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### **Grossing Out Teacher: A Horror Writer in the Writing Classroom** by Michael Arnzen

[gorelets.com](http://gorelets.com)

Michael Arnzen holds a PhD in English, two Bram Stoker Awards, an International Horror Guild Award, and a “Best Fiction Writer” statue from the Genre Writers Association. His latest books include **100 Jolts: Shockingly Short Stories** and **Freakcidents**, a poetry collection. **Play Dead**, his second novel, is forthcoming in hardcover in 2005. Arnzen presently teaches horror and suspense fiction in the Writing Popular Fiction program at Seton Hill University, near Pittsburgh. Visit “[Pedablogue](#)” — his weblog on the scholarship of teaching.



When you write about monsters, you’re something of a monster in the eyes of those who don’t appreciate the horror genre. When you scare people for a living—or even as a hobby—you’re scary by proxy. Everyone wonders what your motives are. Working on “the dark side,” you’re inherently associated with everything from the atrocities of Hitler to the sins of Satan, whether you like it or not. You’re every worrisome goth kid, every creepy carnival barker, every Stephen King movie and every corny advertisement for Halloween they’ve ever seen. Even those intelligent folks, the acquaintances who tacitly accept what you do, are never entirely sure about you. “You’re a sick man, Arnzen,” the best of them say to me with an uncertain chuckle and a shake of the head.

So when I first started teaching English, shortly after I’d sold my first horror novel to Dell Books back in 1994, I steeled myself for an onslaught of worry and doubt from the academics I would call my colleagues. But I always expected the students to know better. In fact, I took a certain comfort in the knowledge that what I did as a horror writer would probably speak to them on some level, if only because I was published and practicing what I was preaching, let alone that what I was doing was entertainment as much as it was literature. I expected that many students would think it was pretty cool to be learning from a local version of Stephen King and that

they'd welcome me with open arms.

Of course, I was right. And of course, I was wrong. But wrong in unexpected ways.

I'll never forget the first semester I taught freshman composition. At first, my students were far stiffer than I expected. I'd never seen the teacher's side of the desk before and didn't realize that so many people write only to pacify the teacher, rather than following their own intellectual or creative pursuits. So for Halloween, I changed the syllabus and tried to do something fun so they'd see that writing isn't all just so much painful anxiety. I decided to come out as a horror writer and read a few of my own stories to my classes. Afterwards, I gave them an open creative writing assignment—with the stipulation that their story focus on an issue related to education.

Most of the students responded by writing stories about kids getting their just desserts, replete with **Twilight Zone** endings. The stories didn't really horrify me, but I didn't care. I wasn't looking for craft, but passion. For the most part, these stories showed the students at their most playful and polished, so I was heartened by their response and excited that my experiment was paying off: by taking off the armor of the teacher and showing them my own passion for writing, the students disarmed and wrote for pleasure. I learned that many of them were surprisingly good writers, and only needed to discover ways to bring their personalities and passion to the page.

One of the student stories stood out from the pack. It actually horrified me. But not in a way I enjoyed.

There was one kid who always sat in the front row—let's call him Fester—who recognized me right from the start of class because he'd read one of my short stories in a horror anthology. He was a horror fan. His story was also written from a passion, but I could tell that he truly set out to frighten me, and therefore impress me. And he did this by writing a story about me.

It went something like this: Mr. Arnzen gets angry with his writing class one day, and drives straight from school to the bar after work. He tosses back one too many shots of bourbon and gets in a fistfight, but he's still angry. When he gets home, he takes his frustration out on his wife. He beats her and rapes her in lewd and painful ways on the living room floor. And just as he's about to have an orgasm, he pulls out a .45 and blows Mrs. Arnzen's head all over the living room wall. The end.

At first I laughed at Fester's chutzpah, but my chuckles soon dwindled into concern. Teachers get this sort of boundary testing all the time, and it's often grounded in gender assumptions, but rarely does it go into rape fantasy. The closest thing many teachers might get to an attack like this is a garter snake in the teacher's desk, or a spitball to the back of the neck. This was my first term teaching and I wasn't quite sure how I should respond. I could have sent him to Student Services for a psychological consultation, and I probably should have, but at the time my gut told me that such a response wouldn't be appropriate, especially given that I'd sort of encouraged this guy to write a scary story. This was a monster that I'd created. I said to myself, "So he took the creative liberties I'd given him and went over the top—can I punish him for that, especially when I tend to go over the top myself?"

His story was clearly a dare to see if (and if so, where) I would draw the line. I wasn't going to let little Fester see me sweat. I called him into my office for a conference. I went through the paper, sentence by sentence, line-editing it for grammar and mechanics. It was a very long conference, and my line-editing was painstakingly close. I completely ignored the story's content, save for a few moments when I suggested that the style of a sentence contradicted the mood he was going for. I even gave him some tips on making the gory part even more gruesome ("this gunshot moment could use a little alliteration... more plosive sound effects, followed by a nasal sound that brings us back inside the brainy chambers of the human head..."). Then I told him to revise it and turn it in again if he wanted a grade.

He was struck dumb with silence. And he played by the rules for the rest of the term. After all, I might make him work harder if he decided to cross the line again. But in the process, he took his writing more seriously and the net result was that his writing improved. I shut down his inappropriate behavior, but even better, he began to take himself more seriously because I took it seriously. That's a lesson many young writers—particularly genre writers—often need to learn: that the pleasure of the story isn't always in the theatrical impact, but inherent to the craft of the writing process itself.

