

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.

EP: So your paintings are your brainstorm and your freewrites?

CB: Right. My writing is much more intellectual. I play music while I paint. I won't today, because we're talking, but it could be Sondheim, it could be Wagner, it could be a boy's choir. I never listen to music while I write.

EP: By the way, who is this fellow you're painting? [Barker has been painting a man who appears to have eyes sewn shut, surrounded by black birds.]

CB: If I knew that, it wouldn't be an *Abarat* painting.

EP: Do the paintings dictate the plot and the characters?

CB: The question is whether character dictates story or not, and that's a long argument that goes back forever as to whether character is story, right? For my money, character has got to be at least the very beginning of story. There are lots of things one adds, which have nothing to do with character, or they are at very best outgrowths of character.

Sometimes story can have its own momentum, and character takes a back seat. But I think that if you haven't got character running strongly in the novel, there's nothing really but story. And you know the distinction between story and plot. A very famous distinction, made famous by E.M. Forster. Story is, "The king died and then the queen died." Plot is, "The king died *so* the queen died." Plot is causality.

There are more obvious pieces of causality. I was mad, so I picked up the gun, so I pulled the trigger, so he fell dead. A lot of what I would call bad writing is all story and no plot.

[At this point, Barker switches to a blank canvas. Throughout the remainder of the interview, a new figure begins to take shape. At first, I think it will be a tree, but it slowly solidifies into a figure holding two severed heads aloft.]

EP: How has the availability of technology shaped your composition process?

CB: Not at all. I handwrite my texts. I give my texts to somebody else who gives them back to me typed. I handwrite my corrections which are very often extreme on the page, and there's a lot of arrows and parentheses and so on. Then I give it back to the person who is working on it, and he or she puts that stuff in. *Scarlet Gospels* is four thousand handwritten pages. Three drafts, twelve thousand pages. The final draft, which will be on another four thousand pages plus any alterations, has yet to be completed. I'm living proof that you can get to twenty-four books without ever knowing how to type.

EP: I would like to respectfully disagree with you when you say technology has not shaped your composition process.

CB: Good.

EP: You've recently been engaged in a more or less polite debate with Roger Ebert about video games as narrative, about how that is a new type of narrative. Any thoughts on that?

CB: Yes, yes, absolutely, of course it's a new type of narrative. I was thinking somewhat more conservatively about the other things that I'm presently doing. The game world is a whole other thing and it requires something much closer to plot than storytelling. It requires the creation of huge amounts of mythological information and topographical information, all of which needs to be in the complex structure of the narrative. So you end up a lot of times creating stuff which in a conventional novel you might jot down for your own sake just to develop some ideas, but no reader would actually get to see. In the game's case, you actually do show that, you do present that, not to the reader, or the player rather, straightforwardly, but through the playing of the game. Lots of information. They're information gobblers, the games. They require so much information, and you'd better be there with it. The game lasts fifteen hours. It's a lot of information to provide, and I see that as a challenge, but it can be tough, no question.

EP: Ebert's biggest argument against the idea that a computer game could be a narrative art form was that it's open ended.

CB: Yes, and this is sort of nonsensical.

EP: All stories are open ended.

CB: Yes, absolutely. I don't think there's much that either you or I could say to each other that we wouldn't broadly agree on at this point, because his position is so nakedly stupid [both laugh], that it's very hard to figure out why he would even go to bat for it.

EP: Let's talk some more about *The Scarlet Gospels*. How does your vision of Hell—this may sound a little standard and cliché, but I still have to ask—how does your version of Hell, its landscape, its flora and fauna, the political hierarchy, how has that been informed by Dante and Milton, and how is it distinctly divergent?

CB: Before starting *The Scarlet Gospels*, I went and looked at every book about Hell I could find, to see if there was anything that had anything close to what I wanted. The closest that I got was actually pictures of war-torn cities, cities after destruction by gunfire, heavy duty artillery. That's the best description of the Hell in *Scarlet Gospels*.

