

# An Eye for Horror

What Terrifies You? Chad Helder Knows.

By GLENN SCOFIELD WILLIAMS

"A good horror story should have some sort of innovation," according to Chad Helder. Helder, a gay Portland writer, thoughtfully sips his coffee in a North Portland café, talking about the recipe for horror: "innovation with the monster design or with the narrative or like the *Twilight Zone* factor, where you reach the end of the story and there's some sort of unexpected twist. Innovation is everything."

Helder's soft brown eyes smile as he takes another sip. "In terms of monster design, I'm not a big fan of a monster who is completely 'evil other.' I prefer shades of grey," he says.

He places his coffee down; a friendly smile breaks his dark beard. You would never guess the twisted, dark knowledge behind that warm smile. Yet Helder's horror sensibility is so adept, at age 36 he has received the highest award given horror writers: the Bram Stoker Award.

The Stoker Award is an honor bestowed by collective vote among members of the Horror Writers Association—members such as Stephen King, Dean Koontz and Clive Barker. Helder's compilation of queer horror stories, *Unspeakable Horror: From the Shadows of the Closet*, garnered the coveted 2009 Stoker Award for superior achievement in a horror anthology.

"The award is a little haunted house," Helder says. "It's very cool. But they didn't know what to make of it when we were going through airport security. They had to look it over very carefully."

Helder began his career in horror as a poet. The son of a Colorado minister, Helder came out in high school, studied writing in college and moved to Bellingham, Washington, where he taught and created a blog to highlight his gay horror poetry and prose, *UnspeakableHorror.com*. The blog and his teaching efforts were instrumental in taking his horror writing to the national stage.

Darren Davis, founder of Vancouver, Washington-based Bluewater Comics (recently in the news and *Just Out's* own pages for its Michelle Obama, Bill Clinton and Sarah Palin comics) visited one of Helder's classes as a guest speaker.

"For years I'd been working on a novel. And basically I revised it till it completely fell apart," Helder says. "But I put all this work into creating this world and all that detail. So I pitched it to him as a comic."

The result was *Bartholomew of the Scissors*, a four-part graphic horror comic about a deranged supernatural boy who avenges his abuse through the expert wielding of a pair of rusty shears. The comic is tight and terrifically scary and immediately received acclaim.

The artist, Daniel Crosier, drew, painted and burned the images into wood blocks to create a bold, theme-soaked visual



A series of panels from one of four comics in Chad Helder's horror series *Bartholomew of the Scissors*.

world that intensifies Helder's plot. After *Bartholomew*, Helder went on to author eight more comics for Bluewater, kick-starting the company's horror comic line.

Helder's blog quickly became a meeting place for queer horror scribes. "Until I did that website," Helder confesses, "I had no idea how many queer horror writers there were."

Among them was Vince A. Liaguno, founder of Dark Scribe Press on Long Island, NY. Liaguno and Helder soon concocted the notion of a queer horror anthology that would show off the range and depth of the genre in a way not hitherto shown. The result, *Unspeakable Horror*, is a collection of stories for every taste in the gay, lesbian, bi and trans rainbow.

"For me the queer element is special," Helder says. "In a homophobic society like ours, any kind of repressed fear of sexuality is naturally going to fuel the horror story."

"I also like the literary sensibilities that queer horror brings," Helder continues. "Queer fiction is always on the edge of the experimental, always looking for innovation, and I think the queer end of the horror genre really flips the whole horror genre on its head and mixes things up."

The success of the first anthology has led to discussions of a second, and Helder's first work of his own horror poetry and prose, *The Pop-Up Book of Death*, is set to be published by a small press in Maine sometime soon. In addition, a complete, one-volume *Bartholomew of the Scissors* will hit bookstores in October.

Chad Helder is a new force in queer horror. Don't be fooled by his mild-mannered, pleasant smile. This man can scare the pants off you. ☐

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