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Jeffery Klaehn¹

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¹Independent scholar, Canada

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Contact journal editors: editors.synaesthesia@gmail.com

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Examining Our Fears: an interview with Canadian horror author Edo van Belkom

Jeffery Klaehn
Independent Scholar

Edo van Belkom (b. 1962) is a Bram Stoker and Aurora Award-winning Canadian author and editor. His works include *Teeth* (2000), *Martyrs* (2001), *Scream Queen* (2003), *Blood Road* (2004), *Wolf Pack* (2004), and *Cry Wolf* (2007), as well as short story collections, *Death Drives a Semi* (1998) and *Six-Inch Spikes* (2001). He is also the author of *Northern Dreamers* (1998), a collection of interviews with Canadian science fiction, fantasy, and horror authors and *Writing Horror* (2000), a book exploring creative writing, storytelling and writing process. His edited works include *Northern Horror: Canadian Fiction* (2000), *Be Afraid!: Tales of Horror* (2000) and *Be Very Afraid!: More Tales of Horror* (2002). His short stories, spanning horror, fantasy, sci-fi and mystery genres, have been published in numerous magazines (including *On Spec* and *Parsec*) and anthologies (including but not limited to *Northern Frights*, *Fear Itself*, *Hot Blood 4 & 6*, *Dark Destiny*, and *Year's Best Horror Stories 20*). This interview explores a range of topics and issues, including writing horror; Ray Bradbury, Robert Bloch, Richard Laymon and Rod Serling; precarity and freelance writing; the relationship between humor and the macabre; the functions of horror fiction in society; and the question of why horror resonates so strongly with younger audiences.

horror | horror fiction | creative writing | storytelling

Jeffery Klaehn: What initially drew you to work in the horror genre and, for readers who may be unfamiliar with your work, how would you characterize your oeuvre?

Edo van Belkom: I always knew I was going to be a writer but the problem was I didn't know what kind of writer I should be. I tried rock songs and poetry, but none of those things turned out very well. Then, over the course of a rainy weekend at the cottage, I read Ray Bradbury's *The October Country* and knew exactly what I wanted to write. Every time I finished reading a story, I felt a thrill – either about how the story unfolded or how it ended – and just about what was possible in the genre. I wanted to be able to give someone reading one of my stories the same kind of thrill. Now, that's a pretty lofty goal, but that's what I was shooting for. So I tried writing Bradbury type science fiction (SF) stories, but I didn't really have a knack for the SF part of it. However, over time what I found was that I had an ability to write stories set in the present day that are tinged by an element of fantasy that's usually dark in nature. So, a novel like *Blood Road*, featuring a truck driver who happens to be a vampire, is basically the sort of thing I write.

JK: Do you remember which Bradbury stories you liked the most?

Edo van Belkom: That's an interesting question . . . As often as I've credited that collection, no one has asked for a favorite story, nor do I think I have one. My recollection of

reading the book was basically, "Wow!" after each story. It was thrilling, actually. I read every other collection by Ray Bradbury since but I never found the consistency I did in that first collection.

And now that you've got me thinking about it, while I admire many other short story writers, I can't say I have a definitive favorite short story, although I love Robert Bloch's "Enoch," and Joe R. Lansdale's "Duck Hunt."

JK: Robert J. Sawyer has said that your work reminds him of Bradbury, in addition to the work of Stephen King, Richard Matheson, Dennis Etchison and Rod Serling.¹

Edo van Belkom: That's very kind of Rob to say that. I think it has to do with the subject matter I'm writing about and, maybe the clarity of the storytelling. I know it's not for me to talk about what's good about my own writing, but I do know that I tell stories, sometimes even good stories, that have definite beginnings, middles and ends. The ends tend to have a surprise or a twist to them – so the comparisons to those authors are understandable.

I feel Bradbury's work played with language and imagery in a way that not many others could match. While I aspired to write as well as Bradbury, I think while his sentences flow, mine are short and sharp, staccato rather than flourish. I also rely on action to move my stories along, and he's content to take his time and dwell on an image or description. When you write as well as Bradbury, you can do those sorts of things. For me, it was better to move along and stick to my strengths rather than dwell on something and have any shortcomings be exposed.

