

# The Form's The Thing– An Interview with Weird Poet Frank Coffman

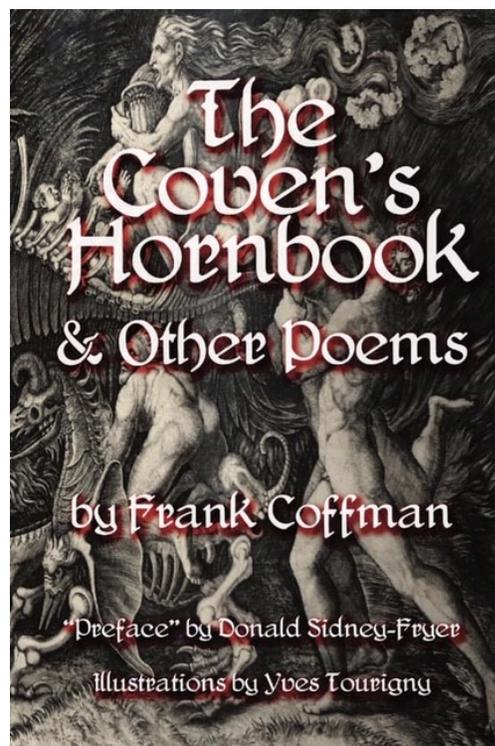
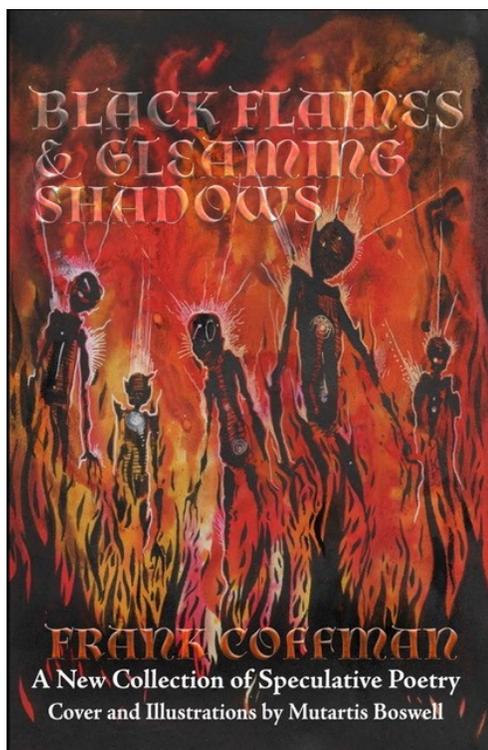
By David E. Cowen, Bram Stoker Nominated Author of *Bleeding Saffron* (Weasel Press 2018)

By day **Frank Coffman** appears to be a mild mannered retired professor of college English, creative writing, and journalism. His real calling, however, is the poetic champion of the formalistic Weird Poem. Frank has



published both speculative and traditional poetry and fiction, and scholarly research in a number of magazines, anthologies, and journals—in print and online. Frank’s poetic focus most recently is in the sub-genres of the Weird, Horror, Supernatural, Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Adventure. In prior interviews Frank has called himself a believer in “freedoms and serendipitously inspiring aspects of traditional verse, meter and rhyme.” Frank is a member of the Horror Writers Association, and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association. He founded and moderates the Weird Poets Society Facebook group. Previous publications include his large speculative poetry collection, *The Coven’s Hornbook & Other Poems*, and a chapbook, *This Ae Nighte, Every Nighte and Alle: 33 Poems of the Weird, Horrific, and Supernatural* and most recently *Black Flames & Gleaming Shadows*

(Bold Venture Press, March 2020). Frank selected, edited, introduced, and did commentary for his *Robert E. Howard: Selected Poems* (2006) and also wrote a slim volume of a dozen tribute poems for Howard, *Coffman Street: Poems for Robert E. Howard* (2006). He has published scholarly articles on several aspects of Howard's work.