I've done a number of Hells. There's a Hell in *Coldheart Canyon* (2001), a Hell in the *Hellraiser* movie, brief flashes of it. I'm deliberately doing a riff on Dante's Hell at the beginning of *Mister B. Gone* (2007), the idea of circles and each one being a different level of punishment.

The stuff in *Scarlet Gospels* is neither Miltonic nor Dante-esque, nor is it Hellraiserian. Though of course the guy formerly known as Pinhead—he has another name in the book—he despises the name Pinhead; it's a name given to him by the creatures he tortures. It's not a very respectful name, so it pisses him off a little bit. The Hell I'm creating for that book, I just want it to be real. I want it to have no clear sense of dominions and principalities, no clear sense of order, the way that—I was talking to my friend who did two tours of duty in Iraq—the kind of chaos of Baghdad, no one really knowing anything for sure, even the soldiers.

Everything being in doubt all the time, to the extent that it becomes part of a soldier's day, to listen to every piece of rumor, even about what his own people are saying.

EP: Since you've written quite a bit about Hell in the past, and since you've stated in previous interviews that all of your stories could exist in the same universe, will readers see the return of other favorite demons from other books?

CB: When I said that all of my stories could exist in the same universe, I meant the same moral universe. These are different Hells, but the same principles guide each of my stories. I don't suddenly become a Catholic just to suit my narrative.

EP: Are you ready to reveal Pinhead's new name?

CB: I'm not. He doesn't have one name; he has a series. He's like the Pope in that sense. The Pope has this huge number of names that both the Church gives him and obviously his enemies give him. I suppose if I had to liken Hell to anything, it would be what would happen if a massive bomb were to go off in the present day Vatican, and you and I were the first people to get there after it had gone off. What would you see of treasures, and pain, and glorious things and inglorious things? Shit and Michelangelo. To me, that's a very potent idea, to put those two things together. Yes, shit and Michelangelo.

EP: Since he's conscious of the name Pinhead, are you saying that the book acknowledges the film mythology?

CB: I thought hard on this. Yes, it has to. I think it's naïve not to. His picture's going to be on the cover. What are people going to say when they see his picture? "Oh, it's *him*." They're going to give him a name. Then I thought, *Okay, I'll use this. I'll make merry out of this.* I'll make it an issue for him, because it sure as hell's an issue for me [laughs]. It's the same as people saying "Frankenstein" and assuming you mean the monster. It irritates me. I do it half the time, but it irritates me. That's not what the book is saying. "The creature," maybe, but not "Frankenstein." To have my rather noble, I think, figure reduced to something spastic, literally,

something deformed in that fashion the way a “pinhead” is...

EP: The microcephalics?

CB: Exactly. It's just not what I want that character to be. I really want this book to be him, his last howl. There won't be any from me after this. No more *Hellraiser*. The little glimpse we get of the Cenobites in their monastic cells in the first movie is a truthful rendition of the monastery. It has a name, but I'm still playing, so I don't want to say it. It will be a closed order from which occasionally soldiers are sent forth. They're cloistered, and occasionally they go out and do their thing as we see in the movies. Most of the time, they're staying in this sealed, claustrophobic space, which I like very much. I like the idea of my villain being someone who's content to make prayer. What he's praying for and how he's praying may be something we wouldn't necessarily like.

EP: Your work has shaped a whole generation of imaginative and of queer writers. Do you feel marginalized as a genre author more than as a queer author?

CB: I feel as though if there was ever a time for marginalized groups, when large or even small bodies of folks got together with the same ambitions in mind and talked and supported one another, that time is gone forever. We live in a society which is entirely too competitive, I think, for that to happen. I'm thinking particularly now of movies, but it's also true of writers. Writers are very combative, very...selfish isn't the word. We kind of have to be selfish, because it's a solitary business, and if we don't look after ourselves nobody else will.

But there is definitely a sense that our lives are these intricate, internal lives that don't have any outward manifestation except to other writers. I can talk to you about the issues of writing in a way that I couldn't to a non-writer. And I can speak to you as a queer man to a queer man, writers of fantastic literature, on a number of levels we meet.

