

Knowing More

An introduction by

Tim Lebbon

The saying goes that the older you get, the less you know. And for sure it sometimes feels that way, because as the years tick by, the more there is to *not* know. It seems that every year that passes opens up time more and more, both backwards – nostalgia, sadness, regrets and contentments – and forwards. Concerns ... worries ... dreads.

Children view the world from the centre out: they're at the centre and everything revolves around them. They're all for the moment, and at a younger age they seem to have little idea of time. 'Next week' means nothing to them, and 'next year' is an alien concept. Hell, every time I try telling my 4 year old I'll play football with him 'later', he always manages to translate that as 'this instant'. And he usually wins. He's a kid, and winning is his job.

What a nice way to view the world.

Then sometime in their teens time opens up, allowing in all manner of experiences ... and an expanding universe of mysteries. Some people move on. Others stay stuck in their teens. And a lucky few retain something of a child's sense of wonder, awe and amazement at the world.

It's this expanding awareness of the mysteries around us, driven by the experience of age, that motivates the best writers of fantastic fiction. And here in this volume we have five such writers. If you take that as a polite way of saying that none of them can really be called youngsters anymore, well then, yes ... I always try to be polite.

These are writers who know a thing or two about living. About the joys that life can bring, but also the kicks to the face; the wonders of living, the fears of dying. Piccirilli, Braunbeck, Leblanc, Schwaeble and Golden are experienced, and they're not afraid of confronting those mysteries, fears and concerns and exposing them for us all to see.

The more answers you find to old questions, the more new questions there are. And at the end of your time there's a lifetime of knowledge and experience behind

you, and countless questions that will – and perhaps *must* – always remain unanswered.

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When I was asked to write an introduction for this book, I thought, *What a bloody great idea for an anthology!* And it is. It's been done similarly before with the classic *Night Visions* series, of course, but allowing each of the five writers to choose a general theme within which to work provides a nice little twist on the idea.

And what a fantastic line-up. Like a sumptuous five-course feast. Though it would be improper of me to suggest who should take the parts of entrée, and dessert.

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First up to the starting line we have Tom Piccirilli, award-winning poet, novelist and short story writer, known for his rich, intense prose and endlessly entertaining short story titles (although check out the Contents page and you'll see that he's restrained himself on that front here).

Piccirilli chooses *Loss*. It's something I've written about a lot, but until I experienced true loss early last year when my mum passed away, I really didn't have a clue. You can't dream it up, you can't imagine it, because it's beyond imagining.

Pic knows all about loss. That's painfully and honestly evidenced in his stories here, and nowhere more effectively than in the opening paragraph of *Bereavement*. In a hundred words he successfully enters the reader's mind and flicks a switch – the one that changes 'I'm reading a story' to 'this is real' – and anyone who has experienced profound grief will realise that they're reading about themselves. That's powerful stuff. When a writer can do that to me, I know he/she and I will spend a lot of time together. Go ahead, flick the book to that story and read the first ten lines, and if you tell me it doesn't touch you ... well, maybe you just can't be touched.

I'll also mention the opening to *Loss*, but for a different reason entirely. Talk about grabbing the reader! Listen:

The last time I saw the great, secret unrequited love of my life, Gabriella Corben, was the day the talking monkey moved into Stark House and the guy who lied about inventing aluminium foil took an icepick through the frontal lobe.

Eh? Talking monkey? Aluminium foil? Icepick? What the ...?

Now, I *have* to read on. Believe me, you'll have to read on too, and it's not something you'll regret for an instant.

Gary A. Braunbeck next, a multi award-winning author of some of the most emotionally hard-hitting fiction around right now. He's a master short-story writer and an eclectic novelist, and he's just about the best there is at dreaming up awe-inspiring and shocking concepts.

