# THE DOCTOR OF HORROR IS IN
An interview with Master of Horror and poet Michael R. Collings

by David E. Cowen
Author of Bleeding Saffron (Weasel Press 2018)

Michael R. Collings has taught literature, composition, and creative writing at Pepperdine University for 27 years. He was Poet in Residence at Pepperdine's Seaver College from 1997-2000. In addition to a number of collections of poetry and individual poems appearing in a wide array of print and internet venues worldwide, he has published books, articles, and reviews discussing the works of Stephen King, Orson Scott Card, Peter Straub, Dean Koontz, and others. In spare hours, he designs wire-wrapped jewelry; his designs have been featured several times in The Wire Artist magazine. Michael R. Collings has been nominated for the Bram Stoker Award® from the Horror Writers Association on multiple occasions for non-fiction and poetry. In 2016 The World Horror Convention awarded him their Grand Master Award for his contributions to the genre.
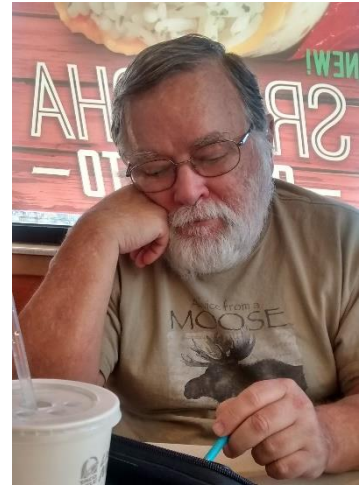
I have asked Michael for this interview to discuss the craft of horror poetry.

Q: I found your book "The Art and Craft of Writing Poetry: Twenty Exercises Toward Mastery", 2nd Ed. (Borgo Literary Guides 2009) an excellent guide for poets seeking to improve the craft of poetry. You offered one piece of advice about crafting metered poetry that stuck with me:

> While understanding the mechanics of meter is invaluable to a poet, especially valuable is the ability to keep meter from overwhelming the poem.

In that same volume you also stated

> While contemporary poets may be less focused on matters of elocution and verbal flourish, awareness of how poems may sound still matters.

These two propositions present a very practical issue for the contemporary poet in the horror genre. Horror poetry has a long tradition of metered and rhymed poetry. A number of writers of dark verse are trying to emulate poets such as Poe and Coleridge by relying heavily on such devices. The "Weird Poetry" movement is replete with "traditionalists" using rhyme and meter. Crafting traditional forms of poetry is difficult and time consuming and I applaud all who do it well. Unfortunately many times I find the meter and the rhyme overwhelming these works. But when done well there is a lyrical quality to poetry with a rhythm.

Looking at these two observations you made and applying them to writing dark poetry do you have any thoughts on this substrata of dark poetry relying solely on meter and rhyme? What advice do you have for the traditionalists on how to achieve the traditional form they are hoping to emulate?

What can they do to make metered poetry both more natural in sound but also keeping with the tradition of such craft in horror poems?

A: Dark poetry, and to a large extent prose, is preeminently about words: the way they sound, the way they make readers feel in the instant of reading, the way they cause a physical response to the subject—a frisson of the spine, an unconscious shiver in the presence of something that does not exist. Effective traditional forms underscore the web of words, create rhythms and cadences that emphasize the particular vocabulary of horror. For modern audiences, this often means adapting meter and rhyme. Strong end-rhyme draws attention to itself; half-rhyme or slant rhyme draws lines together and creates coherence within the poem without accentuating itself. In much the same way, meter need not be strict to establish rhythm. The important thing is that it create a specific sense of motion. Substituting an occasional trochee in a preponderantly iambic poem might stress a certain word that in turn accentuates the poem's dark vocabulary. Rhyme, meter, and other elements of traditional forms are not rules to be followed unwaveringly but rather, as someone once famously said, "More what you'd call guidelines." They are for the poet to control, not the other way around.

