

# An Interview with Michael A. Arnzen

by James R. Beach

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. He presently teaches horror and suspense fiction in the Writing Popular Fiction program at Seton Hill University, near Pittsburgh. *Play Dead* is his second novel.

**Dark Discoveries:** You grew up in Amityville, NY, close to the famous house of horror. How has that influenced your writing? Or has it?

**Michael A. Arnzen:** When I think of Amityville, I think about my family and the relatives who still live there, but when anyone else hears that I’m from Amityville they automatically wink and say, “Oh, that explains it!” So being associated with the town has sort of normalized horror as a part of my life—it’s sort of made me comfortable being a horror writer. It’s really just a normal Long Island village, but growing up alongside all the hullabaloo about the so-called ‘horror house’ in my hometown did tweak my morbid curiosity about the neighbors and all things occult. But it was the impact of the book that really made an impression on me. As a kid, I worked at a newsstand in Amityville that sold a lot of paperback books, and I recall how popular Jay Anson’s novel was on the shelves. I remember everyone coming into the store and talking about it, arguing about whether or not it could be a ‘true’ story, and trading their own experiences with the families that lived there. People were captivated and that really enthralled me. I’m not saying the book’s success made me want to be a writer, but it did make me realize the sort of power a paperback book can have over an audience. And that story is still be told and retold again and again.

**DD:** When did you start writing? When did you start trying to get your work published?

**MA:** I grew up watching the *Creature Features* and *Twilight Zone* and *Night Gallery* reruns on TV, and so I used to imitate those kind of stories when I was really young. I used to tell stories into a microphone on my dad’s cassette recorder, doing something akin to radio plays and skits with my friends. I fondly recall getting called into the junior high school guidance counselor’s office in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, for submitting a story for homework about a bandit who hid from the cops in a garbage truck—which subsequently pulverized him to a gory death in the yucky recesses of the trash compacter. So I guess I’ve always been telling stories. But it wasn’t until I was in the Army when I started thinking of myself as a writer. I was stationed at a ‘permanent field site’ in Germany, which essentially meant that I spent a lot of time manning a communications van alone in the woods, when I wasn’t drinking beer with my buddies at the local *knipe*. I’d bide away my free time by voraciously reading horror novels I’d pick up during the infrequent trips we took to the PX. I read so many that there came a point where the stories started getting predictable and I figured I could do better. So I picked

interview

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my creative  
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up a pen and started writing. I wrote a terrible tale about a man who is driven crazy by flies. I was terrible. It was a pretty dumb story, but when I passed it around to my buddies they all loved it and I realized that I might want to keep trying. By the time I got to college (which was why I joined the Army in the first place—to pay for it), I took a lot of writing classes, and while they helped me enormously, especially in terms of poetry, none of them were dealing with the realities of publication. So I picked up the *Writer’s Market* and studied a lot of how-to books, and the next thing you know I was getting published in the small press. I’m proud of this, because I managed to sell my first novel, *Grave Markings*, shortly before I graduated college.

DD: Early on in your writing career, you had a couple of stories honored by Karl Edward Wagner for his *Year’s Best Horror* collections. Did that help you a lot at the time?

MA: Oh yeah. Getting reprinted in the *Year’s Best* gave me a huge boost in self-confidence, mostly because I was always a fan of that series and to be included among the writers I worshiped made me feel like I’d finally ‘made it’ to the pros, even though I’d been selling to pro markets for awhile before then. The funny thing is that the first story Karl bought from me was actually an excerpt from my first novel, which I had placed just a month or two before Dell called me up about buying it. So while the honor of being in *The Year’s Best Horror Stories* didn’t really help me *sell* the book, it gave the publisher even more confidence in it when they went to press, and Karl Wagner was kind enough to give me what I consider the coolest front cover blurb ever (“A high speed chase into madness”). Those were really good years; I won the Stoker for *Grave Markings* and felt as though I’d finally come of age. Karl bought another tale from me the following year, and even wrote the introduction to my first collection, *Needles and Sins*. All this happened a shortly before Karl died; he was something of a mentor to me and I wish he would have stuck around awhile longer because he really had so much to give.