**Q: The focus of this blog is not for poets to describe why they write as much as how to help aspiring poets learn this craft. Poetry is an art and a craft which requires, as the old cliché goes, inspiration and perspiration. To be good a poet must learn the craft of poetry. Being inspired by the “Muse” is good, the poet**

**must still learn how to take that inspiration and create something people will want to read. You are both a teacher and a poet. I have had the pleasure of interviewing poet teachers like Michael Arnzen and Michael R. Collings and asked them about that dual role. Have you used your poetry to teach? Do you consider yourself a teacher when you compose verse? What advice do you give your students about how to learn the craft of poetry?**

*A: Ideas for poems come to me from a variety of sources, including “out of the blue”—or maybe a better phrase for much of my weird and supernatural stuff, “out of the black.”*

*Often, I’ll begin with a topic or theme already common in a genre or type (Weird, Horror, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Adventure, Ekphrasis, Metapoetry, or Hommage) or sub-genre (folk legend, vampire lore, ghosts, time or space travel, quest, mythopoesis [or mythomorphosis as I term reworkings of established myth or legend], detection, or even Western adventure). During the act of composition, there’s usually a “key line” that strikes me—most often a first or a final line. Free verse folks might be aghast at the notion, but I even work on lists of connotative (for a theme or topic) words and then use my “built-in rhyming dictionary”—everybody has one—to roll out possible rhymes on the words on the list.*

*Indeed, brainstorming on rhymes and themes to find inspiration.*

*The first bit of advice I gave to all my students in Creative Writing in Poetry courses in college was: “Learn the rules of prosody and versification before you decide to (in many cases with my students), to continue to break them. Know the traditions of poetry and poetics that you will either abandon or follow—and in either case know why you’ve made that decision.*

*I have “snuck in” (as I learned the past tense of “sneak” in my homeland of Central Illinois where we also “worsh” our clothes and tend to drop final Gs from “-ing” words: “I’m goin’ fishin’ over at the crick today.”)—as I say, “snuck in” some of my poetic work into classes I’ve taught—both in creative writing and on a final exam or two (mostly to be fairly sure they hadn’t seen the poem or poems before) to get an honest—what I call “parthenotextual”—impression. Of course, examinations and tests also included several poems they’d encountered from “the Masters” and established/famous poets we’d read and discussed.*

**Q: Are there central themes to your work (other than falling within one or more speculative sub-genres)?**

*A: I'm not sure I have any strident themes or "axes to grind" in my speculative work. It seems to me the classics—and here I'm thinking the "verses" in Weir Tales in that first run from the 20s through the early 40s—are more visceral and atmospheric than fraught with intellectual or philosophical or political "message." I'm striving to emulate the type of poetic contributions of those folks: Smith, Howard, Lovecraft, Wandrei, Drake, etc.*

*There were some themes in that classic run of WT. For example: Robert E. Howard's often-cited belief that chaos and the "Dark Barbarian" will always overcome Civilization in the end. It's certainly a stance he took, especially seen in the long debate with Lovecraft in their letters. Meanwhile, one of REH's favorite poets was G. K. Chesterton (also one of my favorite writers) who saw things the other way around—Civilization as a great and always revitalizing "holding action" against Chaos.*

*I do think my speculative work covers a broader "gamut" of emotions than a label such as "poet of the weird" would indicate. Good and Evil, Love and Hate, Life and Death are all in there. Perhaps there's some of my philosophy (if not intellect or political stance) seeping through "between the lines."*

**Q: Your collection *The Coven's Hornbook & Other Poems* (Bold Venture Press 2019) was on the 2019 Bram Stoker Preliminary Ballot. It is a very impressive volume of about 266 poems all of which use some kind of form. Were these composed specifically for the volume or a collection of older works? How long did it take you to put this volume together?**

*A: That collection is so large because it represents a compilation of more than a half century of poetic work. This is especially true due to the inclusion in the final sections of meta-poetic stuff on poetry and on writing poetry and also with the more “traditional” poems in a section that actually includes—if not juvenilia—then, at least some poems written when I was in my early twenties (quite a while ago now, I turned 72 on 29 June). Also, since the vast majority of my time has been occupied with teaching—often double overloads and always heavy summer sessions—my own writing, except for some scholarly work on literature and critical theory, took a definite “back burner.”*

*Also, as things happened, the closer to retirement I got (retired from college teaching on 30 June 2018 at age 70), the more I realized there was a “market” for my stuff—mostly poetry, but a little short fiction as well—in the growing speculative “marketplace.” A great many of the poems in *The Coven's Hornbook & Other Poems* were*

*written between 2014 and 2019. I'm likely the oldest relative 'newbie' in the genre.*

**Q: I read in the introduction to *Coven* that you consider yourself to be "primarily a sonneteer." What is that? Do you consider yourself a pioneer of the horror sonnet?**