Q: Two of your Stoker nominations for Poetry (*Corona Obscura* in 2016 and *A Verse to Horrors* in 2013) were for collections of specialized forms of poetry: sonnets and limericks. These are two very diverse forms of poetry. Limericks do not normally receive recognition as a literary art form while sonnets are one of the most the classic but difficult forms of poetry. Limericks, also being humorous by nature, would seem out of place in the horror genre. Yet you wrote your sonnets with seeming ease and your limericks certainly successfully fit within the theme of horror. How did you approach the writing of these two volumes? Did you intend to focus on each type of form for the books or were these collections of prior works that fit the forms? I was also very impressed with the consistency of the quality and the use of the forms. No cutting corners; no easy forays into cliché as fillers. How did you maintain this consistency?

A: Both volumes were composed with malice aforethought. I had been writing random limericks for a while and decided to apply the form to horror. Almost immediately, an abecedary came to mind, an alphabetical listing of monsters and the monstrous. When I began Corona Obscura, I had already determined its structure: an extended "crown of sonnets." Crowns are usually seven sonnets, with the last line of each forming the first line of the next. The final line of the sequence is identical to the first line. I wanted a book-length volume, however, so I squared the original form to forty-nine poems. A few earlier sonnets were included, but all were revised in their first and last lines to allow them to fit the structure.
*   As to consistency...I've written nearly 3,000 poems over the past five decades, exploring most of the traditional approaches (including free verse), and I taught form for nearly three decades, so I suppose that practice came to my aid in the book. I try to be alert for clichés, easy phrasing, commonplaces; and I've spent a good deal of time 'exploding' forms, pushing their boundaries until a sonnet, for example, almost ceases to be a sonnet—but not quite. In doing so, I can internalize the basic requirements and play with them.*

Q: Traditional forms of poetry are myriad -- Pantoum and Quatrain, Rondel, Rondelet, Anacreontics, Sonnet, Haiku, Villanelle, Etheree, Tanka, Copla and so many others. Are there one or more styles you believe are best suited for horror and if so why?

A: Any form can become an effective vehicle for horror. Two years ago, I published Dark Designs: Forms and Fantasies—Speculative Poetry (2016), a collection of about 150 poems in a hundred different forms, arranged alphabetically, from Anglo-Saxon Accentual Verse to Villanelle. On the one hand, I wrote it because it was simply fun to transform traditional verses into horror; on the other, I wrote it to demonstrate that form is infinitely variable, a scaffold, as it were, upon which the poet can erect any kind of edifice.

Q: In your book *In the Void: Poems of Science Fiction, Myth and Fantasy, & Horror* (Borgo Press 2009) you said the following

> I read the cordel poetry of a Brazilian poet (and friend), Braulio Tavares, and was profoundly moved by the realization that there were still great talents in this world who had no wall between them and the untrained reader. Tavares understood and understands that *if your verse resonates with the ordinary person, the elitists, who are always late to the party of literature, will follow afterward*.

What an amazing observation in a time when poets have almost written themselves into an oblivion of irrelevance to the general public. I know many poets who adamantly insist that the reader is not a true concern of theirs; somehow their words will enlighten the ignorant masses. In this statement I hear your accepting the importance of the reader in poetry. Contemporary Horror or dark poetry seems to try to follow this precept. Write so that the reader will "resonate" with your work and let the critics follow. Contemporary "Slam" poetry, with its heavy emphasis on stylistic performance, seems to illustrate your idea as well. How do you see horror poetry with this regard? Should resonating with the reader be a prime concern of the horror poet?

A: First, I wish I could take credit for the marvelous words you quoted, but they are from the introduction to In the Void, by Orson Scott Card, himself no mean poet and no stranger to dark fictions. I agree with it entirely. Particularly in horror poetry. By definition, we write in a genre that depends upon audience. I might write private poetic meditations to calm my own troubled soul (although I hope they are still decent poems), but when I write about darkness my focus shifts to the recipient, the outsider, as it were, whom I intend to change in some substantive way. Since we do not generally write about familiar street corners or tree-lined city squares, we have an additional responsibility to make our worlds—our imaginary and often gruesome worlds—real enough touch readers on the deepest emotional levels…to conjure fear and terror out of the tissue of our words.