DD: Your first novel, *Grave Markings*, came out in 1994 as part of the much-heralded Dell/Abyss line. It even went on to win the Bram Stoker award for first novel as you just mentioned. How come so long until we have seen another novel by you?

MA: I’ve published all sorts of things over the years, especially short stories and poetry collections, but novels just weren’t in the cards for me at the turn of the century. Right before I won the Stoker, my editor at Dell quit and left me ‘orphaned’ in a publishing house that was getting out of the horror game. And I had a string of bad agents who didn’t know how to market my quirky plots to anyone else, and didn’t even bother trying. But I don’t really blame them—it’s been a pretty rough marketplace for everyone since Dell/Abyss ended their line. I went on a sort of sabbatical from novel writing anyway, working on my Ph.D. so I could continue to study the horror genre even as I wrote in it. Now I’m a full time professor; I teach horror writing in graduate workshops and I’m working full steam ahead on new stuff. *Grave Markings* was reprinted by Delirium recently, and I hold that up as a sort of ‘return’ to the novel field. I’m excited to report that my second novel, *Play Dead*, is coming out in August and I’m working on a very sick and original kidnapping novel as we speak.

DD: So is the short form your preferred form? You definitely seem to be more known for your short fiction and poetry.

MA: I like everything and I'll try plumbing the dark side in any form I can in order to see where it takes me. That could be my biggest strength or greatest flaw...I'm not sure. But I do know that doing a lot of short forms gets my name out there in many more venues than a single title novel might; at the same time, a mass market book on the shelves has more 'marquee' power. A lot of what I'm doing comes down to where I put my creative energy. I usually write for the first two hours of every day, and if I'm not bogged down by the teaching job, I sometimes put in a little more time than that. That schedule helps me write short fiction, but not novels. I enjoy writing novel-length work, but I go into something of a dream state when I'm working on a book-length project, and the degree of concentration I have to sustain to write a novel requires having the chance to focus for extended periods of time. Like killers, I'm more of a 'spree' writer than a 'serial' writer: I'm not one of those novelists who can punch a clock for a storyline everyday. I stay up late nights and write in caffeinated fits until exhaustion takes over. Not the best habit, but I know my stories work better because of it. Part of the process is my fear of getting boring or not 'completing' a thought before my brain goes elsewhere. I can do a short story in a few sittings with clock-punching regularity, but not so much with a novel. A novel is a creative marathon, and I have to keep my feet moving.

DD: Some of your early published stories were in biker magazines and your first novel features some motorcycle stuff and mechanics in it as well. There's a sequence of "Five Mean Machines" in *100 Jolts*, too. Is this something you are interested in?

MA: Nah, it's really the culture that I'm interested in. I admire bikers and grease monkeys; they're genuine people, modern mavericks, and all have great tales to tell. They're skeptical of a lot of the b.s. that passes for modern life. I like that. I am very interested in machines—because they move with a life all their own, and that's pretty damned strange! But I don't pretend to understand how an engine works. I admire people who do. They seem very much at peace with the way things work; I, on the other hand, am constantly wondering how anything works at all.

DD: Dark Regions Press published your first short story and poetry collections. Is there any chance they might be reissued at some point?

MA: There's a really great market out there for hardcover collectables that are reprinting some of the modern classics of horror. Although Delirium Books reprinted my first novel, *Grave Markings*, in a fancy leatherbound "Tenth Anniversary Edition" this past year, I haven't really looked into reprinting those other early books. Frankly, Dark Regions already did a great job with both *Needles and Sins* and *Writhing in Darkness* and I kind of like having some arcane titles out there that are rare or hard-to-find. Actually, come to think of it, some of the stories from Dark Regions edition of *Needles and Sins* are available as e-books on Fictionwise.com, so anyone who's hungry for them can still track them down. As far as reprinting things goes, though, I've always wanted to do a 'complete works' sort of poetry collection that gathers together all the strange poems I've done over the years into one massive tome. But then again, I'm not dead yet and maybe it's too soon.

