? Some of the greater successes?

EH The greatest stumbling blocks I encountered as a writer were the resistance of the entrenched and powerful or simply shortsighted to recognize and encourage new talent. At several points in my life I have encountered the need to prove my talent before progressing to the next plateau. My father wanted to teach me a trade and while it was most generous of him I wanted to be a writer and I felt it was ungrateful of me not to accept his offer. Still when I achieved my goal he was proud and happy that I could "make a living" at whatever I did which was his main concern. At first I wrote stories. Some of them showed promise but none of them was ever accepted. I was discouraged, but never thought of not continuing with my writing. Early in my career I worked in local radio. It was a great job but the prevailing legend was that it was impossible to break in "the big time" in New York or Los Angeles. Stout fellow that I was, I aimed high and made it into the big time. But still I was viewed as a "radio" writer and when television came in I was told that I was a radio writer, that I wrote for the ear, and could not possibly write for the ear and the eye. I finally called a producer, a man named Mark Smith. I knew him because he was the husband of a writer named Claris Ross. I worked with her on staff at NBC. Mark at that time was one of the producers on a live television show called *THE THEATER GUILD ON THE AIR*, or *THE UNITED STATES STEEL HOUR*. I told Mark that if he would give me the same assignment he gave his best writer that for no pay I would bring in a script that was better than the work of his best writer. Mark said "I won't accept your offer, but I am impressed with your arrogance. It shows you must be able to

back up your words so I will give you an assignment." It was my first real dramatic television assignment in New York.

The same kind of prejudice followed me to Hollywood. Every producer I went to see asked "What have you got on film?" Well, I had written radio, books, live television, parades, short stories and an occasional letter to the Editor, but I had not written FILM. The general attitude seemed to be that writing film was something you could only do after you had breathed in sufficient smog. Finally (quite broke, depending only on the generosity of my wife's generous, eccentric Aunt Minnie), I remembered that I had once met Rod Serling. We had met while we were both students, Rod at Yellow Spring, Ohio, and I was still at the University of Cincinnati. We both had submitted scripts to a radio show called Dr. Christian and had been invited to New York to accept awards for our prize winning scripts. At any rate I sent Rod two stories for the *Twilight Zone* scripts and received a nice note back saying his stories were chosen by a committee and that he was forwarding the stories to them. I thought that it was courteous of Rod to even acknowledge the stories and that he was letting me down easy. Not so. A few days later I received a call from Buck Houghton, Rod's producer, saying that they liked BOTH stories and wanted to buy them. HOWEVER, they had learned that I did not write film! Would I like to write them up like little plays? I replied that I would be happy to write them up as little television scripts! I was never without work in Hollywood again!

CD Were any of *The Twilight Zone* scripts autobiographical?

EH It seems to me that everything a writer writes is autobiographical. Imagination can account only for so much of what we put down on paper. Experience, events, sights, sounds, fears, moments, forgotten things, remembered things, whether we are aware of it or not, have to be there in the back of our minds when we write. Who and what we are is mysterious and random and unknowable except in the most surface way. I always loved Thomas Wolfe's observation in *Look Homeward Angel*. "Each of us is all the sums he has not counted: Subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you will see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas."

CD While many of the memorable characters in your later works appear to have a firm, comforting knowledge of who they are, and who their ancestors were, giving them a sense of *belonging* in a universe which is vast, the principle characters in such stories as "Ring-a-Ding Girl," "Stopover in a Quiet Town," and "A Piano in the House" depict men and women standing on far less stable ground. Was this intentional?

EH If some of my more memorable characters had a good understanding of who they were and where they came from it may be that I knew these characters best, knew not only the world they came from, but the earth that had nurtured them. The earth we came from gets into a writer's blood and brain. The good writers know this and put it to work, indeed cannot escape it. Faulkner. Wolfe. Cather. In the stories you mention, "Ring A Ding Girl, A Piano in the House," "Stopover in a Quiet Town," I wrote about people whose roots I did not know. Perhaps if I had a deeper sense of their roots, the earth that nurtured them, the characters might have had more depth.

CD In "The Hunt," a simple old hunter and his faithful dog are drowned while chasing a raccoon, and confront a gatekeeper who implies that he is St. Peter and that Heaven lies inside. What was the impetus for this story? What special memories do you have of working on it?

EH The impetus for "The Hunt" was remembering my father's love for his hunting dog, one he accidentally shot. After the dog had been shot he ran off into the woods. My father spent all night looking for the dog and well into the following day when he found the dog dead. I don't think he ever got over his guilt and his grief. And then too I suppose the fact that I was raised a Baptist gave me the knowledge of the inner workings of Heaven and Hell as they are portrayed in the script.

CD In "You Drive" a motorist's car forces him to confront his guilt after a hit-and-run. This is among the bleaker pieces you ever wrote. What was your intention with the script?

EH "You Drive" was my response to reading a news item about a child being left to die by a hit and run driver. I supposed once again my Baptist upbringing dictated that the guilty

person in my script be accountable for his actions. A car becomes a conscience? Only on the TZ.

CD "Black Leather Jackets" is considered one of the sillier episodes of *The Twilight Zone*. What, if anything, would you change?

EH If I had to do it over again I would not have written "Black Leather Jackets." Each of us is entitled to a lemon!

CD How do you feel about your association with *The Twilight Zone*?

EH So many things. Gratitude, mostly to Rod for giving me my first job in this town, but also for the opportunity to write stories that might not otherwise have seen the light of day, and one other thing: There is a certain respect I feel from a good many viewers that comes from being a *Twilight Zone* writer. I am proud of that and eternally grateful to Rod! It has also brought me in touch with a good many wonderful people like Tony Albarella who collaborated with me on *The Twilight Zone Scripts of Earl Hamner*. Tony is now working with Carol Serling on a series of books in which each of Rod's scripts will be published along with insights and commentary by Tony.

CD What do you wish people to recall most about you?

EH What I would like to be remembered for as a writer is that I wrote about so called ordinary people but found them not in the least bit "ordinary" but extraordinary in every way, astonishing, marvelous beings, vulnerable and capable of evil but more often living lives that celebrated deeds of courage, nobility, sacrifice and bravery beyond their knowing. As a man, I would like it to be remembered that I loved my wife and children, that I loved that little village in the Blue Ridge Mountains where I was born until it was taken over by self serving outsiders, that I loved my country fiercely until it made a war in a place where we had no business being that so far has cost the lives of over eight hundred young Americans and wounded, blinded and maimed over three thousand more.



CD REVIEWS

BOOKS, VIDEOS, SOFTWARE...

At the Foothills of Frenzy & Other Freakish Forays, by Mark McLaughlin, Shane Ryan Staley & Brian Knight; Solitude Publications, 2005; 224 pgs.; \$50.00

There's no solitude involved in the first release of Solitude Publications, a literary ménage à trois between Mark McLaughlin, Shane Ryan Staley and Brian Knight.

Each author has his own section, contributing a chapbook's worth of solo tales. Part One, "The Revelations of McDeth," is McLaughlin's. The revelations include "The Astonishing Secret of the King of the Cats," the true motivations of a job-seeker who can "Connect the Dots," and what a gender-bending pop star drinks to get his "Buzz." In the title piece we learn much about Shakespeare, The Loch Ness Monster, Internet witches, vampire clones and several sure-fire weight loss plans. Only McLaughlin could have written this...or maybe Harlan Ellison on drugs.

Staley takes Part Two, "Nightflares & Wetdreams." His stories are just plain *wrong*. Outrageous gore and sexual perversities reign supreme. Witness an attack by snatch zombies in "The Thriller at Red Nook." Get a front row seat for child molestation in "The Legend of Futt Bucker." Learn a great place to hide forbidden fish in "Swan Lake." If you loved Lee and Pelan's *Splatterspunk*, you'll dive into this cesspool headfirst, you sick bastard.

In Part Three, "Nightmares & Daydreams," Knight abandons the emotional depth of *Dragonfly* in favor of his fecal fetish. His first story, "Twisting in

the Dust," tenuously experiments with extremity. The next two stories—"Lady's Man" and "Alice"—show increasing comfort with the form. It all culminates with the shit monster in "Slickpoo." His corruption is now complete. Someone should have warned him about hanging out with questionable characters like McLaughlin and Staley.

Part Four brings on the "Frenzy!" Here the authors kill each other off in the most horrible ways possible. In "Give Us This Day Our Staley, Dead, or Gone With the Shane," the good and saintly Mark McLaughlin saves the universe from the perversities of Staley, the cyborg/flying saucer—with a little help from Knightzilla. Staley takes out Knight by tattooing the number "Thirteen" on his arm, leading to a string of bad luck that leaves what's left of him in the care of sexual deviant McLaughlin. Knight gets revenge with the perfect movie role for McLaughlin in "The Casket of a Thousand Dildos, or *Quod Faeculentus Intereo*—This Blasphemy Brought to You by Doodie-Fetish Snuff Films L.L.C." These tales are laugh-out-loud funny—if your sense of humor is twisted. Finally all three team up for the volume's title tale, a hardcore Lovecraft spoof.

This is definitely niche work, but folks who like their horror hilariously depraved will prize it.

—Garrett Peck

Black Hole, by Charles Burns; Pantheon Press / Random House, 2005; 368 pgs.; \$24.95

Black Hole by Charles Burns is an experience of horror, through and

through. There is no moment of this graphic novel that is not shot through with disgust, with disease and unease. It is an experience of life in the negative, an evocation of the worst things that await us both within and without. *Black Hole* is also an object of utter beauty, a vision so perfectly formed, a story so gripping, real and unreal, that it lures us in and holds us in spite of its complete and abject success as a horror novel. Burns' brilliant combination of art and storytelling exerts a real power and will remain unpleasantly fixed in your mind long after you've closed the covers.

The setting is the suburbs of Seattle and the time is the mid-1970's. Keith is an ordinary teenager, lucky enough to be paired with the school fox, Chris, in Biology 101. While dissecting a frog, Keith experiences a disturbing, surreal vision and passes out. Later, smoking pot in the woods with his friends he sees a deformed man in the distance, and then finds what looks like a shed human skin. Things will never be the same, for Keith, Chris or anyone in the vicinity of *Black Hole*.

Burns is an inhumanly precise illustrator. Working in a palette of blacker-than-black and white, every single image is there to induce unease, to express distress. Yes, there's an objective point-of-view the reader is forced to assume. The perfection of Burns' art is a constant reminder of how achingly beautiful it is in spite of the repellant nature of what Burns shows us. The beauty, such as it is, erupts on occasion, as Burns' characters experience startlingly surreal visions. There are some magnificent vistas in

here, Lovecraftian netherworlds that suggest an invasion from without, through the within. But whether he's showing you a flower or a gutted frog, Burns is going to give you the shivers. He's aided by incredibly good production and printing. Pantheon deserves credit for giving Burns a great physical version of this very physical book.

Ultimately, *Black Hole* is a masterpiece of body horror. Those surreal visions are all that a mind mired in this ugly lump of deforming, reforming flesh can achieve. Burns is using his visual skills to explore what it means to be alive, and for Burns, in *Black Hole*, to be alive is to be dying. Life is a means of birthing death and thus a source of constant horror. *Black Hole* is a source of constant horror as well, one of the few works of the genre to effectively explore as an end what is usually a means to an end.

—Rick Kleffel

***Bloodstained Oz*, by Christopher Golden and James A. Moore; Earthling Publications, 2006; 114 pgs.; \$35.00**

I am not sure why a book like *Bloodstained Oz* should exist. Ray Garton touches on this question in his introduction to the new novella by Christopher Golden and James A. Moore. Garton notes that in the *Oz* books there was considerable violence not in evidence in the film which is so familiar to everyone. OK. Maybe then this little retelling is meant to shake things up a bit, to over-stress the violence cleansed through the Hollywood lens. Hmm. OK. Maybe. Even so, it is still a retelling.

I am not big on remakes or extensions whether they are books or movies. I absolutely hate, for example, the *Dune* novels written after Frank Herbert's death. Not only are they an unnecessary extension, they are, in my opinion most humble, a vulgarity. Likewise the recent remake of *King Kong*. Why O why, Pete? Why'd you do it? An homage, I guess, but what you created takes a big dump on the original. Why not just watch the classic instead? So I had a bad attitude reading *Bloodstained Oz*. I enjoyed it more when I tried to think of it as separate from Baum's world. After all, the characters are barely recognizable anyway. The writing itself, however, is quite good. The authors flex their imagination muscles well, especially in the scenes with the Tin Man — I never would have thought of that, gentlemen. Good show. I believe the book would have been better as a stand-alone affair, but then there



wouldn't be any hook. Also, I would have liked it more if it had been finished. It stops abruptly at what feels like a third of the way through the story.