Q. Contemporary poetry still favors free verse. Horror as a genre seems to lean more traditionally. If properly used meter and rhyme — cadence and repetition and form — give internal dramatic pressure in a poem. Horror is storytelling and horror poetry is generally going to need to tell a story. I see a strong place for more traditional forms of poetry in horror but I don't see it done well as often as I'd like. There are exceptions. Editors such as S.T. Joshi with his "Spectral Realms" (Hippocampus Press) and Weird Fiction Review (Centipede Press) often feature horror or "weird" poetry with a definite traditional slant. Most writing workshops in poetry do not focus on traditional forms of poetry. I don't see a lot of places where a poet wanting to excel in more traditional verse can go — other than reading textbooks and long dead poets — on the craft.

As an educator and a master of your craft what advice can you give to this growing population of traditional poets? What kind of exercises should they use? How do they convert a sing song meter and rhyme into a naturally flowing cadence?

A.   *Read textbooks and long-dead poets…and anyone else who uses words artfully and powerfully—but do so consciously and learn from them how they achieve their effects using the same words that we do. I fell in love with John Milton's poetry when I was still in high school and made them the principle focus of my doctoral work in graduate school. For Synnes: Deedlich and Derke (Deadly and Dark) (2018), I borrowed the rhyme and meter of his great Nativity Ode for a poem describing a tourist's walk through Dracula's castle. Studying Milton's versatility with traditional forms—following them as well as fracturing them—helped me see ways to transform my own verses into something more than they were.*

          As to sing-song meter and rhyme, well, they too have their place, but only when the poet decides that using them will meet a specific rhetorical goal. I wrote a number of political verses for two collections, Dear Emily (2016) and The State of the disUnion (2016), some of which were consciously simplistic in form, emphasizing lock-step rhythm and forced end-rhyme to suggest some of the problems I perceived in the political discourse at the time.

          And above all…WRITE! Try new forms, new approaches, new ways to manipulate every tool at the poet's disposal.

Q.   Your newest book "Words Words Words: Poems" (CreateSpace 2018) is a fascinating collection of poems about select words chosen by you. It is not necessarily a "genre" collection but instead reaches more universally.

Before each poem you give us the word you have chosen and its definition and then the poem which deals with the word. The poems are metered and rhymed. From what I have read of your work you highly value the use and choice of words in good poetry. In this book you are literally using particular words — interesting words — to craft the poems. Tell us how this volume came to be and its purpose. Did you intend this to be a tool for poets to learn how to go beyond the norm — and cliché — to focus on word usage?

A.   *I've always loved words. The sound of them, the feel of them in the mouth, where they are formed in relation to tongue and teeth. Fortunately, I had a number of professors whose classes allowed me to indulge myself in that love. When I started "Words Words Words: Poems" I had just looked up a word in the OED (Oxford English Dictionary, a multi-volume dictionary that traces entries to their earliest use in English) and realized that the history implicit in the word might make an interesting poem. The book followed. I even invited Facebook friends to suggest interesting or intriguing or odd words for me to consider. I enjoyed the process so much that I'm midway through a "sequel," "Words Words Words 2: The Darker Side," which will emphasize many of the words intrinsic to horror.*

Q.   Early in "Words Words Words" you start off with a "Proem" (prologue poem) entitled "Words"

          Words are tiny temporoscopes, We glimpse through every day; The further they stray from their roots, The more they have to say.

In this couplet you pack a lot. Words that stray from their "roots" — as in the initial meanings — have "more to say." The use of the term temporoscopes is also interesting. One meaning of that term is

> Temporoscope - temporal analogue to a telescope - which uses movie tempo or its derivative to infer interest and drive compression, and a 2D interface to simultaneously control position and compression.

Words then are tiny versions of this device simultaneously controlling position and compression of the poem — driving meaning to the reader that goes beyond the initial root of the word, the ordinary. This book teaches the poet. Do you view poetry this way? Is the poet's use of words a way for the poet to control the world around him or the reader's perception of the word?

A. *Truth? I thought I had made that word up. A device that sees through time. I had no idea that it existed or that it has such a technical meaning. However, your discussion of the word is apt. Words are at the core of our understanding of our world. Discover what a particular word originally meant; trace it through history and discover fascinating things about where it has been, the different things it relates to; and discover more and more about what being human entails. Some words—crucial, fundamental words—change little. Others change as the world undergoes political or social turmoil. Still others shift easily from meaning to meaning through the generations.*

The poet tries to discover what words can do and uses that knowledge to sharpen perceptions, open new perspectives, sometimes alter beliefs and attitudes. I follow the late Renaissance poets in asserting that poetry (by which they meant imaginative fictions in prose or verse) is among the highest endeavors of the human mind. Poets alone can make of a brazen world a world of gold.