DD: Have you had any other mass-market publisher interest since your days with Dell?

MA: Off and on. *Play Dead* is getting more attention from mass market publishers, who are looking at the paperback rights as we speak. When I

interview

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first started shopping it, one of my agents said “No one is going to want this book—no one wants to read about poker. It’s like sex—people would rather do it than read about it.” Well, that mindset explains why they screwed me (hah!) but now that poker is everywhere on the TV and Vegas is hot stuff, the book is getting attention. In any case, I’ve always thought that whatever I sell to the mass market is going to be subversively strange enough to challenge standards and norms, so I’m comfortable with being a little unmarketable and not being a writer with a new paperback on the shelves every three months. I know my writing is strong and I have a lot of knowledge about the market, but I don’t want to cave in and write simply ‘what sells.’ I want to cut against the grain. The whole trick to writing offbeat fiction is to find the right editor who will champion you, and I’m still trying to find the right person. I’ve had an easier time finding people in the small press, I think, because the small press is willing to take more risks.

DD: To say you are prolific would probably be an understatement. It seems pretty rare that I pick up a magazine or anthology that doesn’t have a story or poem from Michael Arnzen in it. Do you have any idea how many you have published at this point?

MA: You’re right that I’ve been all over the map—and I hope it doesn’t sound too pretentious to say that my bibliography is so long now that I’ve stopped keeping count—but then again I always feel like I’m not as prolific as I wish I could be. I’m the sort of writer who feels guilty when he’s away from the keyboard...I never feel like I’m producing enough, and I’ve got more ideas than I can find the time to write. But quantity isn’t my goal. I’m more interested in writing stuff that lasts in the reader’s mind than just seeing my name in print in as many places as possible. The fact that so much of what I do is in the short form, and that my rejection rate is very low, might account for the reason that I’m in a lot of magazines. But then again, there are plenty of places where you haven’t seen me, and I do hope to reach new audiences through them someday, too. Like *Cemetery Dance*. I’ve been in a few of their anthologies, but never in the magazine. I used to submit to *Cemetery Dance* in the 1990s but gave up trying because they turned me down a few times and I convinced myself that my style just wasn’t right for them. But recently I sent them a collaboration (with my longtime friend Mark McLaughlin) and they snatched it right up. I was excited about finally placing a story in that magazine after fifteen years! Little successes like that mean the world to me; I try not to aim for grandiose goals like “writing a global bestseller before I turn forty” or some such nonsense. For me, the goals are always about writing a damned good story. The marketplace is secondary. You have to think that way if you’re in it for the long haul, as I am. The marketplace is all about trends and sure things, and I’m not going to play that. But reaching new readers is my aim, too, so I submit to a range of different magazines and anthologies. I really feel that I’m still growing as a writer and I’m always trying new things, and sometimes it takes publishing in a new, small press or alternative magazine to share the results. I’m cool with that, too.

DD: Mike, besides your writing you are also an associate professor of English at Seton Hill University. How much of a different focus is that from your writing career? Do you incorporate some of the weird fiction in your teachings?

MA: I like to joke that I’m corrupting the youth of America, but anyone who knows me know that I just love talking about stories and so I love teaching. Teaching keeps me in touch with people. Slaving away over a computer in the