Nevertheless, I did enjoy the ride. Despite my grumping and mumping, I admit that much. Exceptionally creepy illustrations by Glenn Chadbourne and the usual high production values of Earthling Publications make this one a steal at the hardcover price. Recommended plus.

—Wayne Edwards

***Bloodstone*, by Nate Kenyon; Thorndike/Gale/Five Star, 2006; 360 pgs.; \$25.95**

In a voice reminiscent of Stephen King in the days of *Salem's Lot*, Nate Kenyon has given us a debut novel laced with terror and filled with ancient secrets. From the beginning, where a woman is abducted and dragged across country by the brooding, ex-alcoholic Billy Smith, to the town of White Falls in New England with its crazy old witch, half-buried secrets and ancient evil, this novel reels you in and drags you along, much as the characters themselves seem fated to be dragged, toward a terrible, brooding darkness.

There is nothing particularly new about *Bloodstone*. Ancient amulets, hidden tomes of secret wisdom, ghosts and witches, all of these have been the fare of decades of horror novels. The key to this novel isn't in the uniqueness of its plot, but in the characters. By the time Billy Smith and the girl, Angel, who he kidnapped, reach White Falls, they are changed, and we have come to know

them. Before the young son of a dead alcoholic loses coherency, we feel his pain, and we touch and taste the depth of his corruption.

Each twist of the tale brings another new face into focus, and that focus is a sharp one. It is very easy to get to know Kenyon's characters, and once you know them, you have to care. That's the key to terror in a story peopled with familiar demons — believable, accessible characters and a good solid reality-based world to be the target of those demons.

What is most remarkable is that this is a first novel. The prose is smooth; the plot is complex, and tight. The pacing is good, and the interaction between the story, its characters, and the world around them is believable. In other words, that same level of suspension of disbelief accompanies *Bloodstone* that readers have come to expect from such old pros as King and Koontz, but with a fresh voice and new insight.

Bloodstone is a very traditional horror story. It is littered with the icons of great novels past, and peopled with strong, believable people whose safety is made important through the force of the prose. Tense and entertaining, this is one of the strongest debut novels to come along in years. Highly recommended.

—David Niall Wilson

***Bully*, by J. F. Gonzalez; Midnight Library, 2006; 292 pgs.; \$15.00**

J. F. Gonzalez had already shown his prowess with supernatural horror (*The Beloved*) and science-fictional horror (*Clickers*). He has also shown that sometimes the scariest horror doesn't rely on flights of fancy, but is inspired by the darker angels of human nature (*Survivor*). Put *Bully* — although it might more rightly be called a psychological suspense thriller than a horror novel — in the latter category.

Like many horror novels involving the supernatural, this tale involves the sins of the past haunting the present. Twenty-eight years ago, an eleven-year-old boy named Raul Valesquez, the neighborhood bully, was murdered. A man named Doug Archer was convicted of the crime and spent twenty-six years in State Prison, but has been exonerated by new evidence unearthed by college students and released. The police have re-opened the case. Danny Hernandez and Jerry Valdez were only teenagers when the crime occurred, but have reason to fear what the police may discover in their new investigation, espe-

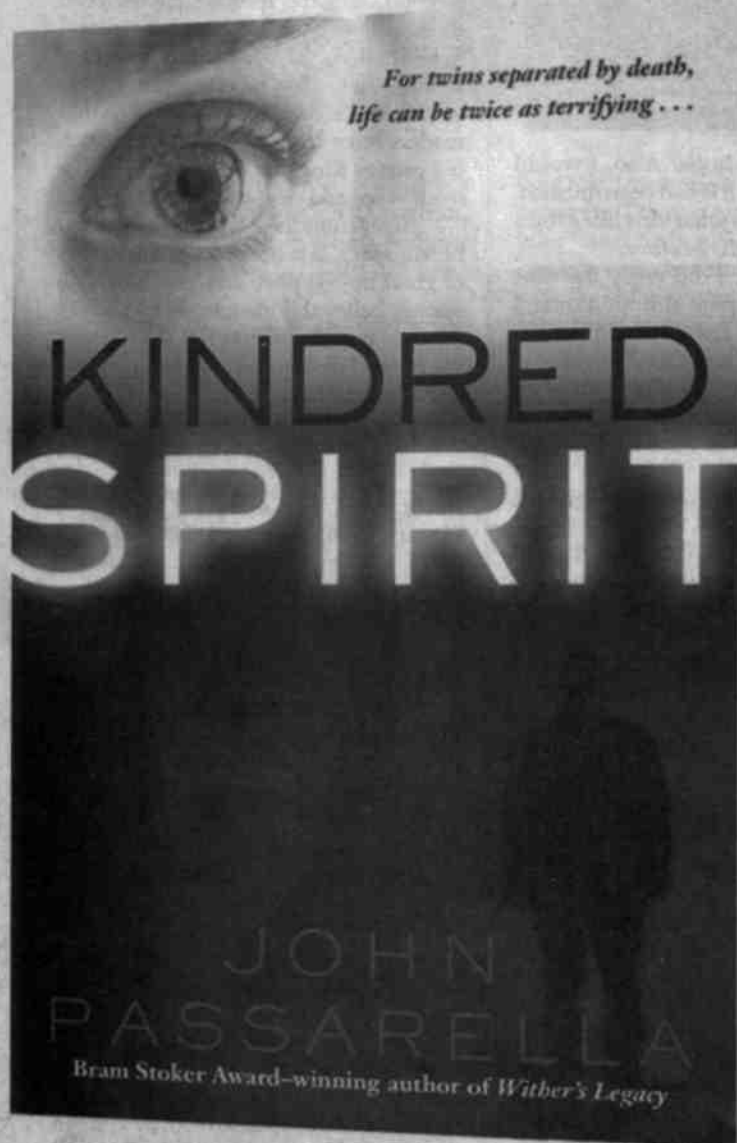
KINDRED SPIRIT

the haunting new thriller from

JOHN PASSARELLA

Bram Stoker Award-winning author of
WITHER'S LEGACY

*For twins separated by death,
life can be twice as terrifying...*



Pocket Star Books - JUNE 2006
ISBN-10: 0-7434-8480-0
Mass Market Paperback Original
www.passarella.com

Praise for the novels of JOHN PASSARELLA

"Terrifying..."

—Clive Cussler

*"Stephen King fans will
love this one."*

—Critic's Choice

*"Books by John Passarella
make it very difficult to
sleep at night."*

—Huntress Reviews

"Frighteningly good."

—Seventeen

*"[A] thrilling and
well told frightfest..."*

—Mysterious Galaxy

*"Rousing good edge-of-
the-seat fun... you'll
care about everyone
involved..."*—Dallas Mayr
(aka Jack Ketchum)

"Chilling..."

—Maggie Shayne

*"A powerful new voice in
horror."* —Amazon.com

Mick Callahan, flawed hero of Harry Shannon's taut thriller "Memorial Day", wants to escape his violent past. He's finally back in the game with a successful radio show, a new girlfriend and money in the bank. And then along comes Mary, the young drug addict who saved his life back in Dry Wells. Mick is the kind of man who pays his debts. When Mary is abducted from his home all hell breaks loose. Callahan gathers his eccentric friends, sets out to find her and ends up confronting a gang of vicious psychopaths at Nevada's bizarre Burning Man Festival.

"Meet Mick Callahan, a former television talk-show psychiatrist foiled by his own ego and a penchant for liquid refreshment. Let's hope he's around for a long run."
-Booklist

"A notable and brilliant new addition to the mystery genre. Mick is all we love to see in a fallen hero: vulnerable, insightful, and just simply a likable guy."
-New Mystery Reader

"A flawed and edgy hero. Dark wit, excellent writing and action-packed pace."
-The Rap Sheet, January Magazine

"A likeable hero. Most promising."
-Library Journal

Eye of the Burning Man (A Mick Callahan Novel)
Five Star Mysteries, November, 2005

ISBN 1-59414-381-1 Retail price: \$25.95

EYE OF THE BURNING MAN

A Mick Callahan Novel



Harry Shannon

Visit the Author at HarryShannon.com

THE PRESSURE OF DARKNESS

A THRILLER
BY HARRY SHANNON

"Wondrous! If Michael Herr, David Morrell and Robert Stone wrote a book together, this would be it. A tremendous novel."
—Ken Bruen (author of "The Dramatist" and "The Guards")

"Gritty, absorbing, and wonderfully written. Easily one of the best thrillers of the year."
—J.A. Konrath (Lt. Jacqueline "Jack" Daniels series)

"Harry Shannon's prose stands hip-deep in swagger, confidence, and wit. Put this guy on your list of favorites—that's where he belongs."
—Thomas F. Monteleone (author of "Eyes of the Virgin")

"A blend of horror, Eastern philosophy, Spec Ops thriller, and virus white-knuckler, *The Pressure of Darkness* keeps the pages turning as fast as your hands can move. Strap in and read fast, or this one'll leave without you."
—Gregg Hurwitz (author of "The Program")

Five Star Mysteries
November, 2006
ISBN: 1-59414-470-2
Hardcover \$25.95
www.harryshannon.com

dying is the easy part...

Visit www.myspace.com/pressureofdarkness



cially since the detective put in charge of the case—Tom Jenson—is also a former friend. Danny has overcome an early addiction to cocaine, though unfortunately not in time to save his marriage, and is now living a clean life. This investigation threatens to derail Danny's new life when it begins to unearth massive police and government corruption.

Though its evident Danny and Jerry witnessed or were somehow involved in what happened to Raul so many years ago, Gonzalez holds those cards close to his chest until the dramatic climax. In the meantime he creates a bittersweet portrait of the skating culture that arose in Southern California in the 70s while exploring themes of friendship, loyalty, revenge, and abuse of power. The back cover claims "It can only be described as *Mystic River* meets *The Lords of Dogtown*," and that's an accurate Hollywood pitch-meeting description of what readers may expect. What may surprise some readers—though certainly not longtime readers—is the depth Gonzalez gives both the psychological and sociological underpinnings of his story. He has a lot to say about people, both as individuals and in groups. It has been said that all evil needs to flourish is for good men to remain silent. Gonzalez shows us that silence may be a survival instinct, and how horrible secrets inevitably beget more horrors...and more secrets.

—Garrett Peck

***Carved in Bone*, by Jefferson Bass; William Morrow, 2006; 339 pgs.; \$24.95**

It is amazing to me how many crime documentary series are on television. One after the other, by the dozens and hundreds, gory details of heinous crimes fill the small screen. There is no escaping them (unless you turn the TV off, but let's be serious). And after you watch a few of these, there is no escaping the fact that savage, violent crime happens absolutely everywhere. You can't escape it, either. Sure, most of the criminals do get caught, eventually. But by then you are already dead. Small comfort.

Judging by the sheer number of these programs, there seems to be an unquenchable thirst not only for the details of the violence, but the excruciating detail of precisely how the criminal gets caught through the analysis of pollen spores performed by some egg-head in the basement of a federal building in Virginia. And I am thinking to myself, well, if you can make a TV show about it, maybe you could write a book

about it. Heh-heh. Of course there are hundreds of those, too. Some are better than others, as the immutable laws of nature instruct. A truly excellent one of this variety new on the stands is Jefferson Bass's meticulous *Carved in Bone*.

The novel opens with what appears to be a savage murder. Reading on you find out that what is being described is in fact a forensic study of violent damage and decomposition. You're hooked already, aren't you? The story is teasingly composed to milk tension and suspense from your taut, page-turning frame. It is an excellent marriage of story-telling and forensic description, of common happenings and freakishly obscure information.

And besides all that, there is a blurb of endorsement on the jacket from Dr. Michael M. Baden. If you know who Dr. Baden is, then you will love this novel. Highly recommended.

—Wayne Edwards



***Cold Flesh*, edited by Paul Fry; Hellbound Books Publishing, 2005; 461 pgs.; \$9.99**

It seems you just can't keep zombies down. That other form of the undead, the ubiquitous vampire, has been dominating horror fiction for some time, but lately zombies have been giving them a run for their money. They've been flexing their rotting muscles at the box office with a remake of *Dawn of the Dead* and the parody *Shaun of the Dead*. Even the master who redefined zombies forever returned to his roots with *Land of the Dead*. But the resurgent interest in

zombies hasn't been confined to theaters. Zombie anthologies have also become quite popular, as with Eden Studio's *All Flesh* trilogy. *Mondo Zombie*, the long-awaited and delayed third volume of *The Book of the Dead* series, is to finally be released. Even your humble reviewer's Charles Grant benefit anthology *Small Bites* is one-third zombie stories. With all these zombie stories shambling around, are there enough good ones to go around for another one? Well, it seems there's at least enough for *Cold Flesh*.

Though the list of contributors to *Cold Flesh* contains more unfamiliar names than known ones, the stories are uniformly readable and action-packed. The bulk of them are simply vignettes from Romero land. Many end with the hero or heroine escaping immediate danger with no guarantee of their ultimate fate, but no one should be bored by any of them.

