

UNDEAD POETRY AND THE CUTTING EDGE OF THE SCIENTIFIC UNKNOWN – AN INTERVIEW WITH BRAM STOKER NOMINATED POET AND AUTHOR G. O. CLARK

*by David E. Cowen
Bram Stoker Nominated Author of
Bleeding Saffron (Weasel 2018)*

G.O Clark's work has been favorably compared to Dark Poets such as Bruce Boston and others. Clark is a Bram Stoker finalist and Asimov Readers' Award Winner. His fourteen books of verse have been highly praised. Clark's speculative poetry crosses the realms of horror and science fiction. Clark graciously agreed to join our blog to talk about his craft, his upcoming projects and to share poetry with us.



Q: On your personal [webpage](#) you describe yourself as “Poet and Writer of the Fantastic. You have excelled in both horror and science fiction poetry, earning nominations for a Bram Stoker in Poetry as well as placing 2nd for the Rhysling and 3rd for the Dwarf Stars awards for science fiction poetry. Both are certainly subsets of speculative poetry. Do you find yourself favoring one sub-genre —

horror or science fiction over the other? Why do you think this is the case?

A: I've read more science fiction than horror over the years. When I should have been doing the required reading in high school, and later in college, I'd peruse something by Clarke, Heinlein, Silverberg, Stoker, et al, cramming at the last minute for the tests based on the assigned reading material. I somehow graduated in both cases. I don't really prefer one genre to the other. For instance, I recently read "Kind Nepenthe", by Mathew Brockmeyer, a fine ghost story, and, "Darwin's Radio", hard SF by Greg Bear. And let's not forget mysteries, Paul Di Filippo's fast paced caper, "The Deadly Kiss-Off". I don't favor one genre over another in my writing. What ends up on the page is what inspired me at the time. I should add that I've been reading more non-fiction as I've grown older. Clinging to reality I suppose, while Death impatiently waits at the curb.

Q: Such a twisted sense of humor you have; even poking fun at your own craft. I found your zombie poem Writer's Block amusing yet also a bit of a serious knock at the field. Sort of an Ozymandias for those who consider them kings of their field.

Writer's Block

Staring at the

blank sheet of white
typing paper poking out of the
old Olympics' platen,

he doesn't have a clue
what to do, how to do it, or why,
terrible hunger pains all he
can think about.

Being a famous writer
has lost all its glamour since becoming
one of them; body rotting away,
fans a mindless mob.

The critics no longer exist.
Deadlines are a thing of the past.
And the major literary award he won,
now serves as a bludgeon.

Humor in horror is sometimes hard to achieve. What do you do to find your inner “sick puppy?” Does your use of humor always have a serious undertone it like *Writer’s Block*?

A: I seemed to have been born with a sense of humor and taste for the absurd. Growing up it usually helped me avoid getting beaten up, and also staying on the positive side of

my interactions with adults. It still works with the later, most days. I have a serious side, but the "twisted" humor just comes naturally in a lot of my poetry and short stories. Robots and zombies do pratfalls with the best of them, and I always keep trip-wires close at hand to help them along. I've met writers who are so full of themselves, that to be in the same room with them makes me feel noxious. They're fair game in my book, (no pun intended). As for me, I'm a masochist when it comes to self criticism. It's a struggle. Writer's block? I suffer more from the Facebook/email/Google whatever routine I go through every morning, putting off the "real work". I may dust off my old Brother typewriter and start over again. I won't be totally unplugged, however, as it's an electric one. As for "serious undertones" to my comic verse. It depends on the subject matter. I've written poems like "Ghosts Of Dead Children" which lack humor, and I'd best describe as being heart-felt. I've never done an accounting of my work to break down the number of humorous poems vs. serious ones. Life is short, and I've got better things to do.

Q: I ask this of most of the poets I interview. Some poets make a point to write every day for a period of time regardless of whether anything inspires them. Others wait for an idea to strike them and then write. Which type are you and why do you choose that practice over the other?

A: I try to set aside morning hours most days to write, especially when I'm working on a short story, (which I work on until a logical breaking point, or finish it). It doesn't always work, email et al getting in the way. As for poetry, I write a poem when inspired by an idea, image, or what have you, first jotting it down in my notebook, then revising it on the PC. Any number of revisions can follow. My writing habits have developed over the last forty years, and have come about because of work schedules, family duties, and standard battle with laziness. Even though I'm retired now, and have lots of free time, old habits die hard, and will certainly outlive me.

