

THE COMPANY OF MONSTERS

AN INTERVIEW WITH CLIVE BARKER

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Clive Barker is one of the most prolific authors of imaginative fiction, maintaining a level of high art in genres that many still dismiss as pulp. In addition to the *Abarat* series of young adult fantasy (HarperCollins 2002 and 2004), which he himself illustrates with oil paintings, he is currently working in the horror genre, preparing *The Scarlet Gospels*, the long-awaited sequel to *The Hellbound Heart* (HarperCollins, 1986), the book that inspired the *Hellraiser* films.

Barker paints extensively and on many surfaces—canvases, the walls of his studio, the skins of the models he is photographing for his upcoming photo book, *Imagining Man*, even the photos themselves. Looking at his photographs is like seeing some of Barker's well-known characters realized, but without knowing which ones to associate with which images. Barker showed me his photographs of placid, sorrowful angels and struggling, blurred bodies over a cup of tea in his rather modest kitchen. Though I never saw the house in which he sleeps, I had the opportunity to tour the offices of Seraphim Studios (his film production company) as well as his personal art gallery. Both of these separate buildings sit in a row with his home, composing what Barker and his staff call "The Compound."

Barker's art gallery is almost entirely decked out in his own paintings—mostly color oils. The previous night, he sold three-quarters of the paintings on display in L.A.'s Bert Green gallery, attesting to his positive reception by the art world. There are strange landscapes, but most of the paintings (some of which are stacked five or six deep against the wall) are of beings—people, creatures, living and undead. One distinct characteristic of Barker's work is that there are no limits to what can exist in his fantasy universe, and that includes matters of taste as well as

physiognomy. Characters can be utterly absurd one moment, frightening the next. He rarely shies away from issues of sexuality and moral ambiguity, though the *Abarat* books are consciously crafted for a young audience and don't contain the eroticism and operatic gore of his work intended for a more mature audience.

The offices have been abandoned for the weekend. In one room, the photography room, there's a large white cube constructed of canvases, open at the front and filled with more white linens. It's big enough for two grown men to sit in. Before the day is through, the cube will be inhabited. Other rooms are less intriguing—this is an office, after all.

Descending the staircase from the ground floor of his base of operations into the studio, I notice the following inscription painted on the wall: *Art is my addiction. Love is what keeps me in this dimension. Go! My husband has healed the past, made sense of the present, and is laughing the future alive.* Barker's husband is the photographer, David Armstrong.

The studio is filled with many unfinished paintings, open books of old etchings upon which Barker will base one of today's illustrations, an entire wall of CDs, a tiny combination TV/VCR, and various forms of erotica. There's also an additional photo set; this one is an arrangement of bamboo poles holding up a grid of the same wood. He wears what one might assume a painter would wear—paint-spattered jeans with sewn-in red-patterned patches that remind me of Inca textiles. He removes his smock shirt in preparation to get down to the business of painting. Once down the stairs, it seems as though no question will go unanswered as I interview the master at work.

EP: Let's warm up with a couple of questions that *The Southeast Review* uses for many of our interviews. Please tell me a writer whose work is currently making you jealous.

CB: I don't do the jealousy thing. It's a mind killer. It gives me a stomach ache, and I threw that out of my psyche in my early twenties. The method I used was this: basically, what I do is not like everybody else's stuff, and what everybody else does isn't like mine. Why be jealous of someone who isn't doing what you're doing? I feel like I'm in a horse

race of one. What I do is pretty much my own.

EP: In that case, can you tell me whose work is exciting you right now?

CB: It's a lot of the same old, same old. I don't find a lot of new writers, and I do look at new writers, who are turning me on hugely. I got excited when I found Phillip Pullman, but that's five years ago now. My annual visit to *Moby Dick*, Borges, a lot of the South American magical realists, they still do it for me in a major way. I find journalism increasingly interesting, because it is very important right now that we be truthful. The other ways that we get our information, such as television, are obviously not truthful and are hugely influenced by their pay masters. I'm looking around actively for journalists whom I can trust. I feel as though I need to get a better grasp on the truth than I presently can.

EP: What attracts me to horror is the monsters, the imagination, and the supernatural. When I read *Cabal* (1985) or watch the film, *Nightbreed*, to me it's not about Decker [the human slasher], it's about Shuna Sassi and the other creatures.