*A: I see the sonnet as the essential and ubiquitous verse form of Western poetics, perennially renewing itself over now about 800 years. It remains as it has very commonly been regarded and named the one required form for all verse poets "worth their salt." It is the perfect "paragraph of verse," a little square of words upon the page, almost instantly recognized as a sonnet and a "fourteener" before the reader begins the read.*

*It is a challenging test of poetic concision or "compression." It broke long ago from its position as a poem for expressing romantic (or platonic) Love or almost always—on some theme related to such—into a versatile lyric or narrative or even dramatic poem transmuted into a variety of rhyme schemes (or free verse) and with even varieties of line length.*

*I'm certainly not a "purist" to insist that a true sonnet be Italian/Petrarchan in iambic pentameters in a strict rhyme scheme. In fact, I tend to trans-FORM it as often as*

*possible with other traditions and metrics. For example, I've modified some of the difficult Welsh and Irish syllabic meters and other cross-cultural forms into quatorzains. But I'm certainly not a "pioneer" with the use of the sonnet for the horrific or weird. One need only look at Lovecraft's Fungi from Yuggoth sequence or Donald Wandrei's Sonnets of the Midnight Hours to see powerful predecessors with the form. Of course Smith and Howard and others used the sonnet. Weird Tales is full of them.*

**Q: The breadth of *Coven* is almost as a textbook to me. You are presenting and demonstrating a number of diverse poetic forms as if using it as a teaching tool to educate your readers on these forms. Was this intentional? Is this approach unique or have you done this with your other publications?**

*A: The intent was and is certainly there to make that tome—and others I've done, both before and since: my chapbook, *This Ae Nighte, Every Nighte and Alle*, and my second collection, *Black Flames & Gleaming Shadows*—books that would also aid both in clarifying what I had done and also in educating the reader—especially readers who might be interested in the study of or even the writing of formal verse—to see how many options are open. Many of those "options" have been either neglected or never known in the first place. The certainly, in the*

*vast majority of cases, aren't being taught any more—especially in the K-12 curriculum.*

*Each of those books has a “Glossary of Forms” at the end to clarify exactly what I was up to—at least with regard to traditions, meter, and rhyme, etc. As I note in the “Introduction” to Coven’s, it’s certainly not intended to insult the intelligence of any reader already familiar with, say, the differences between an Italian and an English sonnet, but as a help to those who might not. But, as I say in the “Intro,” “What’s a hornbook for?”*

**Q: In Coven you include a section of poems you label "metapoetry." What is that?**

*A: As has become customary in literature and literary criticism, the “beyond’ sense of meta- has come to mean reflexivity. Hence, metapoetry is writing poems about poetry or the processes or methods of writing poetry—upon poetry itself as a subject. So the poems in the sections of both The Coven’s Hornbook and the newer Black Flames & Gleaming Shadows are didactic to a degree or, in fact, little poetic essays on my observations and opinions upon poetry itself.*

*Q: In Coven you included a Cynaraelle Sonnet entitled “If But They Could,” which you call an “invented form.”*

*What is this type of sonnet? Why and how did you formulate it?*

*A: The “Cyranelle Sonnet” is one of my many “hybridizations” of the sonnet form. As noted before, I’m not a sonnet “purist,” among the ranks of those who believe the only “true” sonnet form is the Italian/Petrarchan (in fact, the birth of the sonnet predates what has come to called the “Italian” by almost a century, with Giacomo de Lentino and his Sicilian Sonnet (using the Sicilian alternating octave [abababab] rather than the Italian envelope [abbaabba]) taking precedence in the early 1200s.*

*The Cyranelle Sonnet was inspired by my admiration of Ernest Dowson’s poem, “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae.” The title derives from the Odes of Horace, book 4,1. And translates as “I am not as I was in the reign of good Cinara.” The poem’s most famous line fragment is “gone with the wind.” The last two stanzas of the poem are as follows:*

*I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind,  
Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,  
Dancing, to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind,  
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,  
    Yea, all the time, because the dance was long:  
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.*

*I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,*  
*But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,*  
Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! the night is thine;  
And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,  
    Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire:  
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

*[my emphases added]*

*The stanzas are hexains, chiefly in Alexandrines, but with a pentameter line as the fifth line of each stanza. It uses two refrains in lines 4 and 6 which carry throughout the poem (whatever the number of stanzas).*

*For what I call the “Cynarelle Sonnet,” I use two of Dowson’s hexain patterns with a closing couplet in Alexandrines in order to make the 14 lines (which is MY only criterion for the sonnet). My sonnet “hybrid” thus divides 6-6-2.*