Gary tells us about Hauntings. And like the best ghost stories, his three tales here – loosely linked into a trilogy – also deal with loss. He's someone who knows all about grief and yearns for ways around and through it. He also knows about the power of ghosts and what they could mean, what they could be. His writing is painfully heartrending, challenging and yet filled with a desperate hope, and much of the time it's uplifting. His characters are always strong, valiantly fighting the troubles that life throws against them, and the interaction between characters – especially in *Afterward, There Will Be a Hallway*, is sublime. Truly. This story will win awards.

Something that Gary does superbly well is to hide very neat, very strong ideas within the many layers of his stories. There's always a great concept behind his tales, but he never relies on these concepts to carry the story. That's the easy way out, and the route of an amateur. Gary is, in every sense of the word, a professional, and for him these strong ideas are merely skeletons upon which his stories need to be told.

A word to sum up Gary's writing: beautiful.

And now Deborah Leblanc ... a writer who burst onto the scene 3 years ago with the novel *Family Inheritance*, and who after only four novels has already taken over the reins of the Horror Writers Association! What talent. What guts! Next, the world ...

And Deb wants to Curse us. After reading *Bottom Feeder* I think I *feel* cursed. I'm shivering, queasy and stunned by the visceral power of what I've just read. Yeuch! There's a scene in this tale that I had trouble getting through, and that's testament to Deb's power as a writer. I've got a pretty strong, vivid imagination, but here is a writer who can present tableaux to me that I've never considered before.

The great thing about Deb's stories is that she avoids the obvious. Having chosen Curses as her theme, it's pleasing that the curses involved in her tales aren't really the actual stories ... they're the background, against which she introduces characters facing extremes of experience and circumstance, and fighting against the darkness closing around them. Deb's good at making her characters fight. So good that, no matter what they go through (or eat!), you'll want to fight with them.

Hank Schwaeble writes short stories, edits fiction, at press time was busy putting the finishing touches on his first novel, *and* is a practising attorney! He's got short fiction set to appear in several professional anthologies over the coming few months, and I know for sure we're set to see a lot more of Hank's fiction gracing our genre over the years.

Hank introduces us to some Demons. Nasty bastards. We've read about them before, as familiar to horror fans as vampires and zombies, ghosts and werewolves. Yet in these stories, the demons are almost the good guys. They expose the faults of the humans they visit, sometimes extracting payment more like avenging angels than demons. And perhaps that's exactly what they are.

Hank's characters are always damaged and scorched by life, and all the more believable and interesting because of that. On occasion, the characters *themselves* are plain evil ... but wait til you get a load of their demons! The supernatural creatures they encounter or summon use their sins against them, and it's about reaping what you've sown as much as it's about redemption.

As I said, nasty bastards.

And last but not least, Christopher Golden. Someone who made me cry with one story here, and cringe at another, such are his diverse and considerable talents. I could list his publishing credits, but then I'd go past my four hundred thousand word limit for this introduction.

Chris dips into his beloved folklore to entertain and touch us, swinging from gritty action horror in *Under Cover of Night*, to a story so moving and painful that it took me twice as long to read as it should have. That story is *All Aboard*, and if this one doesn't get Chris all the attention and plaudits he truly deserves for his short fiction, there's something wrong with the world. And I'll say no more, because I want you to approach this tale with a clear mind and an open heart.

He's a storyteller first and foremost – he'll not try and confuse and befuddle you with weird stylistic strokes. He comes along, sets his scene and starts to build ...

and by the end of his stories you're left breathless with wonder, and quite often gasping with their emotional resonance.

Chris is a force to be reckoned with. He creates his own beautiful and terrifying mythologies as easily as dipping into those already known, and that's the talent of a true storyteller.

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So there they are, five talented and entertaining writers, writing from the heart of their experiences – painful and exciting, beautiful and rich – and all ready to lead you closer to midnight.

Their work is as diverse as it is powerful.

By the time the clock strikes twelve you'll have laughed, cried and closed your eyes against the dark.

And you will know a lot more, and so much less.

Tim Lebbon

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