

Every House Is Haunted — Story Notes

So here we are... the story notes. Short of writing a glowing review of one's own book, I don't think a writer could come up with anything more self-indulgent. Still, some people like to know where the stories come from, and I must admit *I* am one of those people.

Having said that, I strongly suggest you don't read these notes until *after* you've read *Every House Is Haunted*. That should go without saying, but in this digital age it feels like a spoiler warning is necessary.

If you have read the book, then I hope you enjoyed it, and I hope the notes that follow provide at least a bit of an insight into my creative process.

“Aces” — This is the most recent story in the book, and it's probably one of the strangest. It's so different from anything I'd written before that I felt it was a good way to open the collection. I have a sister, but fortunately she never put me through nearly as much trouble as Soelle does to her brother in this story. On the other hand, anything she says about me is a vicious lie.

“Autumnology” / “Leaves Brown” / “The Currents” / “Twillingate” — I think of these four stories as my Maritimes Mythos. I wrote them as a tribute to my family in Nova Scotia, especially the cousins who terrified me with horrifying stories of crying spirits in the woods and bloody heads falling off the roof of the old army tower behind my uncle's house. The Maritimes are known for their rich folklore and ghost stories. I thought it would be fun to come up with some modern tales — a man who rides the river currents, a place where it's autumn all the time. I asked my wife to marry me at a lighthouse in Newfoundland, although it wasn't the one at Twillingate. We didn't see any ghosts, but I didn't mind. She said yes, and that made the trip more than worthwhile for me.

“Cabin D” / “A Night in the Library with the Gods” / “The Nanny” / “The House on Ashley Avenue” — These stories, while not connected in any noticeable way, form the basis of a much longer story about an insurance company called the Mereville Group which is actually a cover for an organization that investigates — and often eliminates — supernatural threats to humanity.

I've always liked stories that are connected, especially ones where the connection is subtle. I think Stephen King is one of the authors who does this best. I like the way he makes these references in such a way that he never excludes the reader who doesn't make the connection. If you catch the reference, great. If you don't, it won't affect your enjoyment of the story.

For the record, I never did end up writing the book about the Mereville Group. But it's entirely possible they might pop up sometime in the Felix Renn/Black Lands series.

“Winter Hammock” — I think every author of scary stories should try their hand at an apocalypse tale. It's a familiar archetype of the genre, but it's one that readers love. The idea for “Winter Hammock” came from a train ride I used to take from Toronto to Oakville. Somewhere

between these two cities there was a warehouse that I passed on every trip. There are lots of warehouses situated next to the tracks, but this one stood out because it had a door that opened on a small fenced enclosure that I presumed was a smoking area for the people who worked there. Stretched across one corner of the enclosure was a hammock. One day while I was riding on the train, I started thinking about the end of the world — as us horror authors are sometimes wont to do. I thought the warehouse with the hammock might be a nice place to hole up, and the idea for this story followed. I figured even if it is the end of the world, there's no reason one shouldn't be comfortable.

“The Dark and the Young” — I wrote this 12,000-word story in a single day to meet the deadline for an anthology. (Let this be a lesson, kids, to not leave things until the last minute!) It ended up getting rejected, but Tom English, the fine gentleman who runs Dead Letter Press, took it for his mammoth anthology *Bound for Evil*. The book ended up getting nominated for a Shirley Jackson Award, which were given out at the Readercon convention in Burlington, Massachusetts. The book didn't win, but it was the best convention I'd ever attended, and it marked the first time I'd ever signed an autograph in a book.

“Wood” — “Weird” might be a better name for this story, because that's what it is. I've never written anything like it before or since.

“The Rifts Between Us” — This is the one science fiction story in the collection, and to be fair, the sci-fi elements are pretty tame. There are no spaceships or robots in this story. Then again, I'm not sure if you want a sci-fi story from the guy whose only memory of high school biology is making the foetal pig he was supposed to be dissecting sing and dance to “Hello! Ma Baby.”

“Vogo” — I like cryptozoology — the search for animals that haven't yet been proven to exist — especially lake monsters. I wanted to write a story about one, but I knew it needed to have a twist at the end. The town in this story, and the legend of Vogo, feature in a novel I wrote called *The Zane Conspiracy*. It's a science-fiction satire about UFOs, government conspiracies, and family. I think of it as “The X-Files” meets “Arrested Development.” The book doesn't have a home yet, but I'm working on it. Until then, “Vogo” makes a nice little preview.

