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Oh, the Horror: It's Good for You

What's Past Is Prologue

By Michael Sims, Creativity Columnist

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Arnzen credits Mad magazine and the self-referential world of horror film with helping inspire his own ironic worldview.

Terror can be a form of release that gives shape to the paranoia we live in everyday life, according to award-winning writer Michael Arnzen.

Horror writer Michael A. Arnzen was born in Amityville, New York. Yes, THAT Amityville. It's no coincidence that he grew up to win three Bram Stoker awards (named for the author of Dracula), his genre's highest award, as well as the International Horror Critics

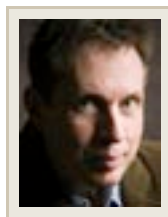
Guild Award. "I was surrounded by these local stories about the Amityville Horror — both after the book came out and before, when the actual murders in that house took place."

At around the same time, horror was becoming a popular genre of film — The Exorcist, Rosemary's Baby. "My father — " Arnzen laughs — "My father used to take me to these things, when no one else would go with him. He would cover my eyes during nudity and graphic violence. I like to believe that turned me into a creative writer, because I had to imagine what was happening during the gaps — in the darkness, when everybody else was screaming or breathing heavy or whatever. He'd take his hands away, and I'd have to piece together how we got from point A to point B." In the afternoons following school, Arnzen watched Chiller Theater without his father's editing hand.

Now Associate Professor of English at Seton Hill University in Western Pennsylvania, Arnzen teaches horror and suspense fiction in the school's M.A. program in Writing Popular Fiction. He also maintains an award-winning blog, <http://www.gorelets.com>. His scholarship and creative writing both focus on the horror genre; his books include the novel *Play Dead*, the story collection *100 Jolts*, the new story-and-poetry volume *Proverbs for Monsters* and a CD of readings entitled *Audiovile*. He remembers the first book that he knows influenced him to move in this direction, after he read "all the fairy tales and Bradbury's *Illustrated Man* and *Martian Chronicles*." Soon after his father took him to see *Jaws*, young Mike grabbed the movie's inspiration — Peter Benchley's novel — off the paperback rack at a store.

Then, of course, he moved on to such books as *The Amityville Horror*, but Arnzen credits *Mad* magazine and the self-referential world of horror film with helping inspire his own ironic worldview. "Everything's a parody to me — especially other texts. Sometimes I'll recast the characters by putting pop celebrities in the roles. What if Britney Spears were Rebecca in this novel?" He narrates his short-short fiction and poetry with a dry, ironic tone, leaving the reader to decide whether to laugh at the horrific (but often farcical) events occurring on the page.

Like laughter, Arnzen says, terror is a form of release, and he cites the various meanings of the word gag. "Bruno Bettelheim talks about the psychological services that fairy tales perform for children in very concrete ways, because their brains aren't ready yet to process in the way that adults do." Arnzen pauses and then says thoughtfully, "I think that for adults horror writing gives shape to the paranoia and the chaos that we live in in everyday life, that abyss of fear we walk over. It's a way of purging anxiety in a waking state which normally you could only purge through a dream state." For Arnzen, writing down the nightmare thoughts keeps his dreams free of monsters — at least most of the time.



Michael Sims writes for the Washington Post, the L.A. Times, and many other publications. Viking has just published his new book, "Apollo's Fire: A Day on Earth in Nature and Imagination." His web site is www.michaelsimsbooks.com.

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