Clive Barker's Books of Blood Short Guide

Clive Barker's Books of Blood by Clive Barker

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Characters

The characters in the Books of Blood are as diverse and colorful as the stories themselves. Because they inhabit the world of shorter fictions, they lack somewhat the depth and roundness of development one might expect of novel-length protagonists and antagonists, but within these limitations Barker is able to achieve some startling and memorable characterizations. The protagonists in these stories come from all social strata and represent a widely divergent number of personality types: what they share in common is the concept of unfulfillment in their lives; it is the purpose of the plot to bring them to the point of fruitful transformation through their respective encounters with the horrific. Of even greater interest in some ways are Barker's nonhuman antagonists, bringing to mind Macaulay's comment upon Milton: "His fiends, in particular, are wonderful creations." Among the more striking of these, exhibiting as well somewhat of the extraordinary range of possibilities Barker works within, are the bumbling apprentice demon of "The Yattering and Jack" (Volume I), the gigantic body-devouring monster of "Rawhead Rex" (Volume III), the rebellious hands of "The Body Politic" (Volume IV), and the chilling specter of an executed murderer in "In the Flesh" (Volume V).

Social Concerns

Although Clive Barker is an author who seems to be more concerned with constructing stories which center upon the problems of individual relationships and self-awareness than those which embody wide-sweeping social statements, it is inevitable that in a collection comprising some thirty stories there will be certain instances where the treatment of social issues is of primary importance. Thus, for instance, the story "Dread" (Volume II), which features the attempts of a psycho-sadist to understand the nature of secret terror by fashioning a series of horrifying clinical experiments utilizing innocent subjects, would clearly seem, on one level at least, to be an indictment of scientific experimentation utilizing human, or possibly even animal, subjects. Sentiments of a similar nature are apparent in "The Age of Desire" (Volume IV), a narrative of the type commonly referred to as "technohorror," in which scientists accidentally discover a powerful aphrodisiac, rush into premature testing upon human subjects, and create a sex-crazed monster who rapes everyone (and everything) in sight until his body ultimately overloads and he dies in suitably gruesome fashion.

The careful reader of Barker's fiction is certain to sense that a significant portion of his work may be construed as allegory, thereby suggesting a technique which has a long and rich history as a vehicle for social commentary. The problem, as in virtually all allegorical readings, is one of correct interpretation of authorial intent, a challenge somewhat exacerbated when the author seems to be offering selfcontradictory statements in separate narratives. A case in point would be the two stories "In the Hills, the Cities" (Volume I) and "The Body Politic" (Volume IV). In the former, two neighboring villages in Yugoslavia cling to an archaic tradition whereby every ten years they each construct an enormous colossus of human bodies (the entire populace of each town) in order to conduct ritualistic and symbolic mock battle. The perfect coordination necessary to bring this performance off ultimately goes awry, however, culminating in the collapse — and literal death — of one colossus/village and the resultant insanity of the other. If this may be viewed as a negative commentary on the basic principles of communism, a vastly different sentiment appears to be at work in "The Body Politic," wherein human hands, ever discussing their philosophy and strategies in the metaphors of revolution, lead what amounts to a secession from their human masters by severing themselves from their respective bodies.

Other tales in the collection with obvious social concerns might include "Jacqueline Ess: Her Will and Testament" (Volume II), in which a feminist who discovers powerful latent telekinetic powers uses her newfound talents to destroy, in spectacularly gory fashion, the men who attempt to exploit her, and "In the Flesh" (Volume V), which provides an ingenious explanation for the presence and continuance of evil in human society.

Techniques

The most frequently commented upon technical feature in Clive Barker's fiction is the elegance and measured tone of his prose style, a somewhat typical example of which may be observed in the opening sentence of his story "The Forbidden" (Volume V): "Like a flawless tragedy, the elegance of which structure is lost upon those suffering in it, the perfect geometry of the Specter Street Estate was only visible from the air." Infused with wit, frequent literary allusions, superb similes and metaphors drawn from all elements of human experience, and a fine ear for dialogue, an appreciation of the style in which these stories are couched, can indeed prove to be one of the major delights of reading Barker's work. Furthermore, in a manner not utterly explainable other than through the notion of heightened contrast, the employment of such stylistic techniques seems to enhance immensely the shockingly grotesque nature of the subject matter with which the author is dealing.