*The capital letters below indicate the rhyme schemes of the two main sections and the final couplet. The subscripted numbers indicate the number of iambic feet per line. The subscripted R-1 and R-2 indicate the two refrain lines.*

A<sub>6</sub>B<sub>6</sub>A<sub>6</sub>C<sub>R1-6</sub>B<sub>5</sub>C<sub>R2-6</sub>

D<sub>6</sub>E<sub>6</sub>D<sub>6</sub>C<sub>R1-6</sub>E<sub>5</sub>C<sub>R2-6</sub>

F<sub>6</sub>F<sub>6</sub>

*Interestingly, The second line of the latter stanza quoted above is one of the possible inspirations for Robert E. Howard's alleged final poetic writing, found after his suicide:*

All fled, all done, so lift me on the pyre.  
The feast is over and the lamps expire.

**Q: You are the administrator of a Facebook group called the “Weird Poets Society” which includes poets who have published “in the genres of the Weird, Horrific, Supernatural, Science Fictional, Fantastic or otherwise Speculative” What do you consider truly “Weird” poetry? What is your brand of “Weird?”**

*A: I was, as some of the members noted early on, playing on the film title Dead Poets Society when I came up with the concept for the Facebook group. The monosyllable “weird” fit nicely—and also encompassed what I hoped would be the initial attraction of the group. Certainly the poets who have joined in—one must be a previously published poet of, broadly: the Speculative—do not all focus or specialize in weird, horrific, or supernatural poetry. Yet, “weird” has become a sort of blanket term to cover the speculative for some people.*

*I would focus what I think of as the genuinely “weird” along the lines defined by Lovecraft in his important*

*book, Supernatural Horror in Literature. I quote the end of his brief "Introduction":*

“The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim. And of course, the more completely and unifiedly a story conveys this atmosphere, the better it is as a work of art in the given medium.”

*In the concluding sentence of that definition, of course, he’s re-asserting Poe’s important dictum of evoking a “single unified effect upon the reader.” Emotional message is more important, it seems to me, than intellectual message in speculative poetry.*

**Q: You have written a great deal about Robert Howard, usually remembered for his Conan the Barbarian series. Howard was also a prolific poet of the “Weird.” Howard was also a contemporary of H.P. Lovecraft and was clearly influenced by Clark Ashton Smith. What do you see as Howard’s contribution to formalistic speculative poetry? What influences from Howard have you drawn upon for your own work.**

*A: The poetry that found its way into *Weird Tales* (and other early pulps) was almost exclusively “formalistic” as well as speculative—this in an age that was being deluged with the advent and burgeoning of *vers libre*. Howard was by no means unique in his holding to traditional forms—especially the two most prevalent forms in Western poetry: the sonnet and the ballad. His few attempts at free verse are fairly dismal by comparison to the power of some of his verses—both his narrative poems—that mode already a diminishing one in his era, in favor of the highly personal lyric—and his lyrics and didactics.*

*As with his prose, I admire Howard’s poetry for both simplicity and directness and the sense of sound echoes and cadence and vibrant imagery that he possessed. This was especially distinctive in light of the fact that most of his poetry was composed between his late teens and early 20s in his short 30-year span.*

*He was not the “total poet” that Smith was, but was Lovecraft’s superior as I see it—although both those poetic voices had influence upon him, as did many others. I did a series of articles for my “zine” in REHupa (The Robert E. Howard Amateur Press Association) that I entitled “Bards Before Bob.” He read widely, and I can see influences from Tennyson, Chesterton, Housman, Frost, Kipling, Service, and Hopkins to be sure. All of*

*those same poets—as well as the best of Howard—have undoubtedly had influences upon me and my work.*

**Q: In one of your writings you state that you “reject the notion that there is a “New Formalism,” since I don’t believe the “old” kind ever died.” For the reader the “New Formalism” is often described as a late 20<sup>th</sup> Century and early 21<sup>st</sup> Century movement that the Poetry Foundation says “championed a return to rhyme and meter in poetry” The Poetry Foundation also lists Dana Gioia, X.J. Kennedy, Brad Leithauser, and Marilyn Hacker as examples of poets adhering to “New Formalism.” In 1995 the annual West Chester University Poetry Conference was established which focuses on for formalist and neoformalist poetry and has become one of the largest poetry conferences in the nation. With regard to this statement about the “old kind” do you discount efforts of poets such as Donald Justice, Dan Gioia, and the like to revitalize modern poetry using traditional forms? Or are you saying that these old forms did not just disappear but have been studied all along?**