There are not a whole lot of new ideas presented here either, but there are a few standouts. "Maternity Ward" by Jennifer Loring presents a memorable portrait of a pregnant woman going into labor entering a hospital that's been overrun by the dead. Robert Morrish's "Do the Trains Still Run on Time?" concerns a man who works at a pharmaceutical company that's developed a drug which prevents infection from zombie bites—if administered in time. The most original story of the lot—smartly presented last by editor Paul Fry—is J. F. Gonzalez's "Ménage A Trois," in which a hedonist makes the mistake of bringing a couple of party girls from the overrun city to join him at his mountainside mansion.

Although *Cold Flesh* doesn't break a whole lot of new ground, it does provide fine entertainment for zombie fans. Though you're not liable to remember it well a few months after you've read it, you will remember you had a good time reading it.

—Garrett Peck

***Cold Skin*, by Albert Sánchez Piñol; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005; 182 pgs.; \$20**

It's amazing how common monsters are, considering we've never really seen one.

Yet, we're surrounded by fiends, assaulted by creatures, besieged by those who are simply other—every time we look in the mirror. We give ourselves the creeps. We are the creeps, the crawlers, and the cannibals. Humans are the most

MATTHEW WARNER'S
Eyes Everywhere

RAW DOG SCREAMING PRESS

IN ASSOCIATION WITH **SHOCKLINES.COM** PRESENTS

EYES EVERYWHERE BY **MATTHEW WARNER**

A NOVEL IN BOTH **TRADE HARDCOVER**

AND **SPECIALTY EDITIONS** ALSO FEATURING

"DIE NOT IN VAIN" A NOVELLA BY **MATTHEW WARNER**

AFTERWORD BY **GARY A. BRAUNBECK** EDITED BY

JOHN EDWARD LAWSON AND **JENNIFER BARNES**

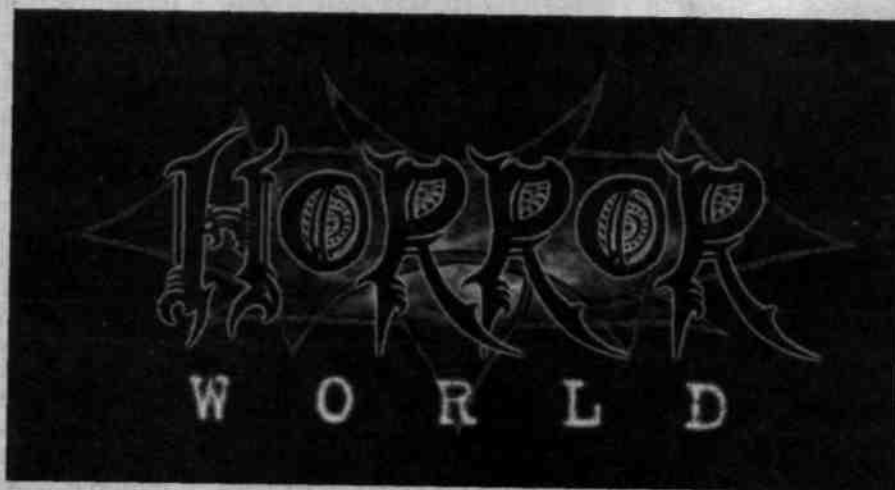
Where does
MADNESS leave off
and **REALITY** begin?

H-PS HORROR / PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE
Some Material May Jeopardize Your Sanity

NOW AVAILABLE

**RAW DOG
SCREAMING
PRESS**

Horror's #1 community on the web
**Communicate directly with some of dark fiction's
best known authors via personal message boards -
Reviews of the latest horror book releases -
Original Fiction by some of the Genre's biggest names**



www.horrorworld.org

LOVE A GOOD GHOST STORY?

AFTER DARK
A Collection of Horror



JEANI RECTOR

Imagine a world where there is only the daylight to banish the darkness. And when the sun goes down, what lurks in the shadows after dark? This book of thirteen scary tales is storytelling at its finest, with monsters in the closet, boogeymen under the bed, and ghosts in the graveyard. Timeless in their style, these stories are relentless in their approach to basic fears. From dark fantasy and pure suspense to classic horror tales, this collection of twelve short stories and one novella surprises its readers with Hitchcock-type, twisted endings. So after dark, let's gather around the campfire and tell each other tales of terror.

www.afterdarknovel.com

Email the author: jeani_rector@yahoo.com

eating nanites, Sicilian war-lords, a lost race, and the sea draining into the hollow earth. Then the novel gets really weird. I don't know if Somheil, who is clearly barking mad, is off his meds, or on them, but if it's the latter, I want some.

Even though this is a wild ride into insanity, it does have a few obvious faults: it may not have enough Williams, who is reduced to almost a supporting role, for old school Destroyer fans; it may not be Lovecraftian enough for old-school Mythos fans; and the ending is especially weak. The novel also suffers from bleeding story-lines, as #138 is referred to, and some loose ends are continued in #140, with a direct sequel promised in #141...although all of this isn't too noticeable as #139 moves at a breakneck pace with its own crazy B-movie comic book logic. Fans of weird pulp/hero fiction will find this a lot of fun, and it's better than most of what you'll find in the overly busy adventure field.

-Mark Louis Baumgart

***A Dirty Job*, by Christopher Moore; William Morrow HarperCollins; 2006; 387 pgs.; \$24.95**

Christopher Moore is a natural at the unnatural. Every time he pops out a new book, it seems like his best yet, even if that concept seems counter-intuitive. That said, *A Dirty Job* is his best book yet.

Moore's novel begins when Charlie Asher sees something he shouldn't see. There's a man in a mint green suit standing over his wife's bed as their baby Sophie is born and his wife dies. In one swift, sweet, surreal, sad and silly moment, Moore neatly captures the conflict that drives our lives. Death and birth, life everlasting. And Charlie's life is only beginning to get strange. As even people he doesn't know start to die around him, as he begins to see giant ravens melting into solid shadows, Charlie Asher begins to suspect that he now has a rather unusual relationship not just with life, but with Death. Death with a capital D. Complicating affairs is the fact that Charlie is, as Moore calls him, a Beta Male.

Take a breath. That's a phrase that's going to be rumbling through your mind for years to come. Let me turn things over to Moore here, for a second, even though I'm reviewing his novel. Some things are important, and you're better off hearing this direct from the source.

"Well, the way I define the Beta male, is a strain of guys who survived through the millennia by virtue of developing a big imagination, rather than big muscles, good looks, or aggression, the way an Alpha male may have prevailed. The Beta survived not by meeting and beating danger, but by anticipating and avoiding it. So his 'big teeth' so to speak, is his imagination. Well, logic tells you that when a Beta male is confronted with an extraordinary or supernatural situation, the way Charlie is in *A Dirty Job*, that he'll have an easier time wrapping his imagination around it and seeing the new rules than would someone who is more locked into a system of thought."

Suffice it to say that Moore unfurls this conceit cleverly, brilliantly and just often enough that you enjoy it but don't feel like he's beating you over the head with it. What this devolves to in the writing of the novel is that Charlie Asher is utterly, completely, and totally like about every guy you know. As a character he doesn't just walk off the pages and into your life; he hangs over your shoulder and turns the pages for you as you read. Now *that's* immersive writing.

For all the great jokes, memorable characters and reanimated squirrel skeletons, Moore is doing some rather subversive work here. The supernatural concept at the heart of the novel contradicts just about every existing religious belief. His monsters here are far more inimical and scary than you'd expect from such a funny book. Flesh-rendering and actually evil-seeming, they provide the balance required to make the humor even funnier.



Moore, always an original, has taken the path trodden by many a writer—personifying Death—and made it so much his own, we're going to have to rename the whole damn street after him. Don't die before you read this book.

-Rick Kleffel

***Dogs Of War*, by Steve Ruthenbeck; Harbor House, 2005; 300 pgs.; \$16.95**

Take eight battle-hardened commandos, stir them into a mysterious secret mission, and shake in a pack of Nazi werewolves and you have first-time Minnesota novelist's new book, *Dogs Of War*.

"A barrage of 20 and 7.92 millimeter slugs punched through the airplane's sheet metal skin. The wind howled through the perforations like a banshee being drawn and quartered."

The book opens with a kettle drum roll of thunder and a blast of Messerschmitt machine guns. A "zombie squad," the leftovers of whatever shot-up units were available at the time, are assembled for a secret mission behind enemy lines in World War II Europe. Their objective is a secret box which is believed to carry a treasure of incalculable value. Unfortunately for the commandos the box is guarded by the aforementioned pack of Wermacht werewolves.

The story reads a little like a mix between *Kelly's Heroes* and *Dog Soldiers*, with a little *Dirty Dozen* thrown in for good measure. The prose is rapid fire and hard hitting. Sometimes too hard in spots. It could have stood with a better editor and a bit of judicious pruning. The author is sometimes guilty of an over-dependence on heavy handed similes, driving them into the reader's skull like a blind man swatting a mosquito with a twelve-pound post maul.

I found myself wondering what this werewolf pack was actually doing so far behind the lines, but perhaps I missed something. Still, one would have thought that a post-D-Day German army, hard pressed by the advance of the Allies, might have wanted their Uber-soldiers a little closer to the front.

Despite these few glitches I heartily enjoyed this novel. I am, in all honesty, a sucker for a well told historical horror; especially one that takes place in World War II. It's a fine first effort for a writer whom I hope to hear a lot more from in the not-so-distant future.

I recommend it highly to fans of testosterone fiction and World War II horror.

—Steve Vernon

***The Epicure*, by H. R. Howland; Berkeley Books, 2005; 262 pgs.; \$6.99**

The first thing you notice about *The Epicure* is how badly written it is—you cannot help it. It starts badly and ends badly. It reads like a writer workshop project that was never revised after finals comments from the instructors. There are actually double slammers in the text. Can you believe that? I get mad when somebody puts two exclamation points in a row in an eMail, let alone in a novel. A published novel. It reads like video tape looks: cheap compared to anything else.

The opening scene is goofy and over-wrought, filled to bursting with exaggerated action and description. I kept thinking, and hoping, it would get better and, to be honest, it did get a little better but that just confused me. After all, wouldn't you put your A-game up front if you wanted to hook people? Sure you would. Not these guys. That's right, H.R. Howland is a pseudonym for the writing team of Holly Newstein and Ralph W. Bieber. That they are a team, that two people are involved in this creation, is just plain aggravating. Neither one of them ever said to the other, "wow, this is a little thin... maybe we should have another lash at it"? That is just sad. And what about the editors at Berkeley? Everybody on holiday at the same time?

There is a plot, and if you focus on it the pain swims back a little. Now, the plot is ridiculous, but that characteristic is not always the kiss of death. Maybe just the hug of death. The book's shocking business is a secret society of cannibals spearheaded by a highly respected (is there any other kind?) surgeon. The surgeon wants to eat a little Susie who is somehow channeling his wanton degeneracy. All right, that's enough of that, isn't it.

Your \$6.99 is better spent elsewhere.

—Wayne Edwards

***Failure*, by John Everson; Delirium Publishing, 2006; 99 pgs.; \$19.95**

Failure. It's a hard word and we've all tasted it in one way or another.

John Everson's new mini-hardcover chapbook *Failure* is a romp through the underbelly of the gutter as we follow a

trio of angst ridden teenage hopeless failures through a night of damnation and possible redemption.

Failure is a grisly little diatribe on the countless ways that a human being can screw up. It involves a suicidal young nit named Raymond, a horny and homely hophead named Sal, and the affection seeking girl named Cind, (say it out loud and you'll get it) caught in the middle. The trio become involved in a blood sacrifice and an attempt to raise the dead in exchange for some good dope and the cheapest sex imaginable. The consequences of their actions run far deeper than any of them can imagine. There is a fourth character, a puppet-master of sorts. A wanna-be failed wizard who believes he's in control of the situation.

The key word in that last sentence is "believes."

Failure is a nitty-gritty no-holds-barred story that drags us straight through the slaughter house. We're hip-deep in Edward Lee territory, with blood galore. This is definitely not a story for the squeamish. Yet Everson has his own style. There is a moody noir to this tale that put me in mind of Brian Keene's *Terminal*, with a rollicking easy-to-read style that kept me grinning the whole way through, because in the end, *Failure* is a novel of redemption.

Everson, whose previous works include the Bram Stoker award winning novel *Covenant* (Delirium Books) and two short story collections of horror and dark fantasy: *Cage Of Bones & Other Deadly Obsessions* (Delirium Books) and *Vigilantes of Love* (Twilight Tales) is clearly a masterful storyteller. I'm looking forward to reading more of his stuff.

