

"Fearful Symmetry:"

Clive Barker Discusses the Art of Fantasy

An artfully dressed man with a youthful countenance (is he thirty-five or maybe forty-five?) seems to be hosting two people for coffee in the Omni Severin Hotel coffee shop at the 2004 NCTE Convention in Indianapolis. He opens doors for his two guests, smiles, stops to pick up the water bottle dropped by a twenty-something elementary teacher in the hotel lobby ("Miss, I think this is yours.") His comfortable, colorful clothing (decorated denim jacket and jeans, pastel cotton shirt with artwork) suggests he might be a studio artist who left fame and fortune behind (the commercial world can go to hell!) and turned high school art teacher, or he might be one of those actors who has reached a point of success where all pretension has been abandoned as unneeded. An accent that says, "London, maybe," places his origin nowhere near Indiana, and the gravel in his voice suggests iron under the art.

"Hello, I'm Clive."

Clive Barker: featured speaker at the 2004 ALAN Workshop, thanks to Michael Cart, ALAN president, and Josette Kurey of HarperCollins, among others.

By sheer volume alone, Clive Barker's accomplishments are mammoth, to say nothing of the genius and passion he has poured into each project, projects even Michelangelo might have found daunting in scope: multi-dimensional marathons—starting in Clive's powerful imagination, moving through sketches to



larger-than-life paintings, moving on to text and often arriving on the movie screen. Since founding a small theater group in London as a young man, Mr. Barker has gone on to write and produce some of the most successful and artful horror movies of modern times, as well as a seemingly inexhaustible stream of fantasy novels and stories for young and old alike which continue to translate to the cinema.

Playwright, painter, horror novelist, graphic novelist, fantasy novelist, movie director, short story

author, dog lover, husband and father, Clive Barker is a remarkable man who can quote from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake and William Wordsworth, as well as Peter Pan, as he carries on a conversation that plumbs the depths of the human subconscious, quantum physics and how fantasy fiction touches the human psyche.

Photos of Clive on his website, many of which were taken by his partner, David Armstrong, show, among other things, the creator of Pinhead and the other Cenubites himself laughing and covered up in a pile of large, friendly dogs, residents of the Barker household, and a loving and devoted father talking and laughing with his daughter, Nicole.

Clive's young adult projects, such as *Thief of Always* (which *Publishers Weekly* describes as a "tale that manages to be both cute and horrifying") and the four volumes in the *Abarat* series (about which,

Booklist reviewer Sally Estes says, “The multilayered adventure story not only embraces the lands of Oz, Wonderland, and Narnia but also offers a wink and a nod to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. More than 100 full-color paintings by Barker are appropriately quirky, grotesque, and campy, effectively capturing and expanding on the nuances of the tale”), might better be categorized as fantasy appropriate for readers of all ages, and although he is obviously not a secondary English teacher trained in the Louise Rosenblatt school, he intuitively recognizes that the age and experience of the reader of a book or the viewer of a play provide for diverse experiences with the text. Professional reviews, as well as online reader comments about these books, provide comparisons to a nearly canonical list of authors, including but not limited to Poe, Tolkein, Aldous Huxley, Blake, Coleridge, as well as cinematic geniuses like Ridley Scott and Alfred Hitchcock. In the following interview, Mr. Barker provides his own remarkable insights into the operation of fantasy in the human imagination.

JB: Your work, set in a modern context, of course, quite possibly resembles the work of William Blake and Samuel Taylor Coleridge more than it resembles the work of your contemporaries. Like Blake and Coleridge, you delve deeply into the subconscious, the spiritual and the scientific, but it’s the kind of science that we speculate on, like quantum physics. The kind of science in which all the rules we know are violated . . . and it’s kind of scary.

CB: Yes, true, right.

JB: Does it take a certain kind of mind in the reader or the viewer to understand your work or do you

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think it just hits the psyche like a ton of bricks and you can’t help it.

CB: That’s a big question. My feeling is the kind of fiction we’re both interested in, whether it’s for young people or adults, is the kind of fiction that works on lots of levels. The first piece of Blake I ever read was “Tiger, Tiger.” “Tiger, tiger burning bright/ In the forest of the night/ What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame thy fearful symmetry.” I didn’t have a clue what that meant when I first heard it. But its music was immensely eloquent. I had it by heart, you know, and I’ve had it by heart ever since—I’m 52 years old now, so that’s 44 years. What has happened is that I have decoded those lines different ways as I’ve grown older. I think the great thing about “the fantastic” is that it provides you with a kind of fiction which means one thing when you’re one age and something perhaps completely

different when you grow older.