*A: I admire greatly the work of all of the “new formalists” that you name—and more. I suppose the “pendulum swing”—as I see it—away from, especially the strident “verse is dead,” “form is a prison,” “rhyme and meter restrict ones true voice and intent” school of*

*free verse—back to a new group of true formalists might be seen as a break or something “new.” But, in reality, formalism and the poetic practice of rhyme and meter never really died—hence, it did not need to be reborn, only refreshed and re-emphasized and re-popularized.*

*Certainly in “weird” or “speculative” poetics it is well represented and has been throughout the growing modern popularity of these genres. I look at masters such as Ann Schwader, Wade German, my great friend Donald Sidney-Fryer, and emerging voices such as Steven Withrow, Ashley Dioses, K.A. Opperman, and the eminent balladeer, Adam Bolivar—and many others—and I see formal verse emphasized.*

**Q: Of all the genres of poetry horror seems to be acutely compatible with formalistic poetry. There is certainly a long history for it, such as Poe certainly, or Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Horror certainly has its roots in narrative poems such as *Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost*, as well of course as the early Weird Poets. Do you consider yourself carrying forward this history in your work?**

*A: Indeed, I am trying to emulate, to whatever degree possible, the spirit of the speculative and “weird” verse of those early eras—especially the pulp era verse of the more modern masters. Certainly not all that was printed*

*in the pages of Weird Tales and other pulps was “gold,” but there is much gold, and much else that glitters, despite the many examples of shoddy work—both prose and poetry.*

*And I agree that there is a “compatibility”—none can doubt the tradition—between formal verse and horror and the weird. The classic works you cite are fine examples. Ancient legends and epics are fraught with the horrific as well as the fantastic. I agree with the defense of “Romance” (as opposed to Naturalism or 19<sup>th</sup> c. Realism) that H. Rider Haggard noted in his important article, “About Fiction”:*

“The love of Romance is probably coeval with humanity....There are still subjects that may be handled there if a [person] be bold enough to handle them. And, although some there be who consider this a lower walk in the realms of fiction, and who would probably scorn to become a ‘mere writer of romances,’ it may be urged in defence of the school that many of the most lasting triumphs of literary art belong to the producers of purely romantic fiction....”

**Q: I also read something you wrote that “early poets of the speculative in the pulps were primarily traditional versifiers, and those inspirations have**

**influenced many moderns.” I see this in the works of Clark Ashton Smith, Robert Howard, and Lovecraft. Are there other earlier speculative, or even “Weird” poets that you believe continue to influence many moderns? Who would you consider the most influential contemporary poets of the Weird?**

*A: Certainly the Romantics both elder and younger have had influence. Coleridge with his “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” much of Blake’s work, Keats’ “Le Belle Dame Sans Merci,” and the later Victorians with Browning’s “Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came,” Tennyson’s “The Kraken,” and others.*

*Aside from the several “traditional versifiers” I noted in an earlier answer, there are undoubtedly many moderns who practice various modes of free verse who are quite influential. As with the versifiers, there are too many to enumerate them all, but I would include established masters and more modern voices such as Marge Simon, Bruce Boston, Mary Turzillo, Christina Sng, Kyla Lee Ward, Stephanie Wytovich, Herb Kauderer, Kurt Newton, Brian Rosenberger, Linda Addison, and there are many of my fellows in the Weird Poets Society (and others)—and I would also note your work, David. Really it is a list too vast for me to even attempt to be close to all-inclusive.*

**Q: I asked about this topic on a panel you were on at the 2019 Stokercon. I sense some of those who adhere to “Weird Poetry” take the position that this type of poetry should be “Lovecraftian,” that is emulate H.P. Lovecraft’s more formal style of poetry. Having had more time to think on this, and as a teacher of poetry, do you agree with this? Or, is Weird, especially formalistic poetry in that sub-genre, broader than just following in Lovecraft’s poetic footsteps?**

*A: While Lovecraft sought to be—and likely succeeded in becoming—“the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s Poe,” I certainly don’t see modern weird or horror or speculative poets in general being overly influenced by or dedicated to any Lovecraftian tradition. Certainly there have been many poems (and, of course, much prose fiction) directly inspired by the Cthulhu Mythos and the offshoot King in Yellow Mythos of Chambers. But those restrictions are far too confining for the scope and depth of modern speculative poetics.*

