

Keene on Horror

Written by Andy Weeks

Thursday, 11 March 2010 13:12

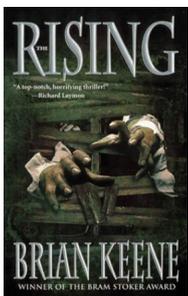


Leave it to Brian Keene to revamp the horror genre. His mesmerizing novels of visceral terror have spooked any number of horror fans, causing the prolific writer to become one of Leisure Books' most popular authors.

But Keene is no walking dead. Popular, yes. But prolific—hell, yes!

In late November, while his family settled around a dinner table to consume a Thanksgiving turkey, Keene was eating canned beans in the Pennsylvania wilderness. He had gone to the woods for seclusion and to work. When he returned, he promised fans on his [website](#), he would have “a completed novel, half of another new novel, a completed novella, the script for issue #2 of THE LAST ZOMBIE, several new short stories and an essay on THE ROAD WARRIOR.” The end result, he updated fans a week later, was that “I came home with many manuscripts,” including “the first sentence of what I’m pretty sure is going to be a vampire novel.”

True horror fans should be happy, because it won't be a TWILIGHT-inspired saga but a book you can seek your teeth into—and one that will likely bite back.



“I’ve been itching to give vampires their teeth back,” he further revealed to fans, and he explains to Fango that his creatures of the night will be in the fashion of NEAR DARK and ‘SALEM’S LOT. “There’s nothing scary about some dweeb dressed all in black, smoking clove cigarettes and listening to Bauhaus and bemoaning how dull eternal life is,” he says with natural good humor. “Vampires should be mean, nasty, vicious creatures driven by a lust for blood.” Fans will

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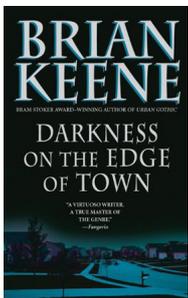
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have to wait a while for that book, which won't be published until at least 2011. But Keene has supplied readers with other bold stories, which, like a crucifix to a vampire, should hold them at bay.

To date, Keene has written 15 novels, plus a handful of novellas, graphic novels, essays and short stories. Impressive for a guy who came on the scene not even 10 years ago with *THE RISING*, a punch-in-the-gut zombie novel that, in retrospect, is appropriately titled to reflect his maturing success. The book spawned a sequel, *CITY OF THE DEAD*, and the stand-alone zombie novel *DEAD SEA*, and Keene was praised for resurrecting the undead scene.

"Well, keep in mind," he says, "*THE RISING* and *28 DAYS LATER* came out the same year, and until that time, zombies had been missing for the better part of a decade. Despite this, the fans had never gone away. I was a zombie fan. I was one of those guys you see at *FANGORIA*'s *Weekend of Horrors* in the 'Fulci Lives' T-shirt. I wanted to write a zombie novel because a) nobody else was and b) I thought there were probably other fans like me who would want to read it. Here we are, almost a decade later, and in hindsight, judging by how prevalent zombies have now become in pop culture, I may have been right about that," he laughs.

THE RISING was originally published as a limited-edition hardcover by Delirium in 2003, and was picked up by Leisure a year later. It won him a second Bram Stoker Award; his first was in 2001 for the nonfiction *JOBS IN HELL*. This year, Keene will have had 11 novels out via the Dorchester imprint. He renewed a contract with Leisure last year that requires him to submit two books a year: the first in February, the second in August, for subsequent publication those months in the following year.

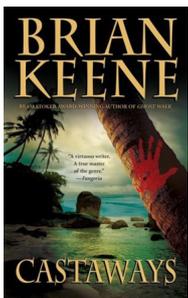


He and his editor, Don D'Auria, make a good team, according to the author. "Leisure treats me very well, and I'm very happy to be with them," Keene says. "Don gives me a lot of leeway. We've been together long enough that he trusts my vision, and lets me go wherever I want to go. And in turn, I trust his input and thoughts and guidance. I do most of the plots and such. He occasionally suggests a title change."