dead of night doesn't always do that. So even though it cuts into my writing time with the impact of a meat cleaver, I enjoy being a teacher, because it keeps me in tune with what's going on in the world of literature and what younger readers and writers are getting into. I'm also lucky enough to teach at a college that doesn't turn their nose up at popular fiction (since we have a graduate-level program in Writing Popular Fiction—see [fiction.setonhill.edu](http://fiction.setonhill.edu)), and I do get to teach courses in horror literature and the writing of scary stories. Hell, even my doctoral dissertation was about 'The Uncanny', so as an expert, it's my duty to teach the dark side. In my creative writing courses, I always perform a fiction/poetry reading to the students and while they're not all fans of the dark side, they often get a kick out of hearing me read my stuff. I think they appreciate having a 'real' writer leading the class. And if you were to drop by my lit courses on any given day, you might find me teaching Poe or screening *The Exorcist* or using a clip from *Evil Dead 2* to illustrate an idea. Horror is everywhere in literary history, and fear is everywhere in fiction; I like to remind students of that and help them express it themselves through their writing, no matter what 'genre' they might be working in.

DD: Your *Goreletter* email newsletter has proven to be very popular, even winning another Stoker award for you. Is this a lot of work for you to keep up with it, and why the electronic format? Are you a big believer in the computer revolution? Have you experimented with some of the other electronic publishing formats?

MA: *The Goreletter* is just a blast to put together. I don't do it all in one shot—I compile the different 'departments' in the newsletter over the course of each month, and so it isn't too difficult to put together. I began to think seriously about doing an electronic newsletter when I finished the 'gorelets' experiment (which involved uploading a poem a week to a server that would send them to subscriber's PDAs). I think I launched it the way I did, though, because I was subscribing to a few of the e-newsletters that other authors were putting out, but was disappointed to find that they were really nothing more than sales tools, with most just compiling a list of publications for sale. I started to think that a newsletter could offer a really cool creative workspace, and give me a way to do a lot of different things (poetry, fiction, humor, memoir, whatever) all in one missive. The other appealing thing to me is that there's no deadlines or maximum length requirements. It just seemed natural for me to try to do this. Although I've always been active with online horror (some readers might remember my early horror website, *Arnzen's Arbor Vitae*), I've always been hesitant to give up the electronic rights to a piece one relinquishes when posting it online. But I figured the newsletter, with an archive on my own site, would give me a way to come to terms with that. I'm so glad it received a Bram Stoker Award...that tells me I'm doing something right. I also use [gorelets.com](http://gorelets.com) as a creative workspace in electronic media, and it incorporates weblogs, visual images I've made, 'electronic poetry' and all sorts of doodads. Just having fun, sharing things, and putting my computer to good use. Although I am a true believer in the printed word, I think there's a lot more that can be done with electronic and alternative forms...they've barely been explored for their potentials in horror. Every medium offers something unique that a creative mind can discover if they dig deep enough into it.

DD: As you mentioned earlier, your long-awaited new Novel, *Play Dead*, is coming out very soon from Raw Dog Screaming Press, who also published your collection of short-short stories, *100 Jolts: Shockingly Short Stories*. How is it to work with them, and could you tell us a little bit about the novel as well?

interview

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MA: Someone joked with me recently that I should call my next book *Roll Over* if Raw Dog Screaming puts it out. I thought that was hilarious, but the fact that my book is called *Play Dead* is actually coincidental to the publisher’s disturbing canine moniker.

*Play Dead* is a noir thriller about pathological gamblers who, well, essentially play poker with photographs of their murder victims. The ‘cards’ they make are really crazy—and in a way I guess it offers up the sort of ‘bizarre image’ showcase that I did with the all those wacky tattoos in *Grave Markings*. The book is structured like a deck of cards—52 chapters in four parts, (or suits) and I am trying to invite the reader to sort of ‘play’ with the story. I have to chuckle when I think about this book—it’s gruesome at times; can’t wait to hear what folks think of it.

The book is *really* different, so I felt like Raw Dog Screaming was the right place to go with it. I really love this press because the people that run it really have the right mindset for publishing. They love what they do and they’re conscious about what they’re doing as an art form. I got to know editor John Edward Lawson from his poetry and some conversations we started up online; I knew right away he had the right approach and I signed aboard. They are really committed to promoting their authors and improving their publishing quality; I was floored by how much close reading and editorial work they put into *100 Jolts* and they really put together an outstanding cover and book design. And those ‘Grim Grimoires’ they do—sculpture-bound collector’s editions—well, it just doesn’t get *any* cooler than that! Raw Dog is definitely a unique press and the fact that they’re so hot right now is proof positive that they’re doing it right.