No one has ever accused me of being a literary writer, so I'm happy with being mentioned in the same breath as some of the short story writers I admire most.

JK: It's interesting that you make this distinction between literary and genre fiction – pulp horror has such rich and interesting history. When I initially read Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2007, I didn't necessarily view it as more literary than other horror novels. I know there are writers who set out to be "literary" with a capital "L" but often feel that so much of this perception is subjective –

Edo van Belkom: I've never wanted to be thought of as a literary writer. My goal has always been to write entertaining stories that anyone can read without having to scratch their head wondering what happened in the story. I've read a lot of people in the horror genre who are generally regarded to be literary writers (and in this genre there are always writers who are deemed to be hot-shit horror darlings) and I've struggled to understand what's happening in their stories and novels. Perhaps I'm unsophisticated and not smart enough to get what they're doing, but if any reader doesn't get it, that's usually on the writer, not the reader. It could also be a case of

the emperor having no clothes, but I'm too old to make that assertion.

JK: You mentioned that you felt you don't have a knack for SF, but your SF story, "Baseball Memories," was shortlisted by the Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Association for an Aurora Award, wasn't it?

Edo van Belkom: Well, that is true. And I did win an Aurora Award for an alternate history story called "Hockey's Night in Canada" that predicted the rise and world domination of Russian hockey and the KHL, although in my story I called it the Russian Hockey League.

"Baseball Memories" deals with a man whose brain is so crammed full of baseball statistics it flushes out all the seemingly useless information that helps him get through his daily life. That is definitely an SF idea, but the story is also a horror story and was selected by Karl Edward Wagner for his *Year's Best Horror Stories: XX* (1992) anthology.

And yeah, my first short story publication made it into Year's Best, which was something I was never able to accomplish again.

JK: Looking back now, in making your living crafting horror stories, was it challenging to deal with the precarity involved in freelance writing?

Edo van Belkom: For a while I was making my living as a writer and I would write stories for anyone who would publish them. I was prolific out of necessity. Because I couldn't wait for inspiration, I had to make it happen. But to put it into perspective, if your job is writing fiction, then that's what you do. I was writing Monday to Friday, keeping regular hours and working at my job whether I felt like writing or not. That's basically what it means to be a professional writer. It's a job like any other and you go to work even when you don't feel like it. When you approach it like that, it's not that difficult to produce a large body of work and be considered prolific.

That said, I did work overtime coming up with story ideas. I still have a notebook full of story ideas I never got around to writing. And I always had a notebook on my nightstand for ideas that came in the middle of the night. If you put off writing down that stuff until morning, it often gets forgotten.

Relying on story writing for my income was awful and terrifying. Imagine waking up and sitting down in front of the computer to start your work day. You know no money's coming in because you haven't sold anything lately, and even if you sold something today you won't be getting paid for weeks, maybe even months. And yet, your family is depending on you to make money at what you're doing and making money writing was an important part of the deal when your wife agreed to let you write full-time.

It's the reason why I did anything for money when I was writing full-time. It's also why I always had a part-time job to ensure a paycheck (even a small one) in those weeks when

writing money wasn't coming in. The reality of full-time writing is not for the faint of heart.

In the end, I was tired of forcing my family suffering for my craft, so I took a good-paying job with benefits and a pension. Now I write on the side whenever someone asks me to write something for them.

JK: What challenges are involved in writing horror?

Edo van Belkom: The challenge in horror is to make things scary. That's easy to say, but hard to do. I've always tried to scare myself first and if I'm writing about things that frighten me, or make me uncomfortable then there's a pretty good chance the work will have a similar effect on others.

For example, my novel *Blood Road* (2004) about a vampire truck driver grew out of just a single scene, almost an image really. I pictured this hitchhiker waking up in the back of a truck, strapped down in the sleeper cab with tubes running out of his arms and this old vampire who'd long ago lost his teeth (and his good looks) lapping at the blood coming out of the tubes.