The book itself is the very first in a planned series of mini-hardcover chapbooks, limited to 500 numbered and signed copies. It's a gorgeous little volume, about the size of a thin hymnal, (4.5" X 6.25") with full wrap-around laminated graphics, (in this particular case illustrated in a vivid slick montage by the author himself). It hefts very nicely in a single hand and just begs to be read. The second book in the series, *Imprint* by Patrick Lestewka, will be released later this year. I'm hoping for many more volumes in this series. They're a great looking product, and I hope the trend for affordable limited edition hardcovers catches on.

I predict that *Failure* will be a great success.

—Steve Vernon

***Fetish*, by J. F. Gonzalez; Cosmos Books, 2005; 343 pgs.; \$17.95**

The serial killer is the trope of the literary borderland between horror and crime fiction. Such tales are sometimes labeled "police procedural" or "psychological thriller." Examples abound in the novels of Thomas Harris, James Patterson, Robert W. Walker and others. These stories generally combine forensic science, profiling and good old-fashioned police work pitted against the demented psychology of a madman who, whether by an inherently evil nature or an abusive childhood, has become a killer. The gruesomeness of the murders and the examination of evil's motivations are what edge these tales out of the territory of the cozy mystery and into the realm of horror fiction. But there have been so many serial killer tales published over the last several decades—in both true crime and fiction—that one begins to wonder if it's possible to do anything new with the form.

J. F. Gonzalez has found a way. *Fetish* is as much a sociological thriller as it is psychological.

A member of a notorious L.A. street gang is found decapitated and dismembered. Detective Daryl Garcia connects the murder to six previous victims dispatched in the same manner. Though he believes this to be the work of a serial killer, the gangs believe it's the work of rival gang members and retaliations begin. As more bodies turn up, gang infested areas of L.A. build toward a riot. Gang reprisals threaten more lives than the serial killer himself. It's up to Garcia and his new love interest, journalist Rachael Pearce, to search through the underground world of gangs and prostitution to find the killer before tensions explode into an orgy of death whose body count could ultimately dwarf the killer's.

By concentrating as much on the effects of the killer's crimes on a community already engaged in a violent lifestyle, Gonzalez has created a serial killer fiction unlike anything seen before. It is a much-needed shot in the arm to a sub-genre withering away under the weight of its own repetition.

—Garrett Peck

***Ghosts at the Coast*, edited by Dianna Rogers; Triple-Tree Publishing, 2005; 249 pgs.; \$16.95**

This is the second in an (apparently) continuing series of ghost story anthologies originating at a gathering of

Coming Halloween 2006 from Cemetery Dance

HARVEST MOON

JAMES A. MOORE



You reap what you sow in Beldam Woods.

Once upon a time there was a town called Beldam Woods, where all of the people lived happy, carefree lives and no one wanted for anything. All of the children at the schools studied hard and learned their lessons. All of the adults were true to their spouses and everyone was content.

At least that's what the travel brochures say.

They don't tell you about the puddle of blood found inside the local veterinary clinic, or about the old librarian found torn into pieces inside his house. They don't mention the troubles the police are having with their investigations into local crimes, or about the petty jealousies that have grown between the students attending the local public school and the kids going to the upper crust private academy.

Those brochures fail to mention the odd vegetation growing in the woods not far from the town, or the reasons that everything in the Witch's Hollow is poisonous to eat or even to touch.

None of the literature written about Beldam Woods talks of human sacrifices or the desecration of new graves; there's not a word written down about the monsters that allegedly lived there in the past, or what the townsfolk did to them.

There's no mention of what happens when the monsters come back to put paid to some old debts.

LIMITED EDITION OF 750 SIGNED COPIES \$40

TRAYCASED LETTERED EDITION OF
26 SIGNED AND LETTERED COPIES \$175

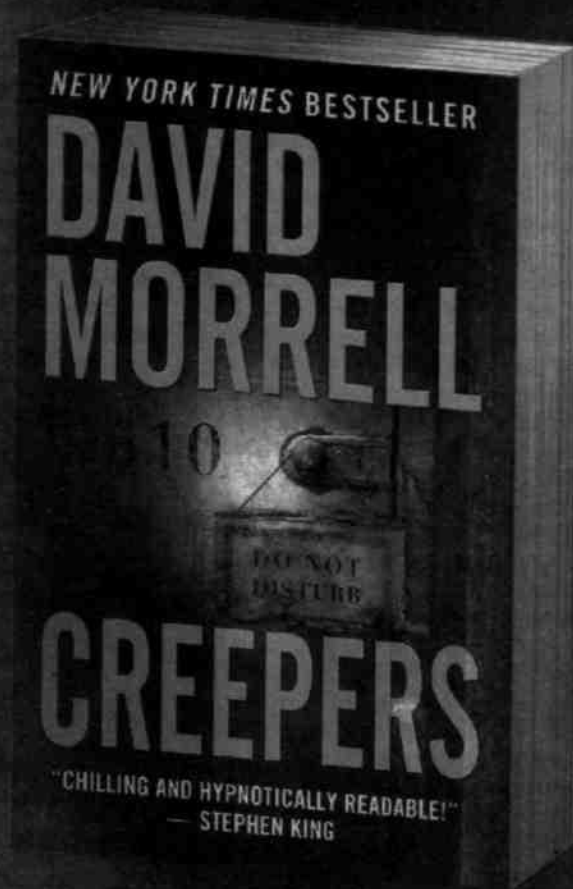
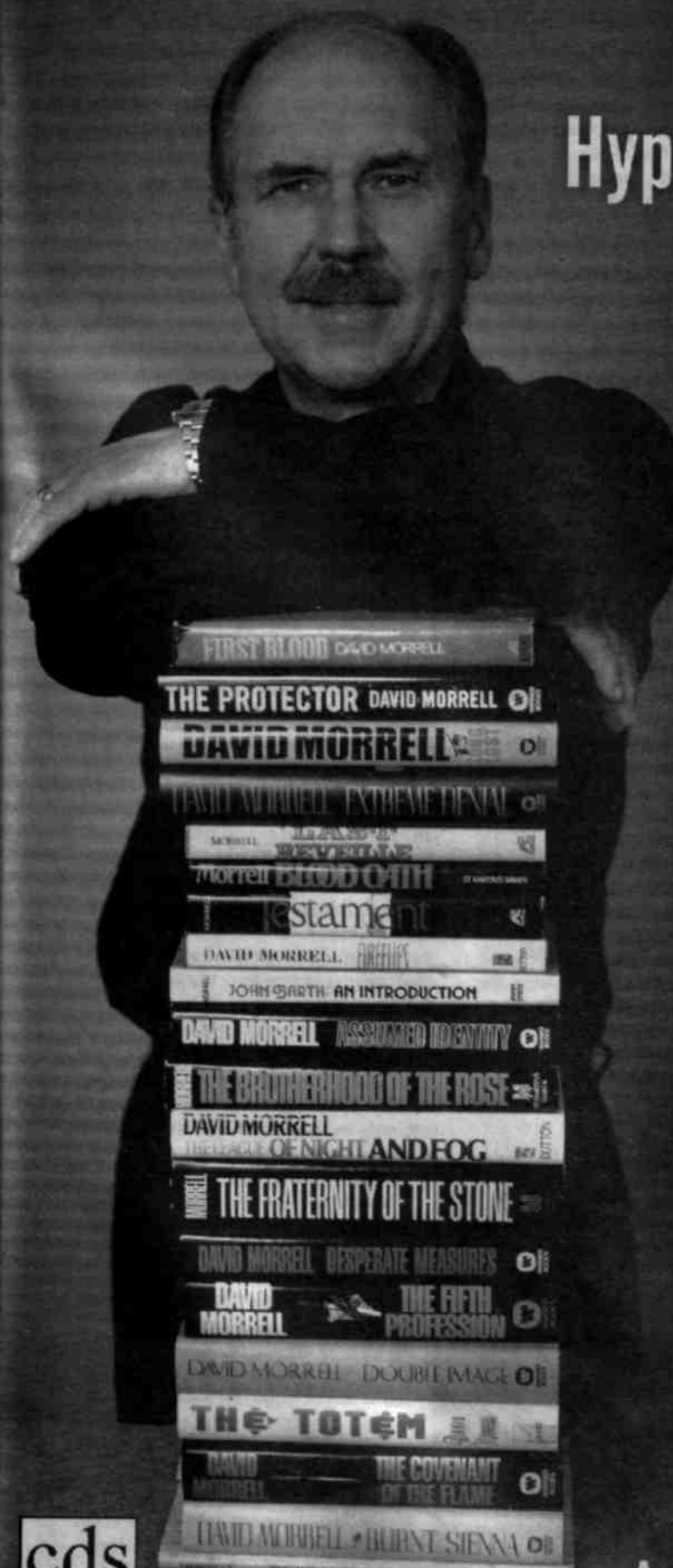
Cemetery Dance Publications • PO Box 623 • Forest Hill, MD 21050
410.588.5901 [phone] • 410.588.5904 [fax] • www.cemeterydance.com



**“Chilling and
Hypnotically Readable!”
—Stephen King**

**“Morrell, an absolute master
of the thriller, plays by his own
rules and leaves you dazzled.”
—Dean Koontz**

**“If you’re reading Morrell, you’re
sitting on the edge of your seat.”
—Michael Connelly**



**cds
BOOKS**

A Member of the Perseus Books Group

Available in Mass Market everywhere
books are sold — October 2006

authors on the Oregon Coast. The Ghost Story weekend requires participants to complete a ghost story during their stay, and to read the stories out loud in a theoretically haunted boat house. It's an interesting method for assembling a book and, in this case, a successful one.

Themed anthologies usually fall into standard patterns which are largely determined by the tastes of the editor, but this book, spawned by a shared experience, and tied only by the wispy thread of spirits from the beyond, suffers none of the standard anthology maladies. The stories are fresh, original, and vary wildly in topic, while maintaining a surprising and satisfying level of quality throughout.

Particularly powerful are "Tiny Bubbles," by Jessica Stone, which explores deep rooted anxiety, scuba diving, and fish from a very "haunting" point of view, and Elizabeth Engstrom's "Reclining Years," which introduces you to the widow Teacher, who is anything but shy. The stories in this volume cover islands and deserts, coastal towns and a wide variety of locations, personalities, cultures, and ghosts. This is a wonderful collection, the second in the series that began with the earlier volume "Dead on Demand."

-David Niall Wilson

Harbingers, by F. Paul Wilson, Gauntlet, 2006; 359 pgs.; \$66.00

For those who came in late, F. Paul Wilson has been writing about the adventures of a reluctant hero, known to his customers and allies as Repairman Jack, for several years now. Jack, who had his first solo adventure in Wilson's novel *The Tomb*, plays a key role in the author's justifiably praised Adversary cycle. Since *The Tomb*, Wilson has treated readers to eight uniformly excellent installments in Jack's saga, providing stories with a unique balance of action, adventure, humor, and philosophy.

As the years have passed, Jack's adventures have grown more and more fantastic, and, sadly, lethal. Jack, who has been told that he is actually no more than a pawn in a cosmic chess game between two entities known as the Ally and the Adversary, has suffered several losses during those adventures, which have seen the deaths of several family members. In *Harbingers*, Wilson ups the ante significantly, as Jack encounters a group of zealots who strive to do the work of the Ally, even if that includes

the slaughter of innocents. Jack initially views them as allies, but eventually begins to have doubts about their methods and activities. Is the group what it says it is? And, if it is, is it being manipulated by otherworldly forces? Jack has to find the answers, or else face personal tragedy once more.

Looking back, it's hard to believe that Wilson has actually reached the ninth installment in this saga. It's also difficult to believe that Wilson could sustain the quality and momentum of the series the way he has, but it's true—each tale is a stepping stone towards the ending that Wilson has already written, essentially back story to a tale that's already been told. It's a tribute to Wilson's skill that he's been able to make readers care so much about this character and his supporting cast, and in such a consistently surprising and entertaining manner. Jack, whose adventures recall those of the great pulp heroes such as Nayland Smith, Doc Savage, and The Shadow, is truly a hero for the ages.

-Hank Wagner

HOSTEL original soundtrack, by Nathan Barr; Varese Sarabande, 2006; 21 tracks; 43:11

Opening with an aggression of violins playing in a Herrmannesque *PSYCHO* fury, Nathan Barr's score for *HOSTEL*, the latest horror effort from Eli (CABIN FEVER) Roth, emits an apprehensive orchestral sensibility from its start, opening as it does on CD by the End Title "Suite." Benefiting from a larger orchestra, the score is a much more expressive composition than Barr's music for CABIN FEVER, which he performed mostly himself. With *HOSTEL*, Barr entertains an enhanced ability to draft melodic

themes amidst his oppressive orchestral atmospheres.

Slowed down by a wondrous Herrmannesque of chordal progressions (acknowledging the influence, Barr, in fact, has dedicated the score to Herrmann and its other primary influence, French composer Georges Delerue), the album opens with a short suite that introduces the score's primary attributes, and captures an effective atmosphere of panic in its *PSYCHO*-like string opening and release in the beautiful, progressive rhythmic melody that adorns the suite in its second half.