I'm proud of my response. At root I showed him what professional horror writers do. They're not creeps who get a perverse thrill out of making others writhe. And they're not the same thing as readers, who typically accept a story on its own terms and respond with fear or dread. Pro horror writers might be after a desired emotional response, but they have to adopt aesthetic and critical distance from their own work. They tinker with the prose the way a mechanic inspects hoses and moving parts when he looks under the hood. And they seek to polish their work in revision.

Now, about fifteen years later, I'm an Associate Professor and teaching a full range of courses in the English major and also graduate students in the Writing Popular Fiction program at Seton Hill University. And though very few write about me personally (aside from a few little love letters, of sorts, I've received that are light, transgressive fun—like a strange poem called "Dr. Arnzen's Beard"), I still get students every now and again who assume that blood-spurting scatology is the way to my heart. Whenever a student writes something that goes for the gross-out, I get caught up in my own love-hate relationship with the more gratuitous side of horror literature. I could blame media culture or "kids today," but that would be skirting the issue. It's really a problem of genre: wrestling with excess is something that all horror writers must do, but to do it well is difficult to teach. A scene of excess typically signals a moment of terror or dread, but it also threatens at every turn to spill over into laughable melodrama or authorial fetishism.

Even graduate students have problems recognizing where to draw the line. Just this month, I sat in on two novel/thesis defenses in our Master's program, and both students—one male, one female—chose sexually graphic passages to read to the audience before fielding questions from the committee. One chose a brutal rape scene, the other a graphic description of an S/M parlor. Both writers were good at what they did, but at the same time, there were far better examples of their skills that could have been shared with the committee and the audience of other grad students in attendance. In fact, I'd recommended earlier in the term both of these students edit those scenes out of their novels completely because they were gratuitous exercises in excess. But they must have read that as a sign that it disturbed me, because they became all the more

determined to retain them.

The committee did the right thing in response to those attempts at shock. We generally ignored them, and instead asked the student hard questions about their writing processes and editorial choices. We also slyly asked them to question their assumptions: “What’s your motive? What would you say if your editor asked you to cut the sex out because children tend to read werewolf stories? As a woman, how would you respond to a feminist who challenged you about this S/M business at a live reading?” As with Fester, we turned them back to their own texts. They dared us to censor them; we dared them to self-edit and sharpen their awareness of audience.

But in a way I’m proud of these students for having the courage to try to shock their audiences. Reading something graphic in front of a crowd takes guts. For one thing, people might walk out on you (as they did with one of the thesis readers). For another, you have to have a lot of conviction to believe your writing is good enough to “get away with it” and pay off for the moment of discomfort you’re inflicting on people. Perhaps their motive was to bring a little Dionysian perversity into the Apollonian halls of academe. I think many students in creative writing programs like to enter edgy ground and work out their own psychological issues in workshops—for some, it’s even a form of therapy, if not a strategy in cultivating a reputation. But horror writers—especially young ones, eager to make a scene—get a peculiar exhibitionist thrill in revealing the taboo in a context where it is unexpected. Eventually I want them to discover that horror is more like a game of peek-a-boo than a gore film. Good dark fiction is a form of seduction—it plays with the desire to both see and not see—tapping into that curious desire we have, to peer between our fingers while covering our eyes. It plays off the ambivalent desire to simultaneously censor and bear witness. Good horror writers learn this skill, but novices tend to emulate the in-your-face approach of the splatter film to their own undoing. In an almost childish—if not masochistic—fashion, the desire of the young horror writer is simple: to get away with it. And that puts the teacher in a bind, because we are in the position to say, “No, I’m not letting you get away with that!” while at the same time wishing to encourage students to take creative risks.

Often, establishing an environment of collaborative learning can help. A few years ago I taught an undergraduate course in Horror Writing that served the core curriculum and it was very popular. I was disappointed at first to learn that the course in Horror Writing was rife with students—mostly women—who wrote grotesque scenes for shock value alone. I tried to talk them out of it, but I also encouraged them to take creative risks, so I didn’t try too hard. But I noticed that the scatological strategies that writers were using began to wane, and the workshops were cultivating a sense of not simply propriety, but skill. The cheap gimmicks of splatter fiction become trite quickly when you see them often enough... and the more you read, the more you start to appreciate the artistry involved with crafting a revolting scene well. You have to work harder to “get away with it” when your peers have all been there, done that. A good collaborative environment can cultivate this sense of awareness, as can reading a lot in the genre.

Admittedly, I’m culpable for some of this desire to go for the gross-out. Students discover that I find the gross-out funny and they often joke with me about it. A pair of students once gave me a lamp that looks like a human skull as a gift. Another student once complimented me by saying, “You smile like you’re imagining what your students look like swinging on meat hooks.” They

know that the gory stuff is more like slapstick comedy than exhibitionism and I appreciate it.

In fact, I still read my own work to my students, no matter what the grade, and even when I go over the top, they can tell by the timber of my voice and the chuckles I make that I enjoy the twisted turns of a horror tale. But I always invite questions after I read and find myself discussing my work in what I would assume to be a model way: with critical thinking and openness toward revision. I share my motives; I talk about theme and subtext; I invite them to offer changes. I pull a Jekyll-and-Hyde routine by reading the creepy stuff one moment and role-playing the literary critic the next. The trick is showing what it means to have distance from your own work. I try to model the role of the educated writer, engaged in inquiry through fiction, even if it's entertainment. Once the teacher shows he is not a censor, it's up to the writing students to censor themselves, but only if and when it's appropriate. Selective critical censorship—that's another way of saying self-editing, and it's a very difficult skill to master.

Especially when you're swinging from a meat hook.

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