

One thousand, nine hundred words on the subject of, well, SEX...



I've always had a soft spot for horror.

Fear and dread have been my worst enemies since I was a child. They colour my perceptions and keep me expecting the worst. And of course they permeate my written work—names, characters and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, no resemblance to anyone living or dead intended...but the moods and ambiance I create are authentic depictions of my state of mind, the despair that shades everything in violets and blues.

The inevitability of doom, disaster, death. I tell you I've had an apprehension of these things for as long as I can remember. It's an anticipation or expectation that something *awful* is about to happen—there must be a clinical name for it. Lately my thoughts have revolved around a massive die-off, a plague with a higher mortality rate than Ebola. Injected in the water supply, breathed into vulnerable faces.

The Trade Center. London. Bali. Madrid. Waiting for the next shoe to drop.

Back in the mid-80's it was Armageddon that preoccupied me, living and existing in the absolute certainty that it was only a matter of time before there was a nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union. Marching in peace rallies, writing letters, signing petitions but in the end as helpless and ineffectual as a French peasant under Louis XIV.



Fear sometimes threatens to debilitate me—I have to write my way out of it, discover through my characters something to counter its insidious effects. Is it God? Love? Money? Fame? Drugs?

How about...sex?

Anything, as long as it helps fight the fear.

1987-88, the tumblers begin to click into place, my first book taking nascent form...

There was never any kind of deliberate thematic unity to the stories. I just knew which ones belonged. The title came easily and never changed:



Sex & Other Acts of the Imagination.

Pretty good, huh? Gives the book something to live up to. A tome with that kind of a handle better deliver the goods. And the title *isn't* misleading. Some of the stories are very raunchy indeed. Not for the prudish. In the wrong hands, sex can be about power and domination. Naturally, I couldn't let that pass.

I've written about the odd circumstances that arose with the original publisher (*see my essay in Non-Fiction* "The Solace of Fortitude") so I won't beat on that particular drum again. I knew I had something special, that *Sex's* nineteen stories represented the best of what I'd written up to that point (1989-90). I shopped the manuscript around, was told that short story collections don't sell, thanks very much, good day. Sherron and I decided to bite the bullet and self-publish—we printed 500 copies and sold out the print run in less than five months.

With the help of the gals who ran *Sutherland Books*, I managed to get a copy of *Sex* into the hands of Canadian literary giant Timothy Findley. I was thrilled when he offered to blurb it. Sweet, kind-hearted

Tiff...his favorite piece of the depraved bunch was a short-short called "Walt Disney in Hell". A truly vicious bit o' satire, it goes something like this:

Walt Disney in Hell: A Trilogy (for Tiff)

"I'll see you in Disneyland."

Richard Ramirez, *aka* "The Night Stalker", serial killer
(to spectators as he is led away after receiving the death sentence)

I

Walt Disney is building amusement parks in Hell. Rollercoasters cascade into loop-de-loops lined with glistening razor blades that eviscerate the riders. Patrons wait patiently to enter haunted houses boasting real ghouls, flesh eaters and bloodsuckers and vivisectionists that giggle and caper through the corridors, slicing and dicing with insane abandon. Ferris wheels constructed without the benefit of safety bars upend suddenly, flinging screaming people to the ground. Conscientious employees sweep up the mess, hose down the rides, prepare for the next horde of sinners.

II

Walt Disney has taken a male lover, a young kid who hung himself with shoelaces while awaiting trial for killing his parents with an ax. The kid gives great head. Walt likes it when he goes down on him while he's working at his desk, poring over blueprints for sadistic new rides. After Walt comes the kid has to put on a set of mouse ears and in falsetto squeaks tell Walt what a wonderful, big cock he has.

III

Walt Disney and P.T. Barnum talk shop while drinking a concoction known as "Old Nick". Walt thinks the Devil thinks too small and Barnum agrees. They bicker on conditions for the merger, finally conclude negotiations with a handshake. The Devil will be deposed and a massive amusement park complex built that encompasses all of the regions of Hell. It will take eons to accomplish but, as Walt looks at it, when he was living he started out with a skinny fucking mouse and a dream and forged an empire. Why shouldn't history repeat itself?

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Sex & Other Acts of the Imagination picked up some fairly decent reviews but afterwards no one came calling, asking after a novel or wondering where they could find more of those wonderfully wrought short stories. It didn't happen, it still hasn't happened and I'm beginning to wonder if it ever will...

My *Sex* collection has been out of print basically since 1990—nice chap that I am, I've decided to post a number of the more memorable offerings from the book. My choices are, in some cases, predictable (“Invisible Boy” and “Cattletruck”) but I ended up re-typing nearly half the collection (I hadn't saved a copy on disk after my last computer upgrade, more than ten years ago). I deliberately chose stories I believe are representative of the tales I was writing at that time.