A gorgeous orchestral motif is introduced in "Village," a composition that bears the clear influence of Czech classical composer Bedrich Smetana, whose composition *Ma Vlast* ("My Land") was suggested to Barr by the Czech landscapes visualized in the film. This theme plays over the establishing shot that first delineates the village in which the *Hostel* is located, allowing Barr one of his few opportunities in this score to exhibit a dramatic flourish as it crescendos beautifully.

Aside from the melodically thematic bookends of "Suite" and "Village," and the compelling sonic bath of "Brothel," a sweet sounding love motif for voices and harp which is reprised later in "Spa," the majority of the *HOSTEL* score is pretty dark, consisting of tonal progressions and eerie, atonal figures and movements, and an unremitting hostility of violent, percussion-driven orchestral assailments that become severe punctuations among the score's overpoweringly apprehensive musical atmospheres.

"Guidebooks," for instance, is a splendidly undulating riff of gathering violins punctuated by an increasingly violent low drum beat, like an undercurrent of corpuscles driven into a frenzy by the beating of a terrified heart. "Pedicure" reprises that sensation of a heartbeaten rhythm, resembling a motif from the original version of *THE HAUNTING* through a relentlessly empowered aggression of pounding timpani that grows increasingly louder and more disturbing. That pounding percussion becomes an ostinato of terror in cues like "Achilles," where a sustained vibrato of high end violins lend a chilling persuasion to the cue's ability to frighten, and in "Mr. Serious America," where it gains more expressivity through the inclusion of driving winds and strings.



"Gallery" is a brutal ambiance of soft and slowly undulating strings reverberations, beautifully and scarily atmospheric. Texturally, the score is mostly acoustic with a minimum of electronics, if any. Barr does include a rare instrument he collected recently called the Glass Armonica, whose haunting strains enrich the musical palette.

The CD contains short notes from both director and composer. It's a first-rate horror score which retains a fine sense of off-screen listenability through its flourishing melodies and the interesting texture and tonality of its suspense material.

-Randall D. Larson

I Love a Mystery (unabridged edition) by Carlton E. Morse; Nostalgia Ventures Inc., 2004; 20 CDs, 20 hours; \$39.99

Oh, what a tangled web we weave. Created by Carlton E. Morse, *I Love a Mystery* is one of the most fondly remembered mystery/suspense radio shows ever produced, giving birth to radio shows, comics, and movies, and probably missed becoming a TV show simply because they couldn't do the special effects.

The series originally ran from 1939-44, in '48, and from '49-'52; episodes were arranged as miniseries, with sets of thirteen continuing episodes running about eleven minutes each. It wasn't the most popular or the longest running series, but, there's a reason it's still remembered fondly by radio fans, while more popular radio shows have been mostly forgotten.

The core characters were American Jack Packard, horn-dog Texan Doc Long, and Brit Reggie York, of the nomadic A-1 Detective Agency. Each episode featured the supernatural, and although the denouement always debunked it, sometimes the "logical" explanation could be just as fantastic.

While not containing the classic "Temple of Vampires," these disks do include three concurrent episodes from the third, Tony Randall, version of *I Love a Mystery*. "The Thing That Cries In The Night" involves hauntings, mysterious deaths, and has a creaking gothic atmosphere to die for (or in); "Bury Your Dead Arizona" sees our heroes in a desert town investigating mysterious deaths, a curse, werewolves, and possession, amongst other things. This is one of the episodes (which seems to star a young Mercedes McCambridge) where the supernatural is more believ-

able than the rational explanation, with a running joke of a woman who wants to stab somebody (anybody will do) being especially funny.

"The Million Dollar Curse" has less supernaturalism than the previous two, and deals (as do all three, come to think of it) with a young woman's curse. This curse results in the violent deaths of her relatives and beaux. The plot features multiple storylines, including a damsel in distress and gangsters, moves at a breakneck speed, and is a lot of extremely violent fun. While it's missing its tenth episode, you can still fill in the gaps, and "The Million Dollar Curse" may be the best of the three mini-series included here.

While the episodes are somewhat dated, they are briskly and well written, chock full of humor, well acted (even though they were performed live, you hardly ever hear the actors missing a beat), and all of the lead characters have their own distinct personalities.

These are followed by all thirteen episodes of *I Love Adventure*, under the umbrella title of *The China Coast Incident*. This was the second incarnation of *I Love a Mystery*, with the A-1 Detective Agency having been broken up by WWII. Unfortunately, *I Love Adventure* doesn't live up to its predecessor's promise, as it is completely devoid of humor, the stories are predictable, and the acting is the pits.

The set also includes the complete ten episode "City of the Dead," the first story of *Adventures By Morse*, a series that ran in 1944 right after *I Love a Mystery* first left the air, and which successfully combines the pseudo-supernatural, and serial elements of its predecessor with the hard-boiled humorless suspense of the later *I Love Adventure*.

Finally, this set also includes an episode each of *Boston Blackie*, *Gang Busters*, *The Third Man*, and *Richard Diamond* on DVD, all being 1950s TV detective shows that had originally started on radio.

In the end, this package is an essential pickup for fans of classic horror or pulp audio.

-Mark Louis Baumgart

***King of Souls*, by Brian Knight; Earthling Publications, 2006; 53 pgs.; \$14.00**

I am really starting to like Earthling Publications. I have read a lot of their releases, and I have to say Paul Miller continues to deliver quality and variety book after book. New from Earthling is Brian Knight's *King of Souls*.

The premise of *King of Souls* is a bit tiresome, but the writing is well done. Basically, what we have here is a voice from the grave deal where a murdered child calls to her father. Hearing the call, Jim sets out to find his little girl. When the police refuse to listen to him, he enlists a rag-tag quest party to storm the fortress and free the souls. The girl, you see, was the victim of a serial killer, one of many. The other troop members are relatives of victims who have endured not only the loss, but the support-group antics Jim put them through for months. They are hesitant to join him, but in the end enough of them do sign on to make the project feasible.

The characters are well drawn by Knight, especially the alcoholic screw-up, Jim. Knight gives him problems and some facilities to solve them. The character reminds me a little of Sean Doolittle's *Rain Dogs* loser-who-can't-stop-trying central character (although SD does a more comprehensive job of ruination on his guy...you should read *Rain Dogs*, folks, it is excellent). The other searchers mostly get smoked during the novella, serving their individual purposes admirably. Beth, the little murdered child, finds release in a *Serpent and the Rainbow* [the movie] kind of way, and Jim wraps things up neatly with mortal sin.

King of Souls is worth reading, especially at the paperback price. It is not quite up to the usual high standard of Earthling Publications, but it did get me through a half hour of bumpy air over the Sonoran desert. Recommended.

-Wayne Edwards

***Laughin' Boy*, by Bradley Denton, Subterranean Press, 2005, 286 pgs., \$40.00**

You can tell immediately you're reading an "important" book, a book that may be entertaining but for which entertainment alone is not the end-all. Just the fact that comparisons can be made to the 9-11 attacks makes this book something of a hot potato. But, to mangle a lyric-driven metaphor, "That's where the fun is." Terrorism is not funny, which is why *Laughin' Boy* works so well even when portraying Danny Clayton, the man who laughed at a massacre. In mid-2000, masked gunmen open fire on a Wichita music festival crowd, killing nearly a hundred innocents. After it is all done, amateur video shot by one of the victims shows a man laughing fit to bust a gut. Dubbed "Laughin' Boy" by the media, video of Danny Clayton's apparent hilarity immediately turns him into a pariah,

Coming Halloween 2006 from Cemetery Dance

Four Octobers

by RICK HAUTALA

The days are getting shorter, and the wind blows cold from the north. After the maple and oak leaves turn from green to bright reds, golds, and oranges, they wither, fall, and die, clattering like old bones as they blow down the street in the twilight. The sun isn't as bright as it used to be, and the nights are dark and cold and long. This is the time of the harvest ... the time of Halloween ... and a time for reminiscences of the summer just past and of other summers, now long gone. This is a time of mystery and expectation as the earth prepares for the frigid onslaught of winter.

FOUR OCTOBERS collects for the first time four loosely interconnected novellas from the vivid imagination of best-selling author Rick Hautala. Each story is set in October, the month of pumpkins and trick or treat, of skeletons and haunted graveyards, and each story is filled with nostalgia for times past ... for summers and youth now gone ... for chances not taken ... for opportunities now lost forever.

"TIN CAN TELEPHONE," set in 1957, tells the story of a young boy and his friend who, in the pre-dawn darkness while waiting to see the Russian satellite Sputnik speed by overhead, experience a mystery and fear far more terrifying than the threat of Soviets in space.

"MISS HENRY'S BOTTLES," perhaps Hautala's best story to date, tells how the simple act of discarding two empty soda bottles on a neighbor's lawn brings to light secrets that should have remained buried ... but like all secrets, this one eventually is revealed with devastating consequences.

"BLOOD LEDGE," set in an Indian Summer of 1971, tells the tale of a young boy who discovers a dark family secret that leads him to accept a family inheritance that has horrifying results.

And finally, "COLD RIVER" is the story of a man so lost in loneliness and depression following the death of his wife that he faces a horror worse ... much worse than drowning in the cold, dark river that flows by his house.

Taken together, these stories show Rick Hautala writing at the top of his game, telling stories that will not only chill you when you read them, but will leave you with an icy dread in your heart ... a dread much colder than any October wind blowing down the street at night.

LIMITED EDITION OF 750 SIGNED COPIES \$40

TRAYCASED LETTERED EDITION OF
26 SIGNED AND LETTERED COPIES \$175

Cemetery Dance Publications • PO Box 623 • Forest Hill, MD 21050
410.588.5901 [phone] • 410.588.5904 [fax] • www.cemeterydance.com



THEODORE STURGEON SOME OF YOUR BLOOD

Theodore Sturgeon's look at the vampire myth was an instant classic when originally published in 1956. When George Smith is arrested for assaulting a senior officer, a military psychiatrist is assigned to the case. The secret of George's past is unearthed, and a history of blood lust and murder. Innovatively told through letters, interviews, and traditional narrative, *Some of Your Blood* effectively portrays the tragic upbringing of George Smith to his attempts at a stable life and the great love of his life to his inevitable downfall. Millipede Press is proud to present this masterpiece in a new edition with a new introduction by Steve Rasnic Tem.

Some of Your Blood

Theodore Sturgeon
with an introduction
by Steve Rasnic Tem
ISBN 1-933618-00-0 | July 2006
\$12 trade paperback
also available as a 300-copy
signed hardcover



www.millipede.com

RAMSEY CAMPBELL THE FACE THAT MUST DIE

Ramsey Campbell's look into the mind of a psychotic killer was published in truncated form in 1979 and expanded in 1982. The paranoid outlook of the book's main character, Horridge, is a grim commentary on a bleak Thatcher-era England. Millipede Press is proud to present this masterpiece in a new edition, with the corrected text by Campbell and the compelling photographs of J.K. Potter. Special features include a new introduction by Poppy Z. Brite; "I am it and it is I," Campbell's long out of print short story; and an afterword by Campbell written specially for this edition.

The Face That Must Die

Ramsey Campbell
with an introduction
by Poppy Z. Brite
ISBN 1-933618-02-7
August 2006
\$14 trade paperback
also available as a 300-copy
signed hardcover



Millipede Press books are
distributed by Consortium Book
Sales & Distribution

AVAILABLE NOW NOSFERATU: CRITICISM & INTERPRETATION

Centipede Press
2565 Teller Court
Lakewood, Colorado 80214
www.centipede.com

Numbered limited edition, 500 copies. The greatest horror film in all of cinema receives the deluxe treatment in this gorgeous, 7.5 x 12 oversized edition bound in Japanese cloth in a two-toned slipcase. Loaded with tons of photographs from the film, essays on Murnau's *Nosferatu*, Herzog's remake, *Shadow of the Vampire*, and other related movies. Includes classic criticism from Lotte Eisner and Siegfried Kracauer, a 40-page history of the early German cinema, Nina Auerbach, David J. Skal, Gregory Waller, and many other critics.

500 copy edition in slipcase: \$250 (\$275 outside the U.S.)

A signed, deluxe, leatherbound edition is also available.

Checks, money orders, PayPal accepted (Colorado residents add 4.6%)
See website at www.centipede.com for more payment information.

vilified for his insensitivity. Speculation of his involvement, of his complicity, and of his lack of compassion spreads like a fire in dry woods.

Everyone hates him, everyone has a theory, and many would like to kill him (except for one woman on the internet who'd like to marry him) — but no one knows anything about him and his unusual response to the massacre. In fact, Clayton has succumbed to a rare illness in which sadness or tragedy causes him to laugh compulsively. Soon he and his fellow "freaks" Porno Girl and the Racist Ranger (dubbed the "Odd Squad"), united by husband and wife celebrity shrinks seeking to expand their popular culture empire while "treating" the trio, become pawns in the government's plan to track the terrorists.

