

# GHOULISH GOALS

Seton Hill writing professor keeps collecting awards for his horror fiction

By Kathleen Ganster

Photos by Jim Judkis

Michael Arnzen sometimes gives his wife the creeps. That wouldn't be the "ghoul" of most husbands, but it delights Arnzen. The horror/suspense writer would often have his wife read his writing, until she handed it back one night. "She was lying in bed reading when she stopped, handed it to me and said, 'I can't read this book anymore.' She thought it was too creepy and gross," he laughs.

Arnzen lives in Greensburg, where he writes horror and suspense novels, poetry, short stories, a newsletter for horror fans, and an

award-winning creative writing Web site, [www.gorelets.com](http://www.gorelets.com). But that's his night job. By day, this four-time winner of the Bram Stoker Award is an associate professor of English at Seton Hill University. "I'm a generalist writing instructor," he says. "I teach creative writing, literary criticism, film history, and I am teaching writing horror fiction."

Ironically, Arnzen was born in Amityville, N.Y., the setting of Jay Anson's best-selling novel, "The Amityville Horror," based on a real murder that took place there. Arnzen's father introduced him

to horror films. "My dad would take me to these horror movies, but he would always cover my eyes during the really gory parts or sex scenes. I would hear all this screaming in the darkness and have to figure out what was going on. I had to fill in the blanks and would imagine things."

But the "tipping point" for his foray into horror writing didn't come until years later when he was in the Army. "There is a lot of downtime in the military so I would read horror novels," he says. "I started to see particular patterns in the books and I got to about the 10th one when I thought,

I can write stuff better than this." Arnzen found it harder than he thought to write horror stories, but he shared his work with fellow soldiers, who encouraged him to continue. "I passed them around to the other bored people that I was with in the military and they thought my writing was hilarious, so I kept going," he says.

After he left the military, he enrolled at Colorado State University on the GI bill. "I took a wide-range of courses but really didn't have a major. My professors kept telling me I was a good writer, so I eventually chose an English major, but I still wasn't learning anything about professional writing as a career," he says.

Undeterred, Arnzen started a self-taught program. "I went to used book stores and bought something like 50 horror paperbacks. I would read them until I got bored or figured out the plot." He also rented a whole lot of horror movies. "I learned the genre that way," he says.

With his newfound knowledge, Arnzen started writing a novel. "I wrote it, then let it sit for a while. When I decided to submit it to a publisher, I didn't know what I was doing and just randomly sent it off," he says. Fortunately, the manuscript ended up in the right hands. "One assistant editor picked it up and started reading it. He said 50 pages later, he was still into it and passed it on to his boss."

The manuscript was accepted for publication before Arnzen graduated from college. "It helped me get into graduate school," he says. That book, "Grave Markings" (1994), went on to win Arnzen's first Bram Stoker Award from the Horror Writers Association. The award is named for the Irish author best known for his 1897 novel, "Dracula," and is given for superior achievement in the horror genre.

Despite his book contract and award, Arnzen wasn't particularly proud of his accomplishments while he was working on his master's degree at the University of Oregon. "I thought it should be kept a secret, like it wasn't real writing. But then I found that there was a real history of horror writing and the genre became a place to sustain my interest and studies," he says.

Arnzen went on to earn a Ph.D., focusing his studies on academic criticism of horror writing. "I did a multi-media examination of the icons of the uncanny. I found an article that Sigmund Freud wrote on the uncanny and I thought, this



The Bram Stoker Award



is interesting, but it doesn't discuss things in today's mass media culture," he says. Arnzen says he tried to bring (Freud's) theories into the late 20th century through a study of advertising, popular film, bestselling fiction and the Internet."

With his Ph.D., Arnzen moved from Oregon to Greensburg in 1999 to accept a position teaching in the then new Master of Arts program in Writing Popular Fiction at Seton Hill. "They were looking for a professor and I was looking for a job. The timing was uncanny."

Arnzen's wife, Renate, doesn't read much of his writings anymore, but she is still instrumental to his career. "She indulges me, and she gives me lots of ideas," he says. "She brainstorms with me sometimes and even will help me edit."

In addition to teaching and writing, Arnzen also created a CD, "Audiovile," while he was on a sabbatical in 2005. "I read my writing and set it to music. I actually had to rewrite some of it to match the beat of the music," he says. Arnzen made the CD himself, playing the guitar and using a mixing board. "I got a pair of friends to do a guest guitar track here and there. Otherwise,

I did all of the music and sound engineering myself," he says, "and it was like composing a horror story all of its own."

In addition to his first novel, Arnzen has written the novel "Play Dead," several poetry books, and a pair of short story collections. He is currently writing two non-fiction books and his next novel. He also recently won his fourth Bram Stoker Award for his fiction collection, "Proverbs for Monsters." He also writes the content for his Web site.

Arnzen says his dad still reads his work. "Although once he read something that I wrote and called my wife to ask if she was okay after he read my stuff. It was pretty funny."

"I love it when I surprise myself," the writer adds. "Sometimes I am writing and something comes out of the page, and then I laugh out loud. Then I know it's working right."

The mix of writing and teaching suits Arnzen just fine. "I have my dream job at Seton Hill. I can write about what I want to write about and teach it. My mission as a teacher is to increase literacy and turn people on to reading," he says. "And horror, ironically, doesn't scare them away." 🗨