*This is not to say that I haven’t written some Cthuluvian or Chambersian or “Biercean” [Carcossian?] verse myself. I’ve written several poems in those traditions. But even within my own work those influences are represented by a small set.*

**Q: Poets I have met often fall into two camps. Some claim only to write when inspired. When the moment or the “Muse” takes them. Others, tell me they are methodical, writing every single day for some set time, perhaps even working on a goal of writing so many poems per day or week. Looking at *Coven* and your latest book there are a huge number of very stylistic and formal poems using from Welsh, Irish, French, Italian, Spanish, Catalan, Romanian, Greek, Russian, Persian, Old Norse, Anglo-Saxon, Japanese, Korean, Malaysian, and Vietnamese cultures. How do you approach your writing, both in determining what to write about and the form of expression you will choose for your piece?**

*A: While there is and has been, especially among vers librists, a sort of mantra that “Content dictates Form” (certainly that it precedes it), that has been true for me only to the degree that an idea for a topic or a theme have generated the start of a poem. Much, much more often, I find that seeking to fit a form—especially a newly discovered cross-cultural pattern or an idiosyncratic pattern found in a poem I admire, or a firmly fixed metric—such as the highly restrictive syllable counts and rhyme and sound harmonies of Celtic verse—inspire me to spin out something that spills whatever Content that “comes” into the Form that has been chosen. As I say in*

*one poem, “liquid fills the form it’s poured into.” So too with Content.*

*I find that traditional, formal rhymed and metered verse is serendipitously inspiring. In seeking a rhyme or fitting a meter, phrases are “turned” in the mind and words are chosen—sometimes seeming magically to appear or become “apparent.”*

*All art has rules and traditional strictures—whether upheld or intentionally abandoned. Paintings and photographs have the boundary of a frame. An opera will have an overture. Reductive sculptors—as Michaelangelo noted in one of his best sonnets—are “freeing” the statue from the hard stone, which is a block of a definite size and shape to begin with.*

**Q: Your newest volume is entitled *Black Flames & Gleaming Shadows* (Bold Venture Press (March 2020). Tell us about this new work. Is it a continuation of *Coven* or something different entirely? Are there any themes or poetic forms central to the collection?**

*A. My second collection is similar in arrangement and in content to *The Coven’s Hornbook*. It does not have as many distinct topical sections, but it does include weird, horrific, supernatural—with short sections on vampires and Halloween/Samain—but it also includes science*

*fictional, fantastic, mythical, and legendary pieces. As with Coven's, it has later sections on metapoetry and a few "traditional" poems. It also includes a complete "Glossary of Forms" for the exotic, cross-cultural, hybrid, and invented forms used in the tome.*

**Q: What is next for you? Are you working on any new volumes or even scholarly works relating to speculative poetry we should be looking for?**

*A: I am indeed working on a third collection of speculative poetry. But I'd also like to note my book that was done as a poetic challenge to myself. I rendered 327 quatrains of Khayyám's Rubáiyát from the over 400 excellent prose translations by Justin Huntley McCarthy. Not that the world "had to have" yet another English rendition of the poems ascribed to (many erroneously) Old Omar, but I believe many of my renderings show decidedly different nuances on the themes inherent in and the Fitzgerald-familiar rubái quatrains of that classic.*

*My third speculative collection likely won't see publication until early to mid 2021.*

*My focus of late (aside from editing and putting out a second anthology/selection from several of the members of The Weird Poets Society Facebook group*

*[SPECULATIONS II, being the second annual collection]) has been on my prose fiction.*

*I have a collection coming out in early 2021 of seven stories about the adventures of my occult detective, Dr. Anaxagoras “Nax” Venn (cousin to the diagram guy) and his “sidekicks”: Father Azor Sullivan, a clairvoyant, exorcist Jesuit and the lovely Miss Rhiannon Jones, a young Welsh empath. I have a couple other weird fiction prose pieces about to be published. I also have a couple Robert E. Howard scholarly projects in the works. I’m having no problem finding thins to do in retirement.*

**Please share with us a few of your favorite pieces:**

*A: OK, here are a few of my poems that, I hope are representative:*

**Beneath the Crescent Moon**

by Frank Coffman

(hendecasyllabic Blank Verse)