Another great example for me is “Peter Pan.” For a long time, the Royal Shakespeare Company did a Christmas production of “Peter Pan.” It was a very straight forward, very eloquent version which included portions of J. M. Barrie’s original play, portions of Barrie’s letters and portions of *The Little White Bird*, which was the first reincarnation of “Peter Pan” that appeared in novel form. I saw the show many times; sometimes I took children, and sometimes I was with adults. Something very interesting happened at the end of that show. Wendy dies, and her daughter Margaret takes over, as you’ll recall from the story. And sometimes Peter comes over and sometimes Peter doesn’t. Eventually he forgets. At the end of the show, the last lines of the play were something like, “and thus it will go

on as long as children are gay and innocent and heartless.” Tied with that image was a completely dark and inhospitable stage and high, high up can be seen the figure of Peter looping the loop, a sealed system in other words, one in which he could never break out. He would be a boy forever, looping the loop, looping the loop.

When the lights came up, a very interesting thing was happening: all the adults were crying, and all the children were smiling. The story had delivered two completely different messages. The message that adults perceived matched their experience of life, which is that things get lost and are never found again, that you can’t always have happy endings. That is quite contrary to the child’s experience. The child is saying “Hey, Peter is up there looping the loop” but the adult is saying “Peter is up there looping the loop; that’s all he can do.”

Sorry about the long explanation, but it’s such a powerful example of what I am trying to do in telling stories that work on these many levels. For example, if somebody wants to come to *Abarat* or *Weaveworld* or *Imajica* with a curiosity about the darker aspect, shall we say, the more soul tugging aspects of life, then I hope I have some . . . I’m not saying I have some answers but I have some interesting questions. Let’s say that. But if someone wants to come for the adventure of it or in the case of *Abarat* for the color and the spectacle of the paintings, that’s fine too.

I don’t believe any artist has, and here Blake and I would disagree, the right to sort of demand a painful introspection from the reader. I think there are times in our lives where, frankly, we don’t want painful introspection. It’s important to be able to enter a fantasy world and be free of the things which tug too hard at us. You lose someone you love, for example, or your dog dies (I love dogs and the passing of a dog is a big deal to me)—It could be any number of heart-wrenching things going on with the result that you really don’t want to be having some “profound” questions asked. On the other hand, if you are in the mood for those kinds of questions, if you are feeling resolute and you want to think about, “What is my life for?”, “What is at the end of this journey?”, “What happens if the universe goes on forever?”, then, hey, I’m there

as the author to ask those questions along with you. I’m not guaranteeing any answers, but I will completely fill my fiction with as much eloquence about those questions as I possible can. The questions that we ask at fifteen and fifty-two are very different.

JB: Adults and young people can have very different perceptions of the same work of fantasy, as you have explained. So then, is there a difference in the ease with which a young person can access your work and the ease with which an adult can do it? Does the adult have to turn loose of too many pretenses and agreed-on views of reality and so on?

CB: Well, there’s a subset answer to that. The first is that I write two kinds of fiction. I write adult fiction, and the adult fiction has three things that are not in the fiction for children. It has cuss words, it has sexuality or manifested sexuality of some kind; there will be sex scenes or erotic scenes and probably the violence will be described more brutally.

Those are the only differences. I don’t put any part of my brain on hold when I am writing a piece of fiction for young readers. Why would I? I have a daughter. She is as sharp and as interested in the world as I am. There are some things I don’t want to expose her to. There are some things that come on the television and I say, “Nick [Nicole], it’s time to go,” or I’ll turn the television off. When it comes to these questions, these existential questions, kids ask them very early on, I think. I think children are very troubled by these issues of, “Why am I here?”

One of the reasons they are troubled is because it’s very clear that adults don’t have any answers to these questions. So, for me, I think, the only thing that’s different between the adult’s fiction and the children’s fiction or young people’s fiction, is the way that these questions are framed. There are some differences. I will tend to frame those questions more obliquely in the adult fiction than in the young people’s fiction because I think adults are very much more uncomfortable with asking those questions than children are and so Candy [Candy Quackenbush in *Abarat*] has an existential issue right in the middle of her life, “How is it possible that I am what I am? How do I

know magic? How do I know this place? What is my familiarity? Where does this familiarity come from with this world, this strange world?"

If I carried an adult character over that divide between the real world and some fantastic world, I wouldn't frame those questions [What is my life for? What is at the end of this journey?] so directly. I'd have to be more oblique because adults are a lot more queasy about those questions, so I think in some ways children are more willing to open up to these big issues. Phillip Pullman's success is a great example. Whether you agree or disagree with the strongly anti-Christian message (I have problems with that as a Christian but no problems with that as an artist), kids love it. I've talked to lots of kids about Pullman. They love to be engaged in the God question whereas, if you engage adults in the God question, for example, if you go out to dinner with ten people and start talking about God, four or five of them are going to act really uncomfortable and the other five are going to fight like dogs.