Bradley Denton has taken risks before. With *Laughin' Boy*, he takes on the touchy topic of terrorism, not one many dare to satirize. The biggest twist in this surreal black comedy is the fact that it was written before the New York attacks, eerily echoing our response to that event if not the event itself. Built along the lines of the Oklahoma City bombing, the fictional Wichita massacre is the initial salvo in the campaign of the homegrown terrorist group White Warriors for Jesus, Deceased (WWJD). This brilliant, darkly humorous novel skewers the media's response to terrorism in a spot-on parody of the wackiness wrought by instant communications and the internet. Look for favorite (and least favorite) media celebs in thinly-disguised cameos, plus a passel of stupid people who spew their ignorance onto internet news and chat groups. Denton spares no one in his assault. We are an insufferably stupid culture, all too eager to enjoy the failures and miseries of others. While often hilarious, *Laughin' Boy* is also a tragic, relentless critique of how our news morphs into cruelty-driven entertainment — and how we stoke that fire ourselves. It's another bravura performance by the author of the equally haunting *Blackburn* (1993) and *Lunatics* (1996), tackling controversial subjects with a jaundiced eye. The grotesque irony of grimness causing laughter will stay with you and forever haunt your television consumption.

—William D. Gagliani

The Link, by Richard Matheson; Gauntlet, 2006; 350 pgs.; \$55.00

Robert Allright, whose most recent book bears the title *Things Without Expla-*

nation, has spent his entire life pursuing the paranormal, and has become an expert on topics such as telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, faith healing, psychic crime solving, out of body experiences, and various super- and preternatural occurrences and manifestations. Thus, it's no surprise when he is approached by Hollywood producer Alan Bremer to spearhead a project to explore these phenomena in a four-hour documentary film. Funded by Bremer, Allright and his team of experts travel the globe to experience the strange and mysterious firsthand. Robert's travels immerse him more deeply in the world of the super-normal, causing him to confront and embrace aspects of his own personality and nature that he has long denied. Embracing those traits will bring him closer to a unified theory of these things, the so-called "Link" which inspired the title of this work.

The Link began as a 557-page outline Richard Matheson wrote for a potential ABC-TV miniseries in the 1970's (a la *Roots* and *The Winds of War*). The text offered in this Gauntlet edition IS that outline, in narrative form, a hybrid of script and novel; although Matheson briefly flirted with changing the outline from a script into an actual novel, he gave up when he realized the finished product would come to more than 2000 pages. Because it's an outline, it's not as rich a product as one would expect from the likes of Matheson, author of *I Am Legend*, *The Shrinking Man*, *A Stir of Echoes*, *Somewhere in Time* and *What Dreams May Come*. It's still a satisfying reading experience, however, for two

reasons. First, readers can easily see what a glorious and engrossing mini series this would have made, given the right creative team — Matheson's vision was expansive and ambitious. Second, it represents Matheson's attempt to wrestle with many of the ideas and notions that have intrigued him and his readers over the decades — as such, it no doubt would have made for engrossing reading in expanded form. Readers should enjoy this version, despite its somewhat stilted nature, as long as they realize that it's only providing a taste of what might have been.

—Hank Wagner

Lorelei: Building the Perfect Beast, Vol. 1, created & written by Steven A. Roman, with artwork by David C. Matthews & Kevin Tuma; Starwarp Concepts, 2005; 142 pgs.; \$9.95

Steven Roman's *Lorelei* stalks the streets of New York City. She's a red-headed angel of vengeance who preys on those who would prey on the weak. As deadly as she is beautiful, she takes from evildoers the one thing for which they no longer have a use: their souls.

Lorelei: Building the Perfect Beast, Vol. 1, is the first volume of an extended graphic horror novel delineating the modern-day adventures of *Lorelei*, reprinting the first half of *Lorelei*'s origin story as originally published between 1993 and 1995. A second volume yet to appear will continue the origin story, which ends with an abrupt splash panel in *Vol. 1*.

The *Lorelei* character debuted in 1989 in a digest-sized one-shot comic written and drawn by Roman. Later volumes, including *Building the Perfect Beast*, saw Roman as scripter and brought in *Satin Steele* artist David C. Matthews, later joined by cartoonist Kevin Tuma. The character is a kind of amalgamation of *Vampirella*, *The Equalizer*, and *Satanna*, *The Devil's Daughter*. Roman's storyline develops slowly, introducing a number of diverse characters whose association will gradually become clear. Elements of Gothic horror fiction are present, but the story is a very contemporary, modern one, with a Boris Karloff lookalike patriarch who seems to be pulling the strings, a back-from-the-dead stripper feasting upon the unfortunate citizenry hapless enough to fall for her charms, and all manner of modern personalities whose connection will become clear in the complete story. The first volume ends with many loose



over the next decade and a half, has finally achieved a proper soundtrack release, thanks to Italy's intrepid GDM label, which has restored full-length soundtracks to dozens of well-deserving Italian Western and Giallo music scores.

Mario Caiano's lush 1965 Gothic shocker, *AMANTI D'OLTRETOMBA* (*LOVERS BEYOND THE TOMB*, but best known under its USA release title, *NIGHTMARE CASTLE*; although also known as *NIGHT OF THE DOOMED*, *THE FACELESS MONSTER*, and *ORGASMO*) told of the post-mortem vengeance a woman and her lover gain upon the sadistic husband who killed them. The film starred Euro-horror icon Barbara Steele. The score, by Italy's maestro of movie music, Ennio Morricone, set the tonal stage (as he did with the Italian Western films around the same time period—including Caiano's own *BULLETS DON'T ARGUE*.) for much giallo music to follow—an extremely lovely, romantic melody contrasted with severely dissonant and dark musical atmospheres.

Portions of the score (26 minutes in nine tracks) appeared for the first time on a 1992 RCA soundtrack release, paired with eight tracks from Morricone's sci-fi score, *L'UMANOID*. GDM's new release contains 39 minutes of music over seven mostly longish tracks. The main melody, introduced in "Amanti D'Oltretomba" closely resembled the gorgeous lyric Morricone used in *L'AVVENTURIERO*, Terence Young's 1967 swashbuckling adventure drama with Anthony Quinn as a Napoleonic pirate. The theme is a sweepingly lovely violin line, here played over rather a busy piano riff with cello counterpoint. This motif represents the lovers and their former bliss, while the balance of the score comprises a series of unusual, awkward, and very frightening sustained musical evocations—organs, voice, interspersed violins and horn.

"Contrappunto Tragico," for instance, is comprised of a series of unusually textured misterioso motifs, mostly for solo organ. The stark cries of the organ bring back all sorts of memories—from silent film accompaniment (references to the subterranean passages of Lon Chaney's *PHANTOM OF THE OPERA* can't help but rise to the surface with those clustering chords from the organ, which lent the film an unusual character through that rather subliminal



reference). Gothic "Distesi" takes the riff that had underlain the main melody and sets it apart from the lyric, marrying it instead to severely disassociated violin notes, shuddering in panic and layered dissonantly against one another; a piping trumpet soon propels the strings into further disharmony and finally a chaotic, panic-stricken dash for freedom.

"Spettri" (the only complete cue never before released, although the previous three tracks all contain previously unreleased material) consists of eerie female vocalisms, ghostly mutterings and spooky spoken sonorities. The organ returns in "Per Organo e Ottori" for another prolonged solo organ exercise; it gets a bit tiresome after a while but is nonetheless very effective in building an aura of claustrophobic discomfort; the heaviness of the organ chords and their slow ponderousness and shrill volume evoke an inescapable dread moving rapidly towards panic. The second half of the cue, like "Contrappunto Tragico," softens the harshness into a series of quiet organ filigrees, suggesting almost the atmosphere of silent film horror; a notable effect is provided by the inclusion of a deep and dramatic solo from French horn resounding over the top of the organ riff, resonating like the growls of some prowling monster moving above the surface of a roiling subterranean lagoon. "Dall Oltretomba" is a sustained tonality of low organ, echoing subtly and proffering a nightmarish constantly grating sound design; very effective in the film but less so on CD. A reprise of the lyrical main theme, proffered in chamber

music ensemble style, closes the album out with a touch of classicism.

Despite its occasional raucous moments, *NIGHTMARE CASTLE* is a rare example of a true horror film score from maestro Morricone, and its preservation in such form warrants praise. The music carries with it its own sensibility of sonic horror, whether provided by organ or strings or voice, and the soundtrack maintains an inherent propensity for a kind of romantic suspense all its own.

—Randall D. Larson

Oddest Yet: Even More Stories to Chill the Heart, by Steve Burt; Burt Creations, 2004; 130 pgs.; 14.95

With three Ray Bradbury Creative Writing Awards, seven honorable mentions in *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror* and a Stoker win under his belt, part time church pastor Steve Burt might be considered the Chaplain of Horror. Like his second collection *Even Odder*, *Oddest Yet* is aimed at young adults but will find older admirers.

Old-fashioned in the best sense of the term, Burt's stories have beginnings, middles and ends, told in an uncomplicated style. Better, he knows how much explanation is required to satisfy readers' expectations without leeching all the mystery out of his plots.

Burt is in touch with his inner child. His pre-teen protagonists are authentic and convincing. In the opening tale, "Too Deep," four friends digging tunnels for an underground fort run afoul of an oversized, carnivorous bloodworm. Fans of "The Body"/*STAND BY ME* will cheer for "Storming Stephen King's," in which the four friends of that novella/movie invade their creator's home to steal his journal. "The Swimmer" is a weird tale distinguished by Burt's refusal to demystify his monster. Though "Uncle Banjo's Chimes" contains strong language, he makes the right artistic call in using it. "But it's hard to imagine members of a terrorizing subway gang using language like 'Heck!' and 'Damn!' and 'Gosh!'" he explains in his story notes, curiously positioned before the introduction. "The Praying Man" is more of a meditation on the mystery and sacredness of death than it is an adventure story, but "Shadow Meadow" finds a more adventurous way to explore the theme.

Three tales involve adult protagonists. The stories are fine, but seem out of place in this volume. The epistolary "Power of the Pen" involves misdirected witchcraft and "Bad Day" is about a video game creator who answers the wrong job notice. Winding up the book is the novella "The French Acre," featuring the psychic detectives Devaney and Hoag first introduced in the story "The Witness Tree" in *Odd Lot* and returned in his next collection, *Wicked Odd*.

All in all, this is young adult fiction older adults will enjoy sharing with their kids, although boys will probably like it better, as there are no little girls to ruin the party.

-Garrett Peck

***Pandora Drive*, by Tim Waggoner; Leisure Books, 2006; 370 pgs.; \$6.99**

Tim Waggoner is well on his way to being proclaimed horror fiction's leading surrealist. His Prime Books collection *All Too Surreal* demonstrated his facility at creating an almost hyper-real atmosphere that seamlessly shifts with the ethereal logic of dreams into the realm of the supernatural. This made him a natural selection to pen the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* novel *Protégé*, the best so far in the Black Flame series featuring Wes Craven's iconic monster Freddy Krueger. His first original novel for Leisure Books, last year's *Like Death*, was thought by many to be the best novel the genre produced in 2005. With accolades beginning to pile up, Waggoner continues to get better and serves up a deliciously imaginative thriller in *Pandora Drive*.

Damara Ruschmann is a quiet and reclusive woman living in Zephyr, Ohio. She has good reason to be reclusive. She was born with an amazing and unwelcome power that's beyond her control. While in her proximity, people's dreams, fantasies and nightmares come to life, even to the extent of transforming their very flesh. Any unguarded thought or musing can be instantly manifested in reality. Think of a pink elephant and it's likely to appear and crush you under its feet. As a child, Damara lost her father in Riverfork, an abandoned and forbidden amusement park, when her powers got away from her. Now, coinciding with the return of her childhood friend Tristan upon his mother's death, her powers are growing and infecting the people of the town. A sexual obsessive with ED grows a monstrous penis with which he can rape women to death. His frigid

teacher wife Emma transforms into a birdlike creature with gardening shears for hands, empowered by her desire to play "snip-snip" with her unfaithful husband. When Emma kidnaps a teenager who nearly became her husband's victim and takes her to Riverfork, Damara and Tristan must follow them into the amusement park, which desires to live again and can use Damara's powers to do it.

Waggoner takes the old advice "be careful what you wish for" in a literal way and uses it both to serve his theme and to create some really cool monsters. His descriptive powers lend a cinematic quality to his prose that plays out spectacularly in the mind's eye. No doubt this book could make a stupendous movie; special effects wizards would have a ball bringing his visions of transmuting flesh to life. As is, the book must already be considered an early contender for this year's best horror novel. It's not to be missed.