I'll admit to some tampering—I've tightened up the language and lanced out some passages I thought inferior. I've maintained the spirit and intent of the originals—the changes I made are cosmetic. Trust me. Call this the new and definitive “Director's Cut” of *Sex & Other Acts of the Imagination*.



I've placed the stories in the order they appear in the book. “Apocalypse Beach” came first and usually led off my readings back in the mid-late Eighties. You'll note a not so subtle preoccupation with the end of the world. Hey, we were living in the time of Ronnie Raygun and missile defense and MAD and MIRV and SLBM...that crap played with your head, those not-so-latent fears, that not-so-well-hidden dread. I vividly imagined columns of fire; I smelled the ashes and tasted the burnt bones of the dead.

Including “Invisible Boy” was a no-brainer. Along with “Also Starring” it is my most anthologized story. But some of you might not have seen it. This one managed to raise my profile a point or two. Is it horror? Fantasy? It was another favorite at readings and the one people wanted to talk about afterward.

“Cattletruck”, another easy pick. I wrote the first draft during a two and a half day train trip to Ottawa. I couldn't sleep so I think I'd slipped into an insomniac stupor...the car faded away and I started to scribble what I saw, a whole different scene superimposed on top, not passengers but *survivors*. I visualized everything, could see the episode exactly as it played out. Always disliked the last line of the original (as seen in *Midnight Graffiti* magazine) and I think this new version is far superior.

“Arrival” started out (I think) as a kind of *homage* to Lovecraft...only problem is, I don't *like* Lovecraft, he's a really crummy writer. So this went from being an *homage* to more or less a conspiracy story, written during a period of time when my sales were nearly nonexistent. It was almost like...like there was some kind of *plot* to keep my work from being published. It's meant to be tongue in cheek. Seriously.



“Final Showing” is my take on ye venerable zombie story—now very much back in vogue (again). Dunno whether that's a good thing but...I like “Final Showing”. It shows there's a hierarchy of evil, a kind of perverse morality that reaches into even the deepest pits of Hell. I don't know why I find that reassuring, but I do.

And speaking of Hell, that brings us to “The Hibakusha”. Now *this* is one spooky piece of fiction. Capable of really hanging a mental licking on you. Based on a nightmare I had of being trapped in some underground space, surrounded by whispering darkness. One of the scariest stories in my portfolio—this one still puts the whammy into me.

These stories should not be considered juvenilia. Early work, certainly, but not inexperienced and, God knows, not insincere. I wrote them in my early-mid twenties. I think my influences (Richard Matheson, Charles Beaumont, Philip K. Dick, Harlan Ellison) show through in places. Tales like “Invisible Boy” and “Walt Disney in Hell” display some originality of voice, however, and I like the economy of the prose. The nightmare landscapes of “Cattletruck” and “Hibakusha” are well-rendered, methinks, without long-winded descriptions. Just a few terse paragraphs to immerse you in a ruined world, then

closeups to disguise the low-budget approach. These pieces are austere, short, compressed, the actual narratives of little consequence. It's the *people* who matter, what you're seeing when you look out through their eyes...

Horror cleans out the pipes. Writing this shit gets rid of a whole lotta accumulated rage and fear and humiliation and thwarted ambition. Restraint is required. Discretion and nuance. That's what the splatter horror flacks don't understand. Get the people right before you start grinding them up. Your readers have to be able to relate to the characters in a story—not necessarily like or admire them but recognize them, see them as people they know all too well. The psychologies in today's horror fiction (as well as the movies) seem all screwed up. Inconsistent, irrational, everyone borderline psychotic. There's a sense of all-pervading nihilism—that good and evil are indistinguishable and possibly originate from the same ineffable source...



I'll stick with my hierarchy of evil. Play with the archetypes if I have to—the vampires and wrapped mummies, see-through people and the living dead—while stubbornly maintaining my conviction that wrong ain't right. I won't presume to confer forgiveness or redemption. I do, however, continue to suffer in hope. Because I know that occasionally we're capable of acting selflessly and for that reason I won't, will *not*, surrender to dejection. For trying to be better than we are, I am willing to accord us a slight chance of surviving ourselves.

In closing...

I wrote these stories when I still had dreams of breaking through. I was convinced *Sex & Other Acts of the Imagination* was my ticket to bigger and better things. Back then, I wrote with fire and focus and still had absolute faith in my talent. These stories pack a punch because I genuinely *believed* them. They seemed like possible futures to me. That might make them somewhat over-earnest at times. But I think it's also what makes them so damn *good*.

Now I'm a more serious and complex writer, technically superior to those early days—but I can't help mourning what's been lost. The *Sex* collection was written out of conviction and confidence and love.

I was wrong when I believed it would make me famous.

But I was right for insisting that it needed to be born.

Enjoy...