It's never happened to me, but I can imagine waking up into that scenario would be pretty frightening. The novel was basically written to make that scene possible.

JK: I read *Blood Road* when it first released in paperback and thought that was an ingenious take on vampires, if they were to actually exist in the real world – it struck me as a great premise. I found it interesting too that you decided to write your vampire as anything but handsome and mysterious, which we've so commonly seen – an obvious exception that immediately springs to mind is *Nosferatu* (1922).

Edo van Belkom: When I saw Tom Cruise wearing a puffy shirt and talking nonsense in *Interview with the Vampire*, I couldn't get over how silly it all seemed. Vampires, by their very nature, are parasites. That means they are at the bottom of the food chain, not the top. And today in our modern world the internet and science has made it very difficult to do anything without someone noticing or raising an eyebrow. When people go missing, others look for that person until they find out what happened to them. All sorts of people are awake through the night so you can't move unnoticed in the darkness anymore. And if you're on the run, television can let everyone in the world know the authorities are looking for you so there is really no place you can hide.

With all that in mind, I set about creating a modern day vampire. Obviously he would be old and have problems related to old age. He would remember the good old days when he wore puffy shirts and humans feared him, and he would be bitter about how things have changed. And he would have to be constantly on the move to avoid detection and spread out his crimes. He would also have to work alone and be able to work mostly at night. So with all of that, I figured he would have to be a long-haul truck driver who

basically lived out of his truck and took his food source with him on the road.

When I was promoting the novel I tried using the line – “Not all vampires are tall, dark and handsome. Some are big, fat and ugly.”

Good luck trying to sell that storyline to teenage girls.

JK: Humor features prominently in many of your horror stories. Why is humor important and how do you approach incorporating humor into your work?

Edo van Belkom: If you spent any time with me hanging out or working or whatever, you’d find that I always have a cynical viewpoint of the world and often voice that opinion. Most of the time it comes off as humorous, but my mouth has sometimes landed me in hot water because of a lack of a filter between the brain and tongue.

When I’m writing a story however, there’s time to think and hone and get the sentiment just right so the humor is maximized. When I began reading Robert Bloch – and he became one of my favorites – I got a sense that there was definitely a place for humor in horror. Fear and laughter are both responses to emotional stimuli, so it’s only natural that they share space in the text of horror stories.

JK: Richard Laymon penned the introduction for your novel, *Teeth* (2000). How did this come about? Were you a fan of Laymon’s work beforehand?

Edo van Belkom: The first contact I had with Richard Laymon came years before I met him in person. My wife was working for our local library system and caught wind of a patron putting in a complaint to the library board about something she’d found offensive about Laymon’s work. The board was going to consider pulling his work from the shelf so I called him and asked if he didn’t mind writing a letter and providing some laudatory reviews of his work that I could submit them to the board on his behalf. He was happy to do it and thankful that I had taken the time to contact him and give him the chance to stand up for his work. The board voted to leave his work on the shelf and he was a friend from that point on.

JK: Do you remember what the complaint to the library board entailed? I recall that James Herbert’s *The Rats* (1974) was also criticized for its graphic depictions of death as well as for its social commentary.

Edo van Belkom: I don’t recall the specific complaint, but knowing his body of work it probably had to do with gratuitous sex and/or violence.

JK: Your short story collection, *Six-Inch Spikes*, featured 16 “tales of erotic horror.” How did you approach erotic horror? Did you set out to write your female characters as strong and empowered, and how did sexual politics play into your pre-

writing story development? “Yours Truly, Jack the Stripper” dealt with gender politics in a very pronounced way – your title pays homage to Robert Bloch as well.

Edo van Belkom: The line between erotica and horror is razor thin. Both genres try to elicit a response from the reader that touches on a base emotion so there’s not a lot holding a story in one of the genres if it wants to creep into the other. There’s also something about how erotica can expose a person’s baser instincts and once those are revealed it’s not hard to imagine something bad happening.