Q: Several of your last works have been self-published. Is there a practical reason for this? Do you find self-publishing liberating or a tedium? How do you seek an audience when you self publish poetry.

A *Simple answer—I am a control freak. For years, I literally hand-made volumes of poetry and prose, because I wanted to have the last word in how each book looked: the paper used, the fonts, the endpapers, the covers. I would haunt fabric stores looking for just the right material to use for a book of science-fiction poems or a collection of love poems to my wife. I would make a dozen or so at a time and take them to sell at conferences and readings. I have never been enamored with the idea of professional publication (although my professionally published books have often been beautifully rendered).*

My son, best-selling horror author Michaelbrent Collings, introduced me to CreateSpace and took me through the steps the first few times. Again, I had the privilege of establishing the parameters of my books, individualizing each to meet the needs of its content. And my son has provided a number of truly outstanding covers for some of them.

As to audience…at seventy-one, I find my writing orienting itself toward a cadre of friends and followers. I'm not in it for the money or, as time progresses, for the fame. I have something to

say; I say it. Occasionally, when it seems appropriate, I will post a poem on Facebook and see what kinds of reactions it elicits.

Q: In 2016 you were named a World Horror Grandmaster for outstanding contributor to the horror genre, voted by World Horror Con members. What works of yours do you believe exemplified your body of work that earned you this honor and why?

A: *I began writing about horror over thirty-five years ago; I initiated teaching it at Pepperdine about the same time; and during my tenure there I published more than a score of books and hundreds of articles and reviews that helped make horror an appropriate subject for academic interest and scholarly criticism. My books on King, for Starmont House, were among the first to take the author and the genre seriously. During the same time, I served as panelist, guest, and guest of honor at dozens of conferences, ranging from fan to professional, demonstrating that one could speak of horror using traditional literary criteria and make it more accessible to readers.*
    At one university conference, my son and I sat on the same panel. He was the moderator. I introduced myself as an emeritus professor who had written some things on horror. He interrupted me and basically told the audience that the reason they were present that day was my work—and the work of others like me—in horror.

Michael graciously shared some of his work with us:

Castle Dracul

The turret's shattered now;
A hollow, ruined brow
    Above the window's unforgiving eye.
Broken arches crumble;
Rough foundations rumble;
    Ancient echoes hesitate…and die.
The nimble dance of tourists' feet
Awakens shadows where remotest ages meet.

Entry paid, they chatter,
Babble on and blatter,
    As if not caring on whose stones they tread;
They poke and pry in corners,
These silly, haughty scorners—
    With every sound affront the safely dead;
But hidden in their scoffing tones…
A liquid, languid tremor chills them to their bones.

Yet none among the horde
Would dare to slash the cord
    That binds their fragile lives to certitudes;

And none would dare confess
They feel the constant press
    Of darkness as it braids slow time and broods,
Of distant moans of mortal pain
That thread among the timeless stones—unheard, yet plain.

For though the turret's shattered,
Its stones collapsed and scattered;
    And silence tapestries through empty halls;
The castle's not deserted
Its evil not inverted—
    Its owner has not truly left its walls,
But waits, and plaits, his reprobation
With the endless arrogance of countless generations.

[From *Synnes Derk and Dedlich*, 2018.]

Kinemortophobia

Kinemortophobia: from Greek *kinē*, *kinēsis* 'motion' + Latin *mors, mortis* 'dead' + *phobia* 'fear'; literally 'fear of the walking dead, fear of zombies.'

I savor lengthy Latin names
That cloak the fear beneath,
That hide some truly evil things
In a dazzling verbal sheath.

The words sound elegant, pristine,
Removed from guts and gore;
Tuxedo-clad, they mount façades
For linguists to explore.

But strip away these syllables,
The detachment that each feigns,
And they reveal vast zombie hordes
A-hungering for brains.