Somewhat allied to the foregoing is the intensely visual quality of Barker's narratives. This should come as no great surprise, given his personal background and interests. A trained artist and illustrator (he provided, incidentally, the cover illustrations for the six British paperback volumes of the Books of Blood), he lists as his most important sources of inspiration not Poe, H. P. Lovecraft, or Shirley Jackson, but rather painters in the fantastic tradition such as Bosch, Goya, and Dali. Indeed, the central visual concept is what provides the initial impetus for his stories.

In a manner vaguely reminiscent of Poe's "single effect" dictum of literary composition, Barker has this to say about his methods: "I'll tell you how I write stories. I come up with images. I draw pictures. I write pictures down. I say, 'Picture.' And I wait. Eventually a story appears around the pictures. I have hundreds of pictures, images that are waiting for the birth of the narrative."

This visual approach to narrative functions exceedingly well in allowing Barker to achieve one of his most frequently-stated objectives in the rendering of horror fiction — to never pull back or allow the reader to avert his eyes from the full nature of the horror revealing itself before him. Unlike the Poe narrator, who "shuddered the more thrillingly, because I shuddered knowing not why," the characters in Clive Barker's tales know only too well why they are shuddering, as do his readers. Only through confronting one's most deep-seated fears and taboos, explains Barker, can one learn to deal with them and perhaps overcome them, a rationale for the therapeutic effects of explicit horror literature which has been articulated in recent times by a number of practitioners in this genre.

The basic plotting technique employed in the various stories which comprise the Books of Blood is one which has become relatively standard in much modern horror fiction. Characters are initially introduced in a context of normalcy bolstered by highly realistic treatments of setting and action. Little is done in these early stages to suggest the nature of the horrors to come. When things begin to go awry — often about one-third of the way through the narrative — the shock of sudden reversal catches the reader

somewhat by surprise, while the horror suddenly introduced into the world of seeming normalcy continues to escalate toward its climax without ever allowing characters or readers sufficient opportunity for recovery.

Themes

Barker's vivid imagination, bolstered by his naturally philosophical bent, leads him into any number of thematic concerns in the course of his fiction.

Two areas of recurring emphasis are apparent, however. The first of these, and the one which the author himself has been most prone to stress in public discussions of his work, involves the concept of fundamental transformation as the result of an intense, revelatory experience, something which in Barker's narratives seems to come close to the notion of epiphany as articulated in the fiction of James Joyce.

People, he says, are given a moment of revelation, which, I think, is just about the most important thing in the world — moments when they see themselves in relation to the imaginative elements which have erupted into their lives.

What separates these moments of revelation and transformation from the epiphanies of Joyce — and those of just about anyone else, for that matter — is, of course, their radically different bias: in Barker, such experiences are terrifying, gruesome, and not infrequently fatal. If the latter seems at first absurd, Barker takes considerable pains to make his point clear: even in death his characters are frequently better off than they were in life. An excellent case in point might be the story "Sex, Death and Starshine" (Volume I), wherein a mediocre acting troupe attempting to stage a production of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night (c.16001601) is confronted by the disgusted and angry ghosts (zombies, actually) of theater audiences past. Faced with a challenge of such unprecedented magnitude, the troupe rises above its innate mediocrity to stage its best performance ever, upon the conclusion of which the theater catches fire and destroys the performers in the ensuing conflagration. Reassembled beyond the pale, the now-dead cast forms an inspired zombie troupe which plays for highly appreciative dead audiences throughout the country. Like the acting troupe in "Sex, Death and Starshine," the central characters in much of Barker's fiction are losers of one sort or another, and it is only through their confrontation with extremity, whether it leaves them whole, maimed, or even dead, that they achieve their true spiritual potential.