Holding his bachall with sickle head he stood  
Between the gathered folk and the sacred oak.  
The bark scraped off one side, many ogham runes  
Were etched into the Tree’s flesh so laid bare.  
He’d watched the flight of the wrens that day to  
scry—

From the wild and twisting patterns as they fly—  
Who had been chosen as sacrificial gift.  
The divining spoons had reaffirmed the choice,  
And now the people answered—as with one voice,  
Echoing his words, responding to his chants.  
The Day of Samhain, told by the rising sun,  
Had come around again. Soon stark Winter's woes  
Would kill the Earth. It needed to be reborn.  
And, as it chanced that night, the pale crescent moon  
Glowed on the blade of the sickle in his hand—  
A larger arc than the symbol on his staff,  
Made of pure silver, with oak leaf pattern etched.  
Then a silence, as they led the young man forth,  
Paler in the wan light than the rest were pale.  
They knelt him before the Priest, facing the folk.  
More chanting. And then—the blade was pulled  
across....  
And though the young throat brought forth no final  
sound,  
All heard—even the chosen one—suddenly—  
The wrens crying from the branches of the oak.

**Residual Murder**  
by Frank Coffman

I bought the old house for—as they say—“a  
song.”

The old man was quite eager for the sale.  
And there begins the weirdness of my tale.  
For soon I knew that something was quite wrong.

I saw her first—then saw him with the knife!  
She ran toward me, rushing through the room—  
Fleeing from him who planned to be her doom—  
This ghost who sought to kill his pretty wife.

When they ran through me, I had to catch my  
breath.

I turned to see her trapped against the wall,  
Cornered! He stabbed her heart! I saw her fall.  
I saw her gasp her last; I saw her death!

Her sad eyes, as they dimmed, looked full at me!  
In my own eyes the tears welled up and burned.

And then the husband wiped his blade—and  
turned.

I recognized the face! For it was he  
Who'd sold the house, so eager to be rid  
Of the place that witnessed his horrific act,  
Of the ghostly replay that relived the fact,  
Of the other scene that showed where she was hid!

For this grim spectacle repeated many nights,  
And I could naught but watch—again and again—  
And see her fear and see her scream of pain!  
But other acts were fixed in haunting sights:  
I'd see them argue, see him strike her face;  
I'd see her weeping there when he was gone;

I'd feel her anguish, as she pined alone.

But I'd also seen him make the hiding place!—  
Open a space behind the bedroom wall,  
Conceal her corpse in canvas, soaked in oil,  
Smiling when he had finished that damned toil,  
Believing he had concealed his crime from all.

All this I saw—and then I made a plan:  
Somehow to bring the justice he was due.  
I asked the neighbors if, by chance, they knew  
Of the young woman who had wed the man  
Who owned the house before I took possession?

“She left him. That's what I heard,” said the one.

“Went home to Boston, left him for another.”

“I heard she took up with that poor man's  
brother!”

Another said. “She was a pretty thing  
And turned men's heads wherever she would go.  
Where she went off to no one seems to know.”

“I noticed he took off his wedding ring,”  
Said one.

One lady said, “I have a confession.  
I can't help thinking that he might have killed her!  
I know that's crazy talk, but, just the same,  
There were suspicions and the police came  
'Round one day and looked about the place  
And questioned him, but they could find no trace  
Of her. And them so lately wed!”

No reason to doubt the tale that she had fled,

Gone off in her young lust with someone new,  
Gone to with no one knew, nor whither to.

I had to act. The ghostly dramas played  
Now every night in that old, cursed place!  
I couldn't keep from looking at that face  
That gazed in repeated death throes straight at me.  
Justice for her had been too long delayed.  
I had to set her troubled spirit free!

. . . . .

Left in the cellar with old furniture,  
The monster had cast aside an oval frame  
With rounded glass that held a fair picture  
Of the beautiful young girl who took his name.

My plan was simple: When the police came  
'round  
To see the horror that I said I'd found  
Behind the bedroom wall.

“The plaster failed  
While hanging that pretty picture. As I nailed  
The hanger into place, the hammer went  
Clear through the wall, and then I caught the scent  
Of something wrong, the clear smell of decay,”  
I'd said. “I pulled more chunks away. Dear God!  
I called you when I saw what lay behind  
That cursed wall. I hope that you can find  
Whoever did this!”

“Don't worry on that score,”  
The officer had said. “I'm sure I know

Whose body you have found—who did this crime—  
And we have had suspicions for some time.  
There's really nowhere the old man can go,  
I've got men even now outside his door.”