[From *Words Words Words 2: The Darker Side,* forthcoming]

Vampire

Vampire: from French, from German *Vampir,* from Serbo-Croatian *vampir,* an alteration of earlier *upir*; related to Czech *upír,* Polish *upiór,* Old Russian *upyrĭ, upirĭ*, from Slavic **u-pirĭ* or **o-pirĭ*, perhaps a compound with **per-* 'fly, rush.'

Forewarning, wolves abrade the night,
      Their blood-cries bright,
      Shattering still,
      Producing chills
As rose-red lips compress and sheen—
      A haunting mien
      Beyond the pane—
      A pallid stain
With ghoulish smile…as throbbing heat
      Retreats, she greets
      Imagined bliss…
      The vampire's kiss.

[From *Words Words Words 2: The Darker Side,* forthcoming]

Biography: **Michael R. Collings** is an educator, literary scholar and critic, poet, novelist, essayist, columnist, reviewer, and editor whose work over three decades—in excess of one hundred books and chapbooks--has concentrated on the art and craft of science fiction, fantasy, and horror, emphasizing the works of Stephen King, Orson Scott Card, C.S. Lewis, and related writers. His series of volumes for Starmont House, beginning in 1984, represents some of the earliest serious scholarly appraisals of King as storyteller and as fantasist; since then, he has published over a dozen studies of King, from literary analyses to annotated bibliographies.

His work in science fiction, fantasy, and horror led to his receiving the Grand Master Award in 2016 from the World Horror Society. As an acknowledged authority on King and his works, Collings has served as Guest, Special Guest, and Guest of Honor at a number of cons, professional as well as fan-oriented; Special Guest at the Salt Lake Comic Con (2014); and three-time Academic Guest of Honor at the World HorrorCon (2008, 2012, 2016). He has been twice nominated for the Bram Stoker Award® from the Horror Writers Association, once for non-fiction and once for poetry.

He has served as the Senior Publications Editor for JournalStone Publications, and his articles and reviews have appeared in both *Hellnotes* and the print-magazine *Dark Discoveries*. These and other writings are posted online at michaelrcollings.blogspot.com.

He is a professor emeritus from Pepperdine University, where he taught literature, composition, and creative writing after almost thirty years.

Poetry:

Words Words Words: Poems (2018)
Seven: Synnes Deedlich and Derk (2018)
Temple and Cosmos: Poems (2018)
Indeterminate Rout: Birds—Real and Otherwise (2017, 2ed., revised and expanded)

Many Waters: Poems of the Ordinary and the Outré (2017)
Dear Emily and Other Poems (2016)
The State of the disUnion (2016)
White Noise (2016)
Dark Designs: Forms and Fantasies (2016)
Corona Obscura: Sonets Dark and Elemental (2016)
Taliesin: The Joseph Smith/King Arthur Sonets (2014)
Deep Music: A Selection of LDS Musical Readings (2012)
Filamental Emblems (2012)
Hai-(And Assorted Other)-Ku (2012)
A Verse to Horrors: An Abecedary of Monsters and the Monstrous (2012)
BlueRose and Other Chapbooks (2012)
The Nephiad: An Epic Poem in XII Books (1995, 2011)
Som Certaine Sonets (2011)
Tales Through Time (2010)
Matrix: Echoes of Growing Up West—Autobiographical Poems (2010)
Cryptic Armature: Verses in the Manner of…. (2010)
In the Void: Poems of Science Fiction, Myth and Fantasy, & Horror (2009)
In Darkness Drawn (2008)
All Calm, All Bright: Christmas Offerings (2007)
Indeterminate Rout (2005)
Nestlings of a Dark God (1996)
Matrix (1995)
*Dark Transformations: Deadly Visions of Change (*1990, 2007)
Naked to the Sun: Dark Visions of Apocalypse (1985, 2007)
A Season of Calm Weather (1974)

Prose:

2017:
    Deathbloom (Novel; horror)
    Tocatta and Fugue in Death "Novel; mystery, horror)
    Fast Foods (Novel; horror)
2016:
    An Annotated Space Opera! (Novel: Lovecraftian horror, with pseudo-academic annotations)
2015:
    Space Opera! A Tale of Three Planets (Novel; Lovecraftian horror)
2014:
    C.S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy: Essays in Genre (Literary Study)
    Chain of Evil: The JournalStone Guide to Writing Darkness (Writing techniques;
        incorporates *Writing Darkness,* 2012 Bram Stoker Award® Finalist for Nonfiction)
    Michaelbrent Collings' THE BILLY SAGA: A Literary Study
    Orson Scott Card: Penetrating to the Gentle Heart (Literary Study)
2013:

Milton's Century: A Timeline of the Literary, Political, Religious, and Social Context of John Milton's Life (Chronology)

2011:

Devil's Plague (Novel, mystery)

Names and Naming in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings: A Checklist of Persons, Places, and Things (Literary Study)

Serpent's Tooth (Novel, mystery)

Shadow Valley (Novel, horror)

Static! (Novel, horror)

2010:

In Endless Morn of Light: Moral Agency in Milton's Universe (Literary study)

The Slab (Novel, horror)

Three Tales of Omne (Short fiction, science fiction)

Toward Other Worlds: Perspectives on John Milton, C. S. Lewis, Stephen King, Orson Scott Card, and Others (Essays, literary studies)

Wer *Means* Man, *and Other Tales of Wonder and Terror* (Short fiction, science fiction and horror)

2009

Singer of Lies: A Science-Fantasy Novel

The Art and Craft of Poetry: Twenty Exercises toward Mastery (Writing techniques)

Wordsmith, Volume One: The Veil of Heaven (Novel, science-fantasy)

Wordsmith, Volume Two: The Thousand Eyes of Flame (Novel, science-fantasy)

2008:

In Darkness Drawn: Poems (Horror)

Stephen King is Richard Bachman (Literary study)

2007:

The House Beyond the Hill (Novel, horror)

2002:

'Horror Plum'd': An International Stephen King Bibloiography and Guide

2001:

Storyteller: The Official Orson Scott Card Bibliography and Guide

2000:

Hauntings: The Official Peter Straub Bibliography

1997:

Scaring Us to Death: The Impact of Stephen King on Popular Culture (Literary study)

1996:

The Work of Stephen King; An Annotated Bibliography and Guide

1990:

In the Image of God: Theme, Characterization, and Landscape in the Fiction of Orson Scott Card (Literary study; incorporated into *Orson Scott Card: Penetrating to the Gentle Heart*)

1987:

Card Catalogue: The Science Fiction and Fantasy of Orson Scott Card (Bibliography)

The Stephen King Phenomenon (Literary Study)

1986:
 Brian Aldiss (Literary study)
 Reflections on the Fantastic: Selected Papers from the Fourth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, ed. Michael R. Collings (Anthology of literary studies)
 The Annotated Guide to Stephen King: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography of the Works of America's Premier Horror Writer
 The Films of Stephen King (Literary Study)

1985:
 The Many Facets of Stephen King (Literary study)
 The Shorter Words of Stephen King, with David A. Engebretson (Literary study)
 Stephen King as Richard Bachman (Literary study)

1983:
 Piers Anthony (Literary study)

My short fiction has appeared in the following anthologies:
 Blood Type: An Anthology of Vampire SF on the Cutting Edge, ed. Robert S. Wilson (2013, 2014)
 Space Eldritch II: The Haunted Stars, ed. Nathan Shumate (2013)
 Yondering: The First Borgo Press Book of Science Fiction Stories, ed. Robert Reginald (2013)
 Space Eldritch, ed. Nathan Shumate (2012)
 Cthulhu Mythos Megapack, ed. John Betancourt (2012)
 Vampire Megaback, ed. John Betancourt (2012)

I have served as Guest of Honor, Academic Guest, Poetry Guest, Special Guest, and Guest for
 Salt Lake City Comic Con, September 2012
 Salt Lake City FanXperience, April 2012
 World Horror Convention 2012
 World Horror Convention 2008
 Into the West—Tolkien Festival, 2007, 2008
 Life, the Universe, and Everything—The Marion K. 'Doc' Smith Symposium on Science Fiction and Fantasy, 1992-2012
 EnderCon 2002
 MythCon (Conference of the Mythopoeic Society), 1994
 HorrorCon'89, 1989