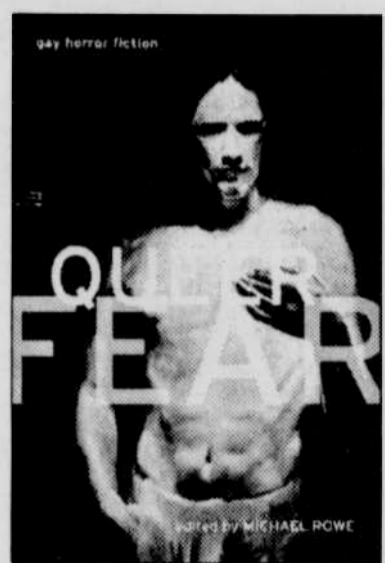


BOOKS



QUEER FEAR: GAY HORROR FICTION
 Edited by Michael Rowe. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2000; \$16.95 softcover.

Do you want to read something queer and scary? For all of us fans of the weird and quirky, writer Michael

Rowe has collected a beautiful boneyard of unnerving short stories in this new anthology of gay horror fiction. A Lambda Literary Award nominee for editing two vampire anthologies, he couldn't be more qualified to lead this consortium of terror.

Some of these stories are harmless—sweet ghostly remembrances to bring a smile and a shiver. Michael Thomas Ford (*Alec Baldwin Doesn't Love Me*) shows his sentimental side with his ghost-of-grandma tale "Goodbye." After AIDS claims their partners, two men consider selling their souls for peace in Brian Hodge's deliciously cynical, subtly metaphorical story "Little Holocausts."

Some of these stories ride the undercurrents of childhood fears. Becky N. Southwell's "Genius Loci" is the scariest boys camp ghost story with a gay twist I ever have read (or experienced, for that matter.) And for sheer spooky, there's the boy-sees-devil tale "The Spark" by William J. Mann.

Some of these stories play off the seams between terror and the erotic, such as the

nasty, taking-care-of-the-ex-boyfriends story "Tabula Rosa" by Robert Boyczuk. A gay-bashing gone ass over teakettle is the subject of Edo Van Belkom's twitchy, darkly sexual story "Hey, Fairy!" And two married neighbors explore their hidden desires to hideous results in the bone-chilling (pun intended) "Piercing Men" by Douglas Clegg:

"You will do this, Danny. For us."
 "Get your hand off me."
 "How's Faith going to feel when she finds out about us?" "You sad—" Danny couldn't finish.
 Somewhere in his mind, he had already begun to accept this. Accept that Sam somehow dominated him.... Only later, when Danny had gotten a room over in San Bernardino, did Sam handcuff him to the bed and begin to slap him too hard, all the while telling him that if he was going to own him, body and soul, Danny had better get used to doing what he was told.

And some of these stories are nightmares of the highest quality. Take, for instance, the sick and brutal "The Nightguard" by C. Mark Umland. A prisoner in an unworldly cell plots his revenge and escape as he finds himself cruelly beaten and abused by a nasty, inhuman watchman. Umland blurs the lines of reality and nightmare with expert precision; this is guaranteed to make your skin crawl. Then try the story that is sure to scare a subculture, "Bear Shirt" by Toronto writer Gemma Files, in which an ex-skinhead becomes sucked into a frightening future through his ex-lover's cloak

Homo phobia
 Horror anthology terrifies; evil stepmother mortifies

of aggression and sexuality.

You could take this book to bed with you on a dark and stormy night. But I recommend you wait till daylight.

—Glenn Williams



ONYX
 by Felice Picano. Alyson, 2001; \$24.95 hardcover.

For the gay novelist, AIDS presents some of the same problems as the Holocaust: How does one address the awfulness, horror and sadness without making the subject

trite through repetition? If familiarity breeds contempt, how can a writer put a fresh twist on a story that, because of the enormity of the subject, demands to be told over and over?

Felice Picano's *Onyx* attempts to shine new light on a story we already know, and it mostly succeeds.

Jesse and Ray, a couple for almost 15 years, are doing that awful dance we know so well. Jesse is very sick, and Ray is very well.

Because the story is set in the early '90s, AIDS cocktails have not yet arrived. We all know where Jesse's story is going.

What makes this novel fresh is that Jesse and Ray are still such sexual beings. Theirs seems to

be the perfect open relationship, one not threatened by the occasional tryst with outsiders.

Even as Jesse slowly is dying, Ray has a thing going with a repairman on the side. How you feel about these things personally determines how viable and believable you find this scenario.

As the novel progresses we, unfortunately, meet and grow to intensely dislike Jesse's mom, Adele. As little more than the evil stepmother to Ray, her flaming homophobia gives the readers somewhere to focus the anger and rage we feel as we watch her son slip away.

Awful beyond description (and, occasionally, belief), Adele is the quintessential Southern socialite, concerned only with her reputation. She provides the catalyst and momentum for one of the book's most unexpected and tragic surprises.

In contrast to Adele, Ray's niece and nephew represent the future: open-minded kids being raised by multiple unlabeled parents.

Picano mixes predictable stereotypes (J.K. the classic, vampy old movie queen) with occasional mention of topical issues such as power of attorney and the right to die. Ray's repairman questions his sexuality, his marriage and his double life, trying all the while to have it both ways.

Onyx breaks little new ground but still provides an engrossing story told with mostly likable and sympathetic characters. Most importantly, it contains a warning: Should we ignore the lessons we've learned about AIDS, we'll be doomed to live through it all over again.

—Richard Bray

GLENN WILLIAMS writes poetry, prose, plays, periodica and porn in Portland.

RICHARD BRAY is a Portland free-lance writer and former bookstore owner.

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