Q: Do you ever write for "therapy?" That is, to simply get something off your chest or to help you filter a strong emotion or life event?

A: I don't consciously write for "therapy". I suppose sometimes my emotions help shape a poem or story, but it's never intentional. I found that when I try to write about politics, religion, the fate of the world, I come across as too personal and preachy. That said, my beliefs do find their way into some poems in an understated way. Pulpits make me dizzy. One thing I avoid in my writing is confessional material. Some of my work is sparingly autobiographical, but most is informational and not confessional. There's plenty of excellent poets who professionally fill the latter category and likely find it therapeutic.

Q: Your collection of zombie related poems, *Scenes Along the Zombie Highway* (Dark Regions Press 2013) strikes me as a parody of modern American living more than a horror piece. For example your piece *Clothes Make the Zombie* with the lines “Policemen, mechanics, coeds and joggers, all dressed in character, /this post-apocalyptic world their stage.” This reminds of the shopping mall zombie scenes from George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (2004). Was that intended? What got you to put this collection together?

A: I find the current crop of zombies these days on TV, in the movies, and some fiction nothing more than dead-meat puppets. They’re there to scare you and be summarily slaughtered. I don’t remember intentionally putting together “Scenes Along The Zombie Highway” as a parody collection. I was trying to point out in most of the poems that the zombies were once like the rest of us, but brain-dead and frozen in time, yet still quite human. The zombies in my poems are contemporary, thus dressed for “the mall”, as you point out. I had a number of zombie poems already written and published, and decided to build on those and create a themed collection. The horror in the poems can be defined by one looking in the mirror at oneself, and imagining the worst. We’re all the walking dead in some sense. The poems are pretty simple for the most part, and

even at times clichéd. They are what they are, and I hope darkly entertaining to the reader.

Q: Across several years of your work the homeless keep appearing as a theme in your poems. *Designated Smoking Area*, which appeared in *Horrorzine*, describes the shadows hiding the homeless as “where true horror resides.” In a 2003 poem called *Spirit Phone* you painted the mental struggles of many homeless

In a garbage dumpster behind the mall,
A homeless man pressing a discarded
cell phone to his ear, intently listening to
a voice that may, or may not, be there,
pressing his case to some invisible spirit,
left on hold for the better part of a life.

Are the struggles of the homeless something of a passion?
Or, is this just sort of coincidence?

A: The poem you quote was never intended to be a horror poem. It was written back in my mainstream writing days. I guess it could pass as horror because of the "spirit phone" element. On the other hand, "Designated Smoking Area" was meant to be horrific. Both were inspired by direct observations on my part of society's outcasts. Homelessness is a big problem in the Sacramento region and California in general. Like other things I observe out

in the real world, the homeless problem sometimes filters into my writing, but never to the point of pontification. Nobody seems to be able to agree on what to do about it, but I think affordable housing seems a no-brainer to me, (unless you're a real estate investor, and a strict bottom-liner). Personally, I give away a lot of spare change, which is more of "the thought counts", than concrete fix to the problem.

Q: Besides science are social issues part of what you want to write about? If so which ones and why?

A: Many of my poems deal with people, in one form or another, so social issues do play a part. I write from a humanistic point of view, I guess. I'm agnostic, for argument's sake, but do subscribe to the Golden Rule. I'm hoping for the best for the future of humankind, despite the ever-darkening times we presently live in. Social issues like homelessness, war, the environment, (which is as much a social issue these days as a scientific one), crop up in my poems and stories on occasion. How humans, et al relate to current issues, is always central to a particular poem or story. Of course in my horror poetry psychopaths/sociopaths share center stage with normal folks. Antisocial to the max, they represent the dark side of American society. (Tweet, tweet!).

Q: Of interest to the people who read this blog is the way, the mechanics, of how good poets write. Do you have a technique you like to use? Pen and pad or IPad? Jot down notes for ideas then come back to them to fill in? How do you write your stuff?

A: I use a simple school notebook to save my initial ideas and first draft poems; ideas for stories or characters, and the beginnings of longer poems. These find their way to my ten year old PC, and miraculously turn in to finished product. Sometimes it's like an out-of-body experience. Other times, it's just persistence, and fear of failure on my part; no poem left undone, which sometimes shows in the quality of the finished work. The rejections that follow, are often justified.

Q: You have done some self-publishing of your poems. Any experiences or life lessons you would share on that?