JB: Is your imagination visual or verbal or both or something else?

CB: Both. I think I've always drawn little pictures beside it . . . I handwrite. I don't have a typewriter. Often I've drawn little pictures of the way I think creatures or other elements of a story should look like, often just for consistency. If you're writing *Weaveworld*, an 800-page book, you want to be sure that you've got a really fixed, clear idea in the same way a piece of geography might be. So, I will use a sketch for that purpose. In *Abarat*, however, I reversed the system. I began by painting pictures. I painted 250 paintings before I showed them to Harper Collins, and some of these are very large. One of them is twenty-seven feet long.

Because there had been some anxiety, and I think, legitimate anxiety, on Harper's part, that Clive Barker, the inventor of *Hellraiser* and *Candyman* would easily turn his hand to children's fiction. The way that I actually dealt with that with *Thief of Always* was to give it to Harper Collins for a dollar so that they didn't have any concerns about me being paid a massive amount upfront. I said, "I don't know if this is going to work any more than you do, but I'd really like to see this

published. Let me give you this for a small amount of money." I think we have a million sold now here in the U.S.

Everybody felt great about that, but then when I came back and said, "Ok, now I want to do a lot of books with lots of paintings, lots of color paintings," which is a big project. There were some doubts, and so I just got on with it, and for four years I painted pictures without saying anything to Harper. Cathy Hemming came out to L.A. and, most importantly, Joanna Cotler came out to L.A., and what she saw at that point was about 250 oil paintings. She said, "Oh, I get this. I see what you're doing here. I understand." So, when I wrote, in that particular case, I was writing a text, which illustrated the paintings rather than the reverse where you would turn in a text, and someone would paint pictures to match the text.

The interesting thing about illustration or picture making is this: roughly eighty percent of the brainpower we use on our senses is given over to the eyes. So, in order to take in Jim and the Snapple machine and the colors and the light and the distances takes a huge amount of brainpower, never mind something as massive as the Grand Canyon, you know? So, what I am liberated to do when I write a text that goes with, as in the case with *Abarat* with 125 oil paintings, I'm liberated to tell a whole bunch of other things in 120,000 words in that book. I don't need to bother with the pictures. I don't need to do that thing that young audiences hate most of all: describe. I don't have to have big chunks of

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description, the painting does all of that for me. Now I am free to move the narrative along which, again, young readers like. I think that young readers are very, very smart about pictures now. They go to movies, and they can decode visual images. They seem to have a new means of comprehension. Nicole, our daughter, can go to a computer and pop through it and get everything she wants out of the computer in two minutes. I sit there a little dumbfounded by the whole thing. I have a much simpler idea of technology than she does. Something happened between our generation and the generation of our children. I see it in lots of places. I see it wherever complicated visuals are concerned. They are picture smart, but I don't think they are necessarily what I call fact smart. In fact, Nick says, "Why would I need to learn that when I can find it on the computer?"

In terms of concrete knowledge about the world, which I would call historical knowledge, for instance, I find a deficit among kids today. Ask them who the first president of the United States was, and they will shake their heads. They will not have a clue. Ask them when the Civil War was and even, perhaps, what it was about and they simply won't know. Ask them how to get to the ninth level of a new video game and the two of us, Jim, will be sitting there slack jawed while they tell us how to do it.

JB: What can a graphic novel do that a novel that is all text not do?

CB: I think it's there in that a picture is a thousand words. I think it's there in the idea that a picture provides you with all this information, and it does draw you in. I've referred to my readers as co-creators, and I think that's fair and true. We went to see *Polar Express* last night. The movie would be the same whether we were sitting in a cinema or not, but *Abarat* or a Pullman or any novel even when it has a lot of pictures in it draws out of you all kinds of very intimate, very personal interpretations. You read *Moby Dick* and I read *Moby Dick*, but we both read different books. We all go see *Polar Express*, we all saw the same movie. I suppose that's the essence of the difference.

I really do believe that the written word, even

when it is attached to paintings as it is with me, allows for a massive breadth of interpretation and an intimate interpretation, by which I mean something very, very near to who you are. It's about who you are and the rediscovery of young people of the world. I've seen it in the time that I've been doing book signings over the last six or seven years for the *Thief of Always* and the *Abarat* books. We have J.K Rowling to thank in no small measure for this. She made a whole generation obsess on something that they never obsessed on before. God bless her, she should be sainted. That has made this generation word friendly again. And articulate again. The young people come to signings who knew everything about the books, often more than I do. They come and they have little contests with each other about how much information . . . Now, nobody has required them to do this. The book is not on anybody's syllabus. This is about them being engaged again with the word and with the pictures again. And putting down the controller for the Super Mario Brothers (that's probably ten years too old but, whatever the current thing is, Doom or whatever), and picking up a book and realizing that the book belongs to them in an intimate way in a way that the game never will.