DD: What else is on the horizon for you?

MA: A couple of things are in process right now. I just placed a book of funky zombie poems with Naked Snake Press called *Rigormarole* and I’m more than a little excited by it. If things go as currently planned, it will also feature some unique art contributions by another writer who is well-known but isn’t generally recognized yet for his art. It’s too early to let that cat out of the bag yet, but I think many long-time horror fans will dig it. I’m also head-deep into a brand new novel involving a very disturbing kidnapper (a little along the lines of King’s *Misery* or Fowles’ *The Collector*) and it’s really an intense and dark story. I hope to finish that this summer, if I’m lucky. Beyond that, I’m outlining a ‘survival’ story, or sorts, set in a warehouse store and even a how-to book about writing, but I don’t like to talk too much about things too early in the creative process. I’ll be getting a sabbatical in the next two years or so from my college, and I’m planning to write my brains out during that time away from paper-grading. I’m very excited about the next few years...the sky’s the limit!

DD: Thank you for you time, Michael!

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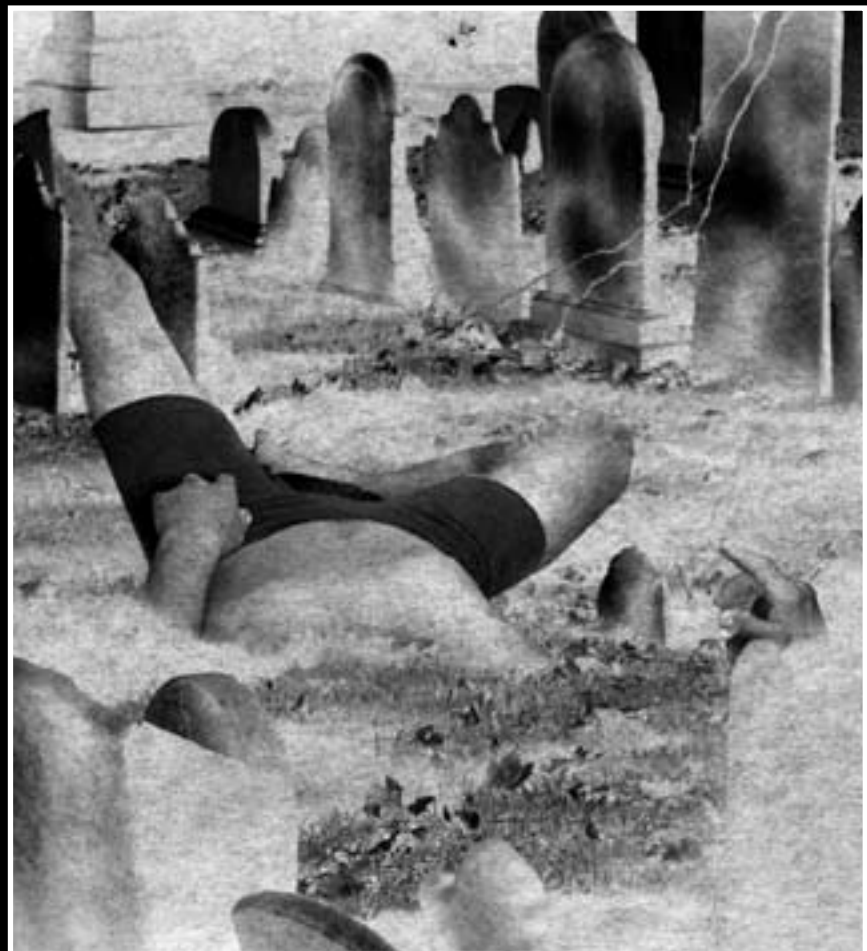
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