-Garrett Peck

***Premonitions #1: Premonitions and Premonitions #2: Disappearance*, by Jude Watson; Scholastic, 2004/2005; 241/202 pgs.; \$6.99 each**

Grace, or Gracie, is a troubled young woman. Her father abandoned her a long time ago, and her mother has recently died. In *Premonitions*, Gracie is withdrawn, resentful, depressed and moody, and she has been shuffled from her loving but incapable grandparents to her Aunt Shay and cousin Diego.

As she mopes about her new home, Gracie's "friend" Emily comes to visit, only to get the usual cold shoulder. Getting nowhere, Emily leaves—and disappears. Gracie becomes the center of the investigation as she was the last person to have seen Emily. She grows even more resentful as she begins to have visionary flashes of Emily's fate. The visions are accurate, but often opaque, and fragmentary, and cause Gracie more frustration as she seems to be constantly wrongly interpreting them. What's worse, these visions are forcing her out of her self-imposed psychic shell.

Psychic detectives are an old theme in horror and suspense fiction, but one of the things that makes this story interesting is that there isn't a lot of time wasted sparring with people who won't listen or believe. Gracie uncovers something about somebody, they become open minded, and we move on. Still, it's an uphill slog for Gracie, who can never decide who to trust. These books are

told in the first person, so readers never know, or suspect, anything more than Gracie does herself.

Although brief, and written for mid-teens, this novel is solid follow-up to the novels of Christopher Pike, and manages to jam in references, hints, and plotlines of childhood abduction, family annihilation, possible incest, runaway fathers, power/bully politics, depression, betrayal, and more.

Disappearance gives us Gracie a year later, and having already sorted out the good guys from the bad guys, Watson doesn't waste time with reintroducing the supporting cast but rather gets right to it with a graphic and brutal murder. The plot thickens as not only is her Aunt Shay a suspect, but so too is her father Nate, who suddenly shows up after he had abandoned her at birth. Although it's shorter than *Premonitions*, the plot to *Disappearance* is more complex and involves several bloody murders.

These are good, short, snappily-written, supernatural detective young adult novels with a likable heroine with unpredictable psychic powers, and equally likable supporting characters. Watson is never patronizing, and her novels aren't overly complicated, but even if they aren't as edgy as they might have been if written for the "adult" market, they are still tightly written, and well plotted with some solid red herrings and plot twists.

If you are wondering what to get your kids to read before they graduate to writers like Koontz or King, get them these. Only remember, when they are done with them, don't forget to read them, too.

-Mark Louis Baumgart

***The Reckoning*, by Sarah Pinborough; Leisure, 2005; 338 pgs.; \$6.99**

Syracouse House stands alone and forgotten in the small town of Streatford until one night three young friends arrive there to party and drink. Tragedy ensues and Syracouse House is now officially awake, and there will be hell to pay, because it's lonely, and it's pissed.

Coincidentally, part-time addict and full-time novelist Robert Black decides it's time to clean up his act and packs up and goes home to Streatford to detox and write his new opus. Black is one of four friends—along with Carrie, Jason, and the enigmatic Gina—who long ago experienced a tragic and traumatic event

that would change them forever and close the Syracuse House.

As Black settles down he learns of the murder/suicide of Carrie and her family, and the news brings back memories of the childhood events that changed his life forever. The story then starts switching back and forth between current and past events, the latter focusing on when the four friends used to hang out at Syracuse House in order to visit Gina. Syracuse House was originally built by Gina's grandfather for his daughter, and magical things always seem to happen whenever Gina is around.

Pinborough builds suspense as little by little we find out who the mysterious "Teacher" is, and what horrible things happened to him and others in Syracuse House that lost summer, and how these things tie in with the events of the present.

Black meets up with forgotten schoolmate and now single mom Kelly, and winds up falling for her, while Jason, who had never left Streatford, begins to pull his life together and tries to come to grips with his past.

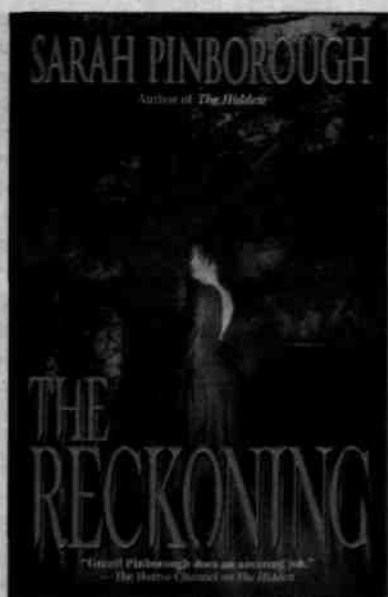
As events progress, Kelly and her child are dragged into Black's problems—not just because of her association with him, but because of something that her ex-cop father did in the past.

Then Kelly's little girl is kidnapped by Syracuse House, the mysterious Gina arrives back into Streatford, and the truth begins to be revealed. *The Reckoning* is not a typical haunted house story but more of a tale about a sentient, self-centered, and selfish house. *The Reckoning* isn't going to break any new ground, and it won't satisfy extreme gorehounds, but, it is a solid character and plot-driven suspense/horror novel that takes its time to gradually build its suspense and to create believable and likable characters. Marred only by a cynical and unnecessary Epilogue, *The Reckoning* should satisfy traditional horror fans.

—Mark Louis Baumgart

Requiem for the Radioactive Monkeys, Masque of the Small Town Oddball, and Bone Ballet, all edited by John Weagly; Iguana Publications, 2004/5; 51/58/54 pgs.; \$4.00/5.00/5.00

Iguana is a fairly new small publisher. Each of these three chapbooks is a modest, saddle-stitched (stapled) anthology of short fiction priced to move. Let me say a bit about each one.



Requiem for the Radioactive Monkeys. The title alone, you know what I'm saying? What we have here are shortish bits that all have something to do with monkeys (or monkey-like things) hot-punked with bomb juice. Most are throwaways. Tina L. Jens offers something worth reading, though, if a bit off-kilter. We are talking radioactive monkeys here. Another surprise is the exceedingly vulgar story by Wayne Allen Sallee. It is not the sort of thing we have come to expect from Wayne. I hope we never see another one like it, either.

Masque of the Small Town Oddball. Notables are thin on the ground in this one. The anchor story, "A Perfect Plan" by Martin Mundt, was a lot fun, I must say, and probably worth the fiver it takes to get this chap. The editor puts one of his own stories in the mix. That is almost always a bad idea—folks, you cannot be objective about your own writing. Editors are a necessity. You cannot edit yourself, at least not well. Yes? OK then.

Bone Ballet. This third one has the best writing of the trio. Another Martin Mundt can be found here, and veteran weird-monger James S. Dorr gives us something to think about after we put the paper down. The theme is bones, and unlike the other two chapbooks, this one doesn't beat the theme to death. Rather, there is notable variety to the collection. If you are only going to pick one to buy get this one. I know it'll be hard to steer clear of the glowing primates, but if you can you'll be glad you did.

—Wayne Edwards

A Reverie for Mister Ray, by Michael Bishop; PS Publishing, 2005; \$45

This is a truly amazing book. You can read for a lifetime and enjoy an author's works, and never really stop to consider the breadth of a career—then you find something like *A Reverie for Mister Ray*, and new understanding emerges. Many know Michael Bishop for his fiction, and probably another group of readers would remember an essay here, or there—book reviews—anecdotes—but when you put it all together in a single volume as has been done here, the perspective shifts.

This book helps to paint a portrait of the author in words. It covers his early influences, Theodore Sturgeon, and Jonathan Swift, among them. It includes book reviews of many sorts, essays on the state of genre fiction, essays on life—humor—and most importantly, it contains Michael Bishop.

Even when what he has written is about another author, like Ray Bradbury, you get the sensation of a unique perspective, full of insight and understanding. You relearn things you might already have known, or experience things you have previously encountered, but with a new twist, or a poignant observation that changes it for you forever.

This is a book that those who read and write science fiction, horror, and fantasy should embrace. It is a wonderful companion for late nights when sleep evades you. You don't have to read it as a single work, because it is a multi-faceted gold mine of thoughts, challenging philosophical statements, and history.

This is not a self-indulgent volume. Bishop lays bare his own work and career as readily as those of colleagues and contemporaries, giving a snapshot of his style and his methods and offering thanks to those who have provided the same to him.

It's not often that a book comes along that can be considered a companion, as well as an object of entertainment, but if such a thing exists, *A Reverie for Mister Ray* is such a book.

—David Niall Wilson

Riverside Blues, by Eric Tomblin; Earthling Publications, 2005; \$14

This is a well-written, subtle novella of deep, abiding love, betrayal, renewal, horror and hope. If there is a complaint to be found it is that this doesn't cover a greater span of time and pages.

Gordon's wife has been missing for a very long time. He has quit taking

care of himself, and his home. He drinks cheap beer and visits town only when necessary. His best friend Earl, who is the local Sheriff, has a secret.

Then Gordon wakes up. He begins to live again, clearing his yard and the path leading down to the river by his home. It is a path he walked many times when his wife was with him. As he continues to work, cleaning himself, his home, and this trail, he comes back to life. Earl notices, and is not necessarily pleased.

Then, when the swimming pool Gordon shared with his Lily is cleared, he makes a new discovery. Lily.

Drenched in deep emotion and peopled with very believable, down-to-earth characters, this is both mystery and fantasy. As Gordon discovers more and more of a past he thought was lost to him, and Earl grows more and more wary of that search, the tension builds toward a very satisfying conclusion.

Well-crafted and entertaining, *Riverside Blues* is just the right blend of the real and surreal. In one moment poignant, and the next repulsive, the images seem to slip from the pages onto the fingertips of the reader and draw him down to that river, and that swimming hole. They bring the taste of cold, cheap beer to mind and paint a compelling portrait of tragic loss.

Highly Recommended.

—David Niall Wilson

SEED OF CHUCKY original soundtrack, by Pino Donaggio; La-La Records, 2005; \$16.98

It's good to see Pino Donaggio back at the business he did so well in the '70s and '80s, creating the scores for such memorable genre soundtracks as *CARRIE*, *THE HOWLING*, and *DON'T LOOK NOW*. It seems like a long time since the world has heard a horror soundtrack of his, and even the lesser scores like that for *PIRANHA* linger in the memory and leave a cool echo.

La-La records released the soundtrack with a full complement of artwork from the film, information on the technical aspects and production notes. Many listeners will enjoy the familiarity of Donaggio's characteristic violin trills and moody piano riffs, while others will be intrigued by a sort of modernization of his sound. There are guitars and synthesizers and some very cool electronic effects.

The Main Title piece sets a theme that runs throughout the melodies

and rhythms of the CD, accompanied by an oddly mechanized female choir that leads, then chases, then runs from Chucky and his son, who is living out the classic GLEN OR GLENDA motif of Ed Wood fame.

The music is performed by the London Symphony Orchestra, another first for Donaggio, and it is wonderfully rendered. This will not go down in history as a great piece of art, but this soundtrack more than fulfills its purpose in driving an odd, low-grade horror film to new heights. Anyone who is a fan of Donaggio's work will enjoy this.

—David Niall Wilson

***Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*, edited by Bernice M. Murphy; McFarland, 2005; 304 pgs.; \$35.00**

Shirley Jackson is an interesting case study. Known mainly for her story "The Lottery" (in *The New Yorker*, 1948) and her novel *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), Jackson wrote extensively outside these themes throughout her entire career. Her work ranged from "literary" depth to almost-pulp fiction novels aimed at housewives in the fifties. Despite the impressive body of work Jackson created, there has been very little analysis and contemplation of her work in academic circles. As noted by the editor in her introduction to *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*, contemporaries of Shirley Jackson such as Eudora Welty and Sylvia Plath have received exhaustive attention from obscure professors trying to get tenure by writing dense deconstructions. But Jackson herself? Not so much. The reasons for this omission are not clear. It could be that her work simply does not warrant extensive analysis. It could be that even though she wrote a lot of material, little of it has the resonance of "The Lottery," *The Haunting of Hill House*, and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962). Whatever the reason for it, little critical light has been shined on Jackson's work.

The book at hand is a collection of essays concerning the impact that Jackson had on future writers rather than on the work she created for its own sake. At least that is what the title implies. In fact, most of the essays are deconstructions, or might as well be. Witness the tantalizingly titled "Multiple Personality and the Postmodern Subject: Theorizing Agency." Mmmhmm. Still, some of it is comparative. There is, for instance, an essay that relates Stephen King's work to Jackson. And there is the merely descrip-

tive, as in S. T. Joshi's "Shirley Jackson: Domestic Horror."

Should you buy this book? Depends what you are looking for. If you want to read Shirley Jackson's work, then no. Buy a collection instead. If you want to know more about Jackson, then no, again. Instead buy one of the several biographies floating around out there. So who *would* want to read this? Well, if you teach English at a community college in the Midwest and you have a lot of time on your hands, this might be your book. And then of course people like me. I thought it was great.