The second area of recurring thematic emphasis in Barker's work is somewhat difficult to articulate precisely, but seems to involve the concept of a necessary symbiotic relationship between humanity and what might be construed as its obverse, all inhuman but nonetheless sentient elements of creation, be they spirits, demons, monsters, or whatever else the imagination is capable of conjuring up. A significant number of these stories involve human contact with agents of Hell, as, for instance, in "The Yattering and Jack" (Volume I), a wonderful instance of black comedy in which a totally incompetent apprentice demon, sent from Hell to torment a man in an effort to win his soul, bungles the job horribly and is eventually enslaved by his intended victim. "Hell's Event" (Volume II) postulates the insertion of a demon in runner's clothing into a wellknown marathon event with, again, the obvious objective of winning souls, while "The Last Illusion" (Volume VI), a decidedly offbeat Faust variant, involves the ultimately futile attempts of Hell's agents to salvage a body needed to balance their account. Interestingly enough,

in all stories where the relationship and ultimate confrontation is between humans and agents of a conventional Hell, the demons are the ones thwarted or subjugated. This may also be the case in confrontations with certain other nonhuman entities, such as that found in "Rawhead Rex" (Volume III), wherein an unspeakably grotesque monster, which may be the result of a sort of Jungian mythic dread made manifest, is ultimately defeated through the efforts of a character who discovers its fatal weakness. More often than not, however, when humans battle the nonhuman (excepting agents of a conventional Hell), it is the humans who find themselves in positions of subservience and subjugation, although ironically their new circumstances may lead them to heightened states of consciousness and self-realization. This, in one form or another, would seem to form the thematic basis of such stories as "The Midnight Meat Train" (Volume I), "Pig Blood Blues" (Volume I), "Scapegoats" (Volume III), "Human Remains" (Volume III), "The Inhuman Condition" (Volume IV), "The Forbidden" (Volume V), "The Madonna" (Volume V), "In The Flesh" (Volume V), and "The Life of Death" (Volume VI).

Adaptations

Several of the tales from the Books of Blood have been optioned by Britain's Limehouse Productions for release as films, with screenplays by the author.

"The Yattering and Jack" (Volume I) is scheduled to be adapted as a segment of the American television series, Tales from the Darkside.

Barker's first film, the hit based on his novella "The Hell-Bound Heart," was entitled Hellraiser and appeared in 1987. The film was produced by Christopher Figg and starred Andrew Robinson, Claire Higgins, and Ashley Laurence. Nightbreed followed and was released in early 1990. The fourth, and supposedly final installment of Hellraiser (1996), was held in distain by its participants, and the director had his name removed from the credits. The film starred Bruce Ramsay and Douglas Bradley.

Literary Precedents

If Barker indeed represents, as Stephen King and others have claimed, the future of horror fiction, he is nonetheless the inheritor of a long and distinguished tradition of the horrific in literature. Despite his sometimes radically different approaches to the medium, he certainly is anything but unwilling to acknowledge his debts.

His allusions to the classic works of horror literature are abundant in the Books of Blood — one of the stories, "New Murders in the Rue Morgue" (Volume II), is at once a retelling and grotesque extension of Poe's classic tale — and even where the debts are not explicitly acknowledged they are abundantly evident. Faustian and Promethean analogues are present in a number of the stories and appear to constitute a source of recurrent appeal to Barker's imagination. "The Last Illusion" (Volume VI) is, for instance, an obvious, if somewhat bizarre, rendition of the familiar Faust motif, while it is not too difficult to see "The Age of Desire" (Volume IV) as a modernized version of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.

Other incidents of precedent abound as well. "The Midnight Meat Train" (Volume I) quite obviously owes something to H. G. Wells's conception of the Morlocks in The Time Machine (1895) The complex ironies of "The Life of Death" (Volume VI), wherein the protagonist seeks and courts Death, only to find it in a manner not anticipated, immediately calls to mind Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale" in The Canterbury Tales (1387-1400), "In the Flesh" (Volume V) recalls any number of memorable resurrection tales, in particular Poe's "Ligeia." Characters, too, are occasionally based upon literary predecessors: thus Quaid, the psychotic experimenter in "Dread" (Volume II), seems to represent a dreadful extrapolation of The Scarlet Letter's (1850) Roger Chillingworth, as well as several other characters of a similar ilk in Nathaniel Hawthorne's fiction.

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