CB: *Nightbreed* is my hymn of gratitude that there be monsters in the world. You know that wonderful sentence which was inscribed on terra incognita on old maps, "Here there be monsters?" Hand in hand, we will go into the dark wood and we will find the monsters. And if we don't, it will be a bad fucking day. It's Dracula we go to see, not Van Helsing.

Are you familiar with a book called *Monsters in the Closet* [Harry M. Benshoff, Manchester University Press, 1997]? It's a book about homosexuality in horror movies, and it is brilliantly written. It goes to my stuff and to Tim's [Burton's] stuff and to Cronenberg's. *Nightbreed* carried very easy codes. I mean Boone, for God's sake. He was dressed deliberately like a Tom of Finland character. The white t-shirt, the tight jeans on a very Tom of Finland body. His interest in the girl is perfunctory at most. He's obviously a lot more comfortable underground in the company of his monsters.

EP: Speaking about queerness, then, do you feel that having a queer iden-

tity has made it any easier for you to break the boundaries of genre?

CB: An interesting question. I think when, from word one in your life, you have been obliged to re-engage with the dialogue of self-description, “I’m not like these other people; what am I then?” It becomes easier to re-engage constantly in that dialogue. It becomes easier to say, “Okay, that’s part of what I will do in my life. I will ask those questions.” I never look at anything I’m going to attempt except with the implicit question, “How am I going to change that?” I don’t want it to be the same as, same as. I have no interest in giving people what they’ve already seen. And it amazes me that people are so happy with what they’ve already seen, so content to have what they’ve already seen.

EP: As far as transgression, the literary as well as the sexual, have you ever felt a conflict between your dual identities as a writer of children’s fiction and a writer of distinctly erotic, horrific adult fiction?

CB: No, because of the commonality of the imagination. My imagination, and its fecundity, are the things which bring both into play. I certainly would never think of labeling my children’s fiction, “This is for children only.” I very strongly feel that adults will take pleasure in *Abarat*, and I think in *The Thief of Always* (1992) too, to a lesser degree. I would add the caveat that I don’t write horror for the consumption for the young minds, or fantasy. You can easily say that a very advanced eight-year-old could read *Lord of the Rings*. A very advanced eight-year-old should not be reading *Imajica* (1991). The issues of gender identification and sexuality are so much at the core of what that book is, you’re asking for trouble, a lot of questions, a very confused reader. It was a book for adults.

EP: I love that variety you create in your fantastic characters.

CB: It’s one of the great joys of the fantastic in any medium, that there be a level of absurdity. It’s the fundamental constant. It’s something even in the way that the narratives of operas are shaped. It’s the defiance of the real. It’s almost critical that the creator be saying, “If we’re going to do this, we’re going all the way.” One of the loudest protests that I heard on *Nightbreed* was, “Why don’t the monsters look the same?”

Now, all of this is in service of the *Abarat* series. You see that map [Barker points to a triptych of oil paintings that cohere into a map of the islands of Abarat]. That's what my brain looks like. The sense of there being a lot of places where things can grow and diversify. I believe in the diversification of species.

Tulips, for instance, will continue to reinvent themselves even though that doesn't add to the success of the plant. It's almost as though the diversification is there to please. That, in my head, is tied to a distinction I made very early in my writing life, which I don't believe has been made in these terms, but I offer it up: There's an inclusionist art and then there's exclusionist. The Mark Rothko paintings, Racine, Bosch, this is all inclusionist art. A few brush strokes that form the outline of a leaf, that's exclusionist art. There's nothing there other than what's needed. My art is inclusionist.

EP: A bit of the carnivalesque?

CB: Exactly. You've got it.

EP: How do you make the time to write?

CB: I have rules. Nobody talks to me between getting out of bed to me getting to my desk. I sit at my desk, and I jam. I work until I've done twenty pages, though twenty pages of dialogue is obviously different than twenty pages of narrative. It also depends—I'm writing *Abarat* three right now, and I am aided hugely by the appetite people have for material. It's very moving to me to have a bunch of people come up to me and say, "So when do we get the next piece?"

I've never oil painted before this project. What I'm finding is that I get to be able to fold into the work that I'm doing things that I know are going to be necessary in the books from this point on. When I was beginning the books, I was just painting, just painting whatever came into my head, and then I built the books around those paintings. Now, I don't have quite the same freedom. Obviously, as the books get closer to the end, my freedoms will be diminished.