His latest release, *DARKNESS ON THE EDGE OF TOWN*, is “a postapocalyptic novel,” Keene says. “Without giving too much away, what if darkness itself became a sentient entity that fed off all living things, and what if it blanketed the Earth, eating everything it enveloped—except for one small town that has managed to withstand the assault?” He worries that when people pick up the book, they’ll compare its theme with Stephen King’s *UNDER THE DOME*. “Great minds just think alike,” he laughs, reminding readers that *DARKNESS* was originally written in 2007 and first published as a limited-edition hardcover in early 2008 by Infernal House.

Unlike some midlist writers, Keene has the good fortune to be able to devote all his working time to writing. “*THE RISING*, my first novel, took two years,” he says. “*A GATHERING OF CROWS*—which I just finished, and is my 15th novel—took three months. But part of that is because I now write full time and can spend eight to 10 hours a day on it.”

But, as the saying goes, there’s not much rest for the wicked...er, wickedly brilliant author who has been a fan of horror since childhood. When Keene is finished with a project, he says, “I smoke a cigar and take a full day off, during which time I do all the things around the house that my wife wants done—the things I’ve put off till I finished the book. Then, after the day off, I go right back to work the following day.”



Keene had most fun writing *DEAD SEA*, *KILL WHITEY* and *THE CONQUEROR WORMS*, he reveals, because “they were big, cheesy, pedal-to-the-metal pulp stories. In contrast, while books such as *GHOUL* and *DARK HOLLOW* were more serious in tone, they were just as rewarding. Not fun, but I felt a certain sense of pride when I finished them. They were my most personal, most autobiographical novels, and I really put a lot into them.”

Keene’s 2009 Leisure novels were dedicated to two genre-fiction favorites: *CASTAWAYS* to the late Richard Laymon and *URBAN GOTHIC* to Edward Lee. “Like King, [Joe R.] Lansdale, [Robert] McCammon, F. Paul Wilson and [Jack] Ketchum, Lee and Laymon were authors who

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inspired a good chunk of my generation,” he notes. “I’ve also been lucky enough that both gave me guidance and help along the way. I wanted to pay tribute to them for that, and want to do the same for those other five at some point down the road as well.”

Keene, who was born at Ft. Bragg, NC and now lives in central Pennsylvania, adds that he’s not alone in his craft in that area of the country. “For some reason, central Pennsylvania has become sort of a horror-writer mecca. I get together quite often with fellow authors like J.F. Gonzalez, Chet Williamson, Geoff Cooper and others who live in the area. And folks stop in here on their way through the country. During the summer, you might find, at one time or another, Tim Lebbon or James A. Moore or someone else sleeping on my couch.”

That’s all right by Keene, who has developed friendships with literary personalities across the globe. He has a large and growing fan base, too, and keeps them updated on his website and through social media. He has even provided his site readers a free serialized novel called DELUGE, a sequel to THE CONQUEROR WORMS. Not only are his books available in hard copy, audio and digital formats, and for Amazon’s Kindle, his stories have been adapted for graphic novels, comic books and film. His story “The Ties That Bind” a short movie last year, and Keen praises its director, Jeff Heimbuch, saying he liked the latter’s adaptation better than his own original tale. GHOUL, DARK HOLLOW, URBAN GOTHIC and TERMINAL, meanwhile, are all under option.



“The guys who made Jack Ketchum’s THE GIRL NEXT DOOR and OFFSPRING [the ModernCiné company] are involved with GHOUL, so I’d say that has a good shot at getting made,” the author says. “Things look good for DARK HOLLOW as well, which is under option by a group from the UK. I always thought KILL WHITEY would make a great film, simply because of the insane, balls-to-the-wall violence, and the fact that it’s basically nothing but one big chase scene.”

There’s another kind of chase going on: fans trying to keep up with one of horror’s most prolific personalities. Not only is Keene a busy writer, he’s a constant reader. He says he reads between three to five books a week, and reported on his website that in 2009 he read 249 of them! That doesn’t include magazines—such as FANGORIA. “I started with issue #15, which

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featured HALLOWEEN II,” he says. “I’ve never missed an issue since. I just wish I still had some of those older editions.”

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