—Wayne Edwards

STAY ALIVE original soundtrack, by John Frizzell; Nicabella Records, 2006; 18 tracks; 35:15

In the space of just over ten years, John Frizzell has maintained a powerful and effective career as a Hollywood composer. Equally capable in comedies (*OFFICE SPACE*, *MAFIA!*) as in dramas (*THE GOODBYE GIRL*, *GODS AND GENERALS*), Frizzell has also proven to be an exceptional scorer of horror films (*ALIEN RESURRECTION*, *GHOST SHIP*, *THIRTEEN GHOSTS*, *THE WOODS*). A new soundtrack record label, Nicabella, makes its debut with Frizzell's excellent score for *STAY ALIVE*, William Brent Ball's eerie thriller about a group of teens who stumble upon a new video game called Stay Alive and are soon being murdered in the same method as the character they played in the game.

Frizzell's score is a splendid hybrid of electronic and orchestral recordings. According to Nicabella, multiple versions of Frizzell's themes were recorded and manipulated during the composing-to-picture process; afterward, an additional unmanipulated orchestral recording was done to hold the score together and give it depth. The resultant mix is tonally and texturally very interesting, proffering some new sounds which lend this horror film a degree of aural originality not often found in modern horror picture soundtracks.

In "Investigation," for example, a soft piano melody gives the eeriness an emotive characteristic that plays well against the brooding darkness of the riffing musical atmospheres that lie behind it. "Butch's Story" carries a similar characteristic, a very poignant and understated piano melody heard over the consistent atmospherics of the orchestra. "Meet the Counters" is an especially eerie mix of synths and orchestra. "Winning By A Rose" and

"Abigail is Captured" both feature agitated string lines that grow in intensity and volume and provide a compelling urgency through their relentless propulsiveness. "Final Encounter" concludes the score with an affecting melancholia that emerges into a powerful and persuasive resolution. A short coda, the quirky, burbling electronica of "In Stores Now," adds a humorous epilogue to the film, a final stinger suggesting that the game remains... waiting for new victims.

STAY ALIVE is a great example of a mostly ambient, dissonant horror score that never goes over the line into unlistenability when separated from its film on CD. That danger is always there, especially when horror scores need to be aggressive, non-melodic, or disturbing. Frizzell maintains a likable balance between creepy atmospheres and emotional tonality which serves both the film and its soundtrack well.

-Randall D. Larson

***Terrible Thrills*, by C. Dennis Moore; Silver Lake Publishing, 2005; 157 pgs.; \$12.95**

There are quite a few horror authors—particularly those who concentrate on short fiction—who have been laboring away for years, seeing their work published online and in small press magazines. C. Dennis Moore is one such author. *Terrible Thrills* collects stories written between 1991 and 2005 and are (with one exception) presented in the order in which they were written. He also limited his selections to stories of 3,500 words or less, so it represents a decade-and-a-half's worth of his shortest fiction.

Because of the linear presentation of the tales, the reader gets to watch the author's storytelling improve over the years, getting better as the book goes on. Though there are several forgettable short-shorts of less than a page each, the longer pieces reveal a writer with a gift for metaphor and a penchant for fresh takes on time-tested tropes. Take the suicidal vampire of "The Salvation of Victor" or the atypical shape-shifter in "The Flesh-Method and Myriad" as good examples of how to re-imagine classic monsters. The war between the mind and the body inspires some of Moore's strongest tales, such as "Inside," "Bob's Leg," and "Parliament of Jim." Holiday mythology is another major inspiration. His takes on Halloween ("Terrible Thrills") and Christmas ("Working For

the Fat Man") turn traditions on their heads.

With a near equal mixture of the forgettable and memorable, the collection as a whole is average, but the best of the stories are very good indeed. The consistent improvement in his work over the years, as well as his ability to seamlessly shift from the mundane to the surreal, indicate an author worth keeping an eye on.

-Garrett Peck

***The Voyage of the Sable Keech*, by Neal Asher; Tor UK/Pan Macmillan, 2006; 506 pgs.; £17.99**

Writing within the science fiction genre, Neal Asher offers readers an unparalleled experience of horror in *The Voyage of the Sable Keech*. This direct sequel to Asher's previous personal best, *The Skinner*, should only be read if you've read the first novel first. Asher uses horror as a literary tool to achieve a wide range of effects, and very few of them are the effects that we normally associate with the horror genre. Yes, there is a good deal of humor to be found here, and that is commonly associated with the horror genre. Awe is here, pure, raw, science fictional awe. That's also not unexpected. This is, after all, first and foremost, science fiction; alien planets, alien life forms, alien empires, mutated humans; yes, this is science fiction. But *The Voyage of the Sable Keech* launches all the tropes of horror to create a lot of emotions within the reader that are not in the least bit horrific.

What's most striking about *The Voyage of the Sable Keech* is Asher's ability to create a sort of sweet, almost romantic wistfulness within paragraphs about oozing pus and gruesome gore. In this horror-drenched novel, you'll encounter no scares and little of the "Are-they-going-to-be-safe?" kind of tension usually associated with horror. You will find true friendships, strongly portrayed. Asher nails service for the greater good, he hammers down issues of trust, love and companionship. To a plank. Through living flesh. It's a singular accomplishment.

The Voyage of the Sable Keech is set on Asher's planet of Spatterjay, a water covered world that is constructed with an eye towards ecological detail not seen since Frank Herbert mapped out the life cycles beneath the sands of *Dune*. Some ten years after the events in *The Skinner*, remnants of the lives touched then are once again stirred by the same forces.

The alien Prador are back. A cult of reifs—living dead resurrected by technology but hoping to achieve actual feel-the-wind-on-your-skin life—has arrived, hoping to duplicate the feat of the now-legendary Sable Keech, the reif cop who was brought alive by Erlin, a youngish Hooper and Janer, the emissary of the Hive minds of intelligent wasps. It's all very much the stuff of science fiction, carefully layered.

As ever, Asher makes it seem simple and fun, but adds to the plot and the characters until the simple has become, while the reader was immersed in Asher's prose, much more complex. He's got the kind of skills that conceal themselves within deceptively easy reading. Easy, that is, if you can take Asher's non-stop onslaught of gore, fluids and steaming, slimy anatomical detail. There are very few paragraphs in this novel that don't include a description along the lines of, "...he had been unable to resist the lure of a bile duct."

The Voyage of the Sable Keech offers readers wonderful plot turns, utterly memorable characters and a tour of a world that is dangerously beautiful. But more importantly, it offers an incomparable reading experience. You need to get past—way past—any reaction to the effects of horror, to the devices of horror with a feeling of horror. This is not a scary book, it's not a book to really gross you out. *The Voyage of the Sable Keech* is a novel you can dive into with no danger whatsoever of ever being anything less than enthralled.

-Rick Kleffel

If you have a product that you'd like to have considered for review, please send copies to each of the following addresses:

Robert Morrish
22393 Old Logging Rd.
Los Gatos, CA 95033

Richard Chizmar
132-B Industry Lane, Unit 7
Forest Hill, MD 21050

Grave Tales



If you were a fan of the old Warren comics, *Creepy*™ and *Eerie*™ and the legendary EC horrorbooks like *Tales From the Crypt*™ and *The Vault of Horror*™, you'll absolutely love *Grave Tales*! With beautiful, full color covers, and interior black and white illustrations from some of the best, each issue of *Grave Tales* is good old-fashioned horror.

Published quarterly, past issues have featured stories from Richard Laymon, Edward Lee, Rick Hautala, Al Sarrantonio, Nancy A. Collins, Thomas F. Monteleone, and other masters of horror!

Future issues have contributions already lined up from Jack Ketchum, Ray Garton, William F. Nolan, Stewart O'Nan, Tom Piccirilli, Ed Gorman, Richard Laymon, Douglas Clegg, Joe Hill, Rick Hautala, Al Sarrantonio, and Kealan Patrick Burke!



Subscriptions

4 issues, U.S. \$16 4 issues, non-U.S. \$30

DELUXE LIMITED EDITIONS:

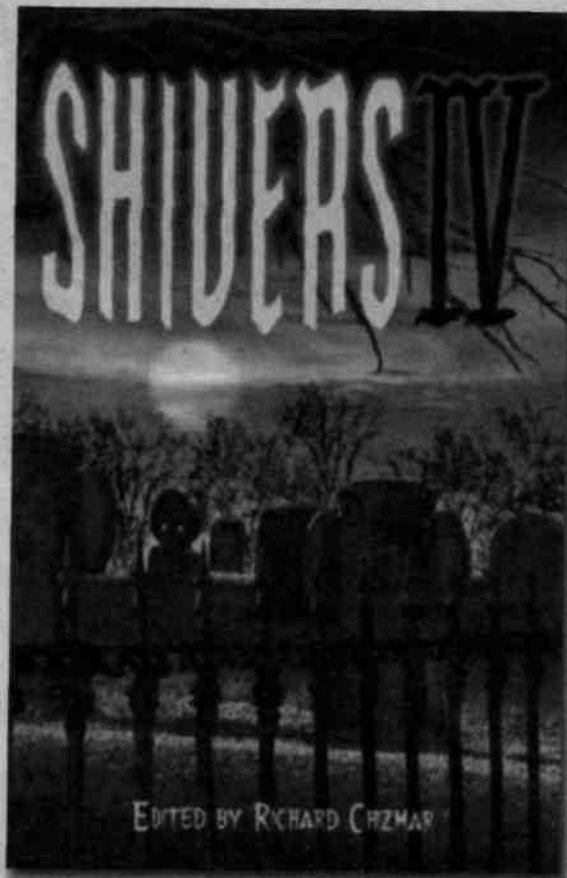
The hardcover Limited Editions of *Grave Tales* are hand-bound, limited to only 100 numbered copies, and in most cases they are signed by all of the contributors! The discounted subscription price is a savings of \$50 off the retail price.

4 issues, U.S. \$250 4 issues, non-U.S. \$325



Cemetery Dance Publications • PO Box 623 • Forest Hill, MD 21050
410.588.5901 [phone] • 410.588.5904 [fax] • www.cemeterydance.com

SHIVERS IV



Cemetery Dance Publications is proud to announce **SHIVERS IV**— the fourth volume in this brand new anthology series of terror — containing two dozen short stories from today's hottest writers, including TIM LEBBON, RAY GARTON, BRIAN HODGE, ED GORMAN, BRIAN KEENE, T.M. WRIGHT, BRIAN FREEMAN, KEALAN PATRICK BURKE, WILLIAM F. NOLAN and many others!

Featuring almost all original dark fiction, this chilling anthology is only available as a beautiful perfect-bound trade paperback and is priced at *just \$20. Add \$5 for U.S. postage.*

Cemetery Dance Publications
132-B Industry Lane
Unit #7
Forest Hill, MD 21050



Ph: 410-588-5901
Fax: 410-588-5904
www.cemeterydance.com
Visa/MC/AmEx/Dis Accepted

MAKE THE MYSTERY BEGIN ON THE COVER

Quality, one-of-a-kind cover art
for Mystery & Suspense
authors and publishers
978.454.4248

BestBookcovers.com

Cover Art Fiction · Mystery · Suspense



Coming this Halloween from Cemetery Dance



A Midwestern town. You know its name.
You were born there.

It's Halloween night, 1963. Every boy between the ages of sixteen and nineteen has been locked up for the last five days. Now, starving and wild, they're hitting the streets armed with baseball bats, pitchforks, and two-by-fours studded with nails.

They're ready to go nose-to-nose with a legend. He's the reaper that grows in a cornfield, the merciless trick with a heart made of treats, the butchering nightmare with a Jack O' Lantern face. He's the October Boy, and he visits your town every Halloween, ready to run a gauntlet of young men anxious to carve his beating candy heart from his chest.

Mitch Crenshaw and his gang burn rubber in a street rod with Gorgon headlights... Pete McCormick's on the move with a stolen .45... and a hunted girl is out there, too, making her break on the one night of the year when no rules apply. You're running with them, threading your own path through danger and moonlight, shadowing a sadistic cop and packs of brutal teenagers who'll attack anyone who gets in their way. Because this is your town. You understand its secrets, and you want a ringside seat on the night it all comes tumbling down.

LIMITED EDITION OF 2000 copies: \$40
DELUXE LETTERED EDITION OF 52 copies: \$175

Shipping Halloween 2006

Norman Partridge returns to Cemetery Dance with a high-octane tale of fantastic suspense. Startlingly original in style and execution, *Dark Harvest* is sure to be the horror event this Halloween season. Don't miss it!

Cemetery Dance Publications • PO Box 623 • Forest Hill, MD 21050
410.588.5901 [phone] • 410.588.5904 [fax] • www.cemeterydance.com