Nothing you can say to me gives me as much pleasure as the notion that I can be useful to other writers. I thank you for that from the bottom of my heart. I know how hard it is out there, and I know how many

good people go down in flames through no failure except that they can never quite believe that they're ever going to make it.

If we can strike a metaphysical note for a moment, I'm a fifty-six-year-old man, and I think a lot about being a fifty-six-year-old man. There's so much still in me. Trying to organize what I do, and trying to minimize the shit that gets between me and doing what I need to do. You get to a place sometimes where you go, 'Well, what does this all add up to?' The idea that what you do does mean something and does matter; it's more than just another way to dawdle on your way to the grave. I've got to believe in something greater than that; otherwise, I can't even get myself to pick up a pencil. I need to believe that there is purpose in what I'm doing, there is a grander scheme. If I don't believe that—I think that's what takes me to God, honestly, or to that notion. That's why I say let's talk about metaphysics. It's not necessarily God or any specific form thereof; it's that the whole apparatus of religion, the whole issue of metaphysics, of being and reasons to be, are not even reasons to be happy. Most of the reasons, most of the times when I'm happy, are the times when I'm looking at art or staring into somebody else's eyes. It can be a gorgeously turned phrase, it can be Sondheim, it can be a beautifully stated feeling. The things which get me are very often the small things.

EP: For what books did you suffer the most?

CB: *Imajica*, just because it was enormous, and I doubted my ability to finish it many times. *Sacrament* (1996), because I was writing about a gay man and AIDS and the depopulation of the world's animals. I'm a huge animal lover, and I've lost many of my friends to AIDS. The book was very hard to write. To be honest and not be sentimental, particularly about animals. When writing about animals, it's so easy to be sentimental, and that would've completely removed and invalidated a lot of what I was trying to do.

Interestingly, the book begins with its hero, Will Rabjohns, being horrified by the spectacle of watching all of the polar bears on the Hudson coming to eat or to pickpocket or scavenge their way through the trash heaps and in consequence losing a lot of their mobility, their beauty,

their white perfection.

I saw a film of this, which moved me immensely. One of them got his snout caught in a mayonnaise jar, and the audience was just laughing and I thought, ‘*Christ!*’ I just wanted to slap everyone in the fucking cinema. Now, ten years after *Sacrament*, we’re seeing all of their population going down because they’re drowning in water where there used to be ice. They’re having to swim distances where they used to walk. Even though they have huge reserves of energy, they just aren’t strong enough. I hadn’t foreseen that. I didn’t foreshadow it in the book, which was my mistake.

Though the opening sentence of *Mister B. Gone*, “Burn this book,” is my favorite opening sentence, the opening paragraph of *Sacrament* is my favorite opening paragraph.

EP: I read an article you wrote for *Fangoria* magazine in which you referred to *Sacrament*, and you were talking about how you were upset that people felt absolutely no real revulsion at the gore and violence in your books, but they nailed you to the wall about gay erotic content.

CB: The double standard isn’t about violence and gay sex; the double standard is about violence and sex. We live in a society that was formed by Puritans, and that puritanical taint is in our culture still. Putting aside the plagues that sex has brought—and there’s no minimizing those, before AIDS there was syphilis; these are not good things—but the sexual urge, the sexual instinct, the sexual heat, is immensely spectacular. I’d thought by now, by the age of fifty-six, that my sexual interest might be mellowing, but no, not a bit of it. When I say interest, I’m not so much talking about fucking as I am about the whole area of making erotic paintings, making erotic movies, sitting down with friends and asking about what turns them on and them asking about what turns you on. That kind of talk can help you understand your friends, no question.

So yes, I do get mad about the double standard. I think it’s fucking stupid. I’m of the opinion of never explain, never apologize. The moment somebody comes around here, and God bless, there are very few of them, someone who would say, “Why are you into that?” Those people

I will turn my back on and walk out. They're asking the wrong question. I don't have answers for them. Art, even bad art, isn't made up of neat little answers to neat little questions.