A: Actually, I can't remember self-publishing any of my poems or short stories. The majority have found homes in various small-press venues, and a few in pro publications like Asimov's Science Fiction. The day will come most likely when I may have to do so. I've been stocking up on slate and chisels for years now. Due to arthritis, expect nothing longer than haiku. Actually, the three-plus minute function of my memory just kicked in, and I recall myself, plus three other poets and a photographer, self-publishing

a poetry chapbook titled, "Range & Section", to accompany a poetry broadsides and photography exhibit we did at the Gorman Museum, on the UCD campus where we all worked. 1984, I believe the year was, way back in my mundane days.

Q: Now the easy question, what projects do you have upcoming?

A: I'm slowly but surely collecting recent short stories, (last few years), for another collection. Still need to write a few more to get the total page count up. As for poetry, I've turned in a new science fiction related manuscript, 50+ poems, titled "Easy Travel To The Stars". Hoping for the best, as usual.

Poems by G.O. Clark

Globes

I've replaced
my old world globe,
a gift from many years ago,
with a recently updated,
illuminated one,

one that represents
the world of today, our
timeline of history having

passed the old one by.

The Union of the Soviet
Socialist Republics messily
breaking apart like so many
bad marriages.

The countries of Africa
redrawing borders with blood-
filled pens; old Imperial monikers
out, Africanized ones in.

Looking forward,
if I live long enough, another
updated globe will surely have
to replace my current one,

a globe that reflects
the effects of global warming,
islands that once flourished now
under ocean blue; a lot more blue
as coastlines shrink.

For the present, I'll just give
my new globe a spin, point at a spot
upon its surface, and randomly pick
a mystery destination.

As for the old globe?
In my mind I launched it into
deep space, to a quadrant where
old worlds go to be archived,

while in reality,
I unceremoniously popped it
into my car trunk, and dropped
it off at the Goodwill.

Parting Shots

She mailed
a massive funnel cloud to her
abusive ex-husband.

He had a very stormy personality.

She fedexed the
vengeful ghost of a prostitute
to her former boss.

He'd treated her like one for years.

She shipped by UPS
a Lovecraftian god-monster to her

Catholic school Alma Mata.

The sadistic nuns had it coming.

She wasn't a vengeful person.
Nor was she born evil, Satan's little
mistress, or, delusional.

She'd been baptized, and psychoanalyzed.

She was just taking a few parting shots
before retiring to the cloistered woods,
and the bylaws of the coven.

It was her turn to bring snacks.

Ghosts Of Dead Children

The ghosts of dead children
haunt school playgrounds, sand lot
ball fields, and amusement
park rides.

The ghosts of dead children
linger at Thanksgiving dinner card tables,
family picnics at the lakeshore, and
on lunchroom benches.

The ghosts of dead children
hide the toys of the living, shiny metal
trucks and rosy cheeked dolls,
come Christmas eve.

The ghosts of dead children
tap out spelling bee answers in the wee
hours of the night, their siblings stone
deaf to their coaching.

The ghosts of dead children
hover above their sleeping parents,
shielding them from recurring nightmares
and quicksand traps of sadness.

The ghosts of dead children
cling close to their Earthly homes,
tethered to their short-changed memories
and the warmth of the living.

The Sea Monster

When the sea monster
casually walked out of the waves,
it took all the weekenders on the beach
by total surprise.

It was one of those flat-wave kind of days.

At first they thought it
was an optical illusion. Then they looked
around for the film crew and director.
Finally, they realized it was real.

Strange that none of them had a camera.

But by then it was too late!
Their yapping dogs became appetizers!
Their obese, candy filled kids, were gobbled up!
And the rest became its meat and potatoes.

It had stiletto sharp teeth and a giant appetite.

Fully sated, the creature burped, and
tail wagging, sauntered back into the waves,
the beach in its wake littered with bloody props
for the Six O'clock News.

G. O. Clark's writing has been published in Asimov's, Analog, Daily SF, HWA Poetry Showcase, Tales For The Camp Fire, and many other venues. He's the author of 14 poetry collections, the most recent, "The Comfort Of Screams", and 2 fiction collections, "Twists & Turns" published in 2016. He was a 2011 Stoker Award finalist, and the Asimov's Readers' Award winner in poetry, 2001.

He lives in Davis, CA in a mobile home entertained by books, cds, streaming TV, and fading dreams. See <http://goclarkpoet.weebly.com> for details.