I never really set out to write strong female characters, but I never shied away from writing stories where women came out on top either. If that’s what the story required, then that’s what the story got. It’s funny the way these things get analyzed ... My novel *Teeth*, which features a female serial killer whose weapon of choice is her vagina dentate, was basically panned by every male reviewer and lauded by every female reviewer. Obviously the central character had to be strong, but she was strong because she’d been abused by males all her life and developed her condition as a defense mechanism.

JK: What was your inspiration for “Letting Go”?

Edo van Belkom: Fellow writer and friend, Michael Rowe, was editing an anthology of gay-themed vampire stories, but he hadn’t invited me to submit anything. At one of the regular get-togethers of fantasy writers in the Toronto area I asked him why he didn’t ask me for a story. He said he didn’t think I’d be interested since I was straight and I’d never written anything that would suggest I’d be interested in writing gay horror. I told him of course I was interested and would love the challenge. My idea for “Letting Go” was that the vampire in my story would take the life of an AIDS patient at the very end of his life, in a way that was dignified rather than salacious. I think that’s why the story resonated so strongly with Michael.

[But] I always use that story as an example of the futility of writing short stories for a living. I spent three weeks on that one to earn the grand sum of \$100. Michael was thrilled by it, it was mentioned in a lot of reviews of the book, and I was pleased with the result. I don’t know if a straight sentiment shone through. I just looked at it as a story about two people who love each other deeply.

I did a second story for Michael and then another lesbian-themed story for Nancy Kilpatrick. To be fair though, the story for Nancy (which was selected for *The Best American Erotica* 1999) had more to do with sex between two women than any lesbian themes.

JK: What are your thoughts on the functions of horror fiction in society?

Edo van Belkom: I think the number one function should be

to entertain, which is easy to understand if you get horror, and not so easy to understand if you don't. People enjoy being frightened in a safe context and that can be fun. People are understandably hesitant about venturing into an actual house that's rumored to be haunted, but they have no trouble munching popcorn and watching someone else do it. Past this, it's a way of examining our fears and imaging the possible outcomes of acting on our darkest thoughts. I've written all manner of horrible stories about despicable people and all of that sprung from this small dark corner of my mind. If any of the events of those stories ever happened in real life, they would be front page news and signalling a new low-point in human history. Instead, they were examined in prose and the horror can be stopped by the simple closing of a book. Safe thrills and introspection of our species' dark side are probably the most valuable contributions the genre has to make.

JK: You've edited two collections squarely aimed at younger readers. Why do you think children have always been and continue to be fascinated by horror and the macabre?

Edo van Belkom: First let me talk about the two anthologies. *Be Afraid!* and *Be Very Afraid!* are young adult horror anthologies that deal with teenage issues. I really have no idea whether children are or have always been fascinated by horror. When I was a kid, I looked away from the TV during *The Twilight Zone* and I'd have trouble sleeping for weeks. There's a great review Roger Ebert did of *Night of the Living Dead* where he recounts how children were crying in their seats because what they were seeing on the screen was so different and terrifying from what they were expecting.

When I pitched the first book, I was determined that it not be a horror anthology about traditional monsters like vampires and werewolves, but rather something that teenagers could really relate to and might find terrifying in their daily lives. That to me is where horror should come from, our daily lives. So, my horror anthology for young adults deals with not fitting-in in high school, being teased for having a big nose or bad acne, or wondering how to come to terms with being gay as a teenager. To me, all that's the scary stuff about growing up, and I think the books achieved what they set out to do.

Biographical Summaries:

Canadian scholar Jeffery Klaehn holds a PhD in Communication from the University of Amsterdam and a PhD in Sociology from the University of Strathclyde. More information about his work can be found at: <http://uva.academia.edu/JefferyKlaehn>

Referees:

Dr. Tom Ue researches and teaches courses in 19th-century British literature, intellectual history, and cultural studies at Dalhousie University.

Dr. Daniel Broudy teaches courses in communication theory and the rhetoric of visual culture at Okinawa Christian University.

Notes

¹ Sawyer, Robert J. (1997) "A Profile of Bram Stoker Award-Winning Author Edo van Belkom," <http://sfwriter.com/vanbelko.htm> [Accessed July 27, 2015]