The game is a cold thing which will never find its way into their souls the way that Ray Bradbury found his way into mine when I was a kid. When I first met Ray Bradbury, I said, "You are one of the reasons I'm writing, and you really got me reading, and I'd like to think that there's a new generation of readers coming along because of Rowling and because of people like Pullman and Neil Gaiman and, hopefully, myself. The kids come along and say, "You did *Hellraiser*, so I read your book. I can't see *Hellraiser*, my mother and father won't let me, but I'll read your book." They really love it when they feel something sort of dark and scary going on in the book. For me these last three or four years have been going out on the road for the book not only here but in Europe has been really, really encouraging. Just at the time when I was beginning to think Ridley Scott might have been right when he predicted reading will be the high opera of the twenty-first century, which I take to mean that it would be an elitist activity, which is

turning out to be simply not true. People are reading books and buying books in unprecedented numbers. I think bookstores are more friendly to be in than they have ever been. Even being on the Internet you have to read. It's not a succession of pretty pictures. I'm really encouraged. Three things that I don't put into fiction for young people, and frankly I don't miss any of them, are the cuss words, the sex and violence. I think this is a brand new day and it is looking very exciting.

JB: Coleridge in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Kahn," and Blake in "Auguries of Innocence," as well as many of his paintings, seemed to visit some uncharted aspect of the human mind. Do you go there as you work, and what can you tell us about it?

CB: Yes, I'm definitely going there. This will amuse you, I think. I had a breakfast with Margaret Thatcher a long time ago. It was rather fun because my politics are far from Margaret's. She had quoted Blake a great deal, and we would quote Blake back and forth, and I thought here is at least some common ground. She was talking about what a wonderful British education Blake had had. And I said, "Sorry to disagree with you, but he had practically no education, he was entirely self-taught. She then went on to say that he was a great traveler, and I said, "No, he never left a two-mile radius of his home," which is true. In all his life he never left a two-mile radius of the place in which he was born.

The point that's relevant here is that we all have these internal spaces, and we don't have to travel to find these spaces. We dream them. I think that the great gift of Freud and Jung, particularly Jung, is giving us those tools to comprehend what those spaces are. The shaman dreaming with his eyes open is the ideal shape of the artist. That's what Coleridge is doing. Coleridge is, of course, taking drugs in significant amounts. Blake is not. And I'm not. On a Monday morning I'm going to my desk and I'm looking at the page and it's interesting. I'm only beginning to discover how much I just rely on a process, which has no intellectual content whatsoever. That is, I don't think this through. I don't plan this. I sort of

unplug myself from what's around me, and I think that's probably what most imaginative artists do. I don't work from research and go research *Abarat*, you know? You just have to trust from the Jungian part of yourself, the dreaming part of yourself and say, "The thing that I dream will be of interest to other people." That's a very arrogant thing to think, and that's why when you turn your book in, you're always thinking, "I just spent this year dreaming all these wacky things, and I put them into this book. What right do I have to assume that anybody will be interested?" I'm not being falsely humble here; I remain astonished that this act of creation which is so pleasurable for me, so indulgently pleasurable for me, should result in something that people will love. I feel as though I can completely understand why I would do it, but the idea that these wild things that I've conjured, and this brings our conversation full circle, it goes back to your first question that the reason, I believe, is that when we are accessing this material, we are accessing common material. I suppose what I am trying to do is find these common images, pour them into the book in the purest way I can. Not toy with them, not over intellectualize them, never go back and say, "Well, I don't really know what that means." This is why I think we are coming full circle. I will never take something out because I don't know what it means.

I would never censor myself on the basis of meaning. Going back to Coleridge and "Kubla Khan", ". . . the sacred river, caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea." Damn, if that isn't right. I mean it doesn't get any better than that, right? Haven't got a clue what it means at the level I understand. I mean, I know what it means at a literal level. It means that he decreed a pleasure dome and that it was built where a river ran, but why does it move me the way it does. I don't have any answers for that. I do know that if he had revised it until it was something that he could intellectually defend, he probably would have messed up completely. That's why when I write something that I can't necessarily completely explain, I won't muck with it even though when you ask me what it means, I would have to shrug and say, "Jim, I don't know."