Just then he looked down at the oval frame,  
Sitting upon the chair. “It's weirdly just,”  
He said. “You finding her as you hung  
Her picture.”

I asked, “What was her name?”  
“Wasn't she beautiful? Her name was Grace,”  
He answered. “Well, she's forever young  
In this old photo.”

Smiling at that face,  
We each held back a tear.

. . . . .

But I must  
Finish my strange tale. That very night  
There was no repeat of the murder scene,  
Nor any of the other sad vignettes.  
Perhaps even a house of horror forgets  
If things are somehow changed from what has been,  
If things are somehow, some way set aright?

But one last ghostly vision came that day  
(Believe or disbelieve it matters not.)  
Grace came and smiled at me and turned away.  
That smile she gave shall never be forgot.

I sold the house for much less than I paid.  
A place of murder hasn't much appeal.

I'm happy in the new home I have made  
In a different town—surrounded by “the Real.”  
But often this strange story I recall  
As I smile at the oval portrait on my wall.

## **A Poem that Works**

by Frank Coffman

Far more than a mere assemblage of choice sounds,  
A poem that works is charged with mystic might,  
Can make the bright day solemn, light the night  
With words of fire, break through the bounds  
Of Everyday, so limn—beyond the Norm—  
New vistas. Thoughts, emotions—sudden sprung—  
Tied in the Reader's mind, loosed by the poet's  
tongue.

So, the once formless fantastically finds form.

Thus, as the potent, salient syllables roll,  
Sail up the sight and mingle with the mind,  
Whatever Truths the random readers find—  
Poet's intent, or some wild, hybrid flower—  
Are ripples in the ocean of the soul,  
Or heavings with that same sea's tidal power.

## **Unheeded Warning**

by Frank Coffman

(a poem in Pararhyme)

He had been told the townsfolk had a ban:  
To “never fare out ‘neath the fullest moon.”  
He heeded not—he was a fighting man.  
To scores of foemen he had proved the bane.  
But now he wandered where scant few had been,  
And soon he pondered what their words could mean.  
Just then he heard—quite close!—a deathly moan;  
He saw red, gleaming eyes, heard crunch of bone!  
Drawing his sword, he turned to face the wood.  
A shape moved through the trees—a grey, grim  
ghost?  
The full moon glinted off his burnished blade.  
The thing came out into the clearing wide.  
The wolf-beast walked as man!—he stood aghast!  
One second more—he saw the white fangs flash—  
Tried once to cry out through his throat’s torn  
flesh...!  
...The moon mirrored in the black pool of his blood.

**The Pathways of R'lyeh**  
by Frank Coffman  
(an Irregular Megasonnet\*)

Deep-diving the Pacific at the spot  
That's furthest off from any mass of land,  
The Bathyship was doing wondrous work.  
The depths were lighted, and the sonar scanned  
Those black-dark waters where strange creatures lurk.

We found the place that reason says cannot  
Be real! And yet—a nightmare of the deep  
Lies there among the drifting ooze and weeds.  
We dared to enter through a cyclopean gate  
Of monstrous stones in shapes I can't relate!  
A city's there! In weird and age-old sleep!  
But to describe it?! No human tongue succeeds.

Yes! We had found R'lyeh—that city of myth!  
At least we'd thought those horrid tales untrue—  
Mere ramblings to frighten, fables of the sea!

We dared to cruise down one strange avenue,  
The lines of which confound geometry.  
The city center loomed, green gloom like Death  
Hung all about. Then, suddenly, we knew!  
Dreaming—though Dead! We fled! We had to flee  
From those depths! For we saw what lies beneath!

**Frank Coffman** is a retired professor of college English, Creative Writing, and Journalism. He has published speculative poetry and fiction in a variety of magazines, and anthologies. His poetic magnum opus, *The Coven's Hornbook & Other Poems* has been followed by his rendition into English Verse of 327 quatrains of *Khayyám's Rubáiyát*. His second large collection of poetry, *Black Flames & Gleaming Shadows* was published in March of 2020. All are available from Bold Venture Press and Amazon. He selected and edited *Robert E. Howard: Selected Poems*. A member of the Horror Writers Association and the Science Fiction & Fantasy Poetry Association. He established and moderates the *Weird Poets Society* Facebook group. See his Writer's Blog at: <https://www.frankcoffman-writer.com>.