“The Cat” — I grew up with cats. Lots of cats. I think at one point we had nine of them in our house. It wasn't so bad. We cleaned the litter boxes and de-furred the couches on a regular basis, and no one ever complained that our house smelled (not to our faces, anyway). Of all the cats we had, only one of them, Muffy, was an outdoor cat. He was always bringing back mice and garter snakes he caught in the farmer's field behind our house, laying their tiny corpses on our back stoop to show what a great hunter-protector he was. Muffy could also open the screen door with his claws (but as you might expect from a cat, he never closed it behind him). One day when I was older I started to think about some other things a cat like that could do. It scared me a little bit and I wrote this story. Today my wife and I have two cats of our own and we don't let either of them outside. I learned my lesson.

“Deleted Scenes” — I'm a big film geek. In fact, had fate bumped me in another direction, I might be making movies today instead of writing books. Regardless, I still love movies and my collection of DVDs is well into the hundreds (please don't tell my wife). I'm also a big fan of

movie trivia and folklore. (Did you hear the story about the munchkin who killed himself on the set of *The Wizard of Oz*? Yeah, that one isn't true.) I'm also one of the guys who actually watches all the extras that come on special-edition DVDs. My favourites — surprise, surprise — are the deleted scenes. Years ago I ran a website called *The Cutting Room Floor* that was devoted to deleted scenes, alternate endings, etc. It was a small site, but it received a favourable review in *Entertainment Weekly* (he said modestly) and spurred the idea for this story. "Deleted Scenes" has a humorous bent to it, much like "Aces," but it's a twisted kind of humour. I also realized that the protagonist's agent is the same one that represents Sandra Clifton, ex-wife of Felix Renn in my *Black Lands* stories. That's the kind of useless trivia only a film geek could love.

"The Tattletail" — While this wasn't my first published story, it *was* the first time I was ever paid for my writing. I remember getting the acceptance e-mail in the Toronto apartment I shared with my wife. I printed it out and gave it to her with a straight face. She glanced at it, read it the whole way through, then the tears started. I didn't cry myself, but there might have been a bit of a Snoopy dance.

A side note: I'd originally intended to write a series of stories featuring the Smith family and their encounters with the paranormal (there's a reference in "The Tattletail" to Tad's sister being turned into a vampire), but I never got around to it. Maybe one day.

Another side note: "The Tattletail" was reprinted in a Finnish magazine called *Spin* with a number of brilliant illustrations. I can't read Finnish, but I noticed that the furniture polish Pledge was translated into something called *puunkiillotusaineella*.

"Charlotte's Frequency" — Remember what I said about every horror author trying their hand at an apocalypse story? Well, I feel the same way about bug stories. I think every author should try writing one because let's face it: bugs are scary. Some authors like to inflate them to a gargantuan size a la the "big bug" movies of the 1950s (*Them! Tarantula, The Deadly Mantis*), but I decided to go down another route. I kept my spider small but made her smarter. This seemed scarier to me. Sometime I'd like to pit my spider against the ants in *Phase IV* and see who'd win.

"Relaxed Best" — This story is really just the beta version of Felix Renn. 'Nuff said.

"Hunger" — I don't write much flash fiction because, honestly, I don't read much of it. I prefer stories with meat on their bones. Having said that, I had a lot of fun destroying the world in a few hundred words.

"Inheritor" — I sold this one to *Cemetery Dance*, one of the biggest horror fiction magazines around. It was the sale that told me, *Hey, people like my stuff*, and *Hey, maybe I could do this for a living!* I'm not doing it for a living yet, but I think people still like my stuff. Of course these might be the same people who said my house doesn't smell like cat litter. Hmm...

It's also worth noting that this is one of my few stories that takes place in the United States. Early on I was under the impression that in order to get published in U.S. markets, all of my

stories must be set in the U.S., because I thought American readers only want to read stories set in their own country. I eventually realized this is not true — it's not even close to true — which is good, because there's no way I could have Felix Renn running around New York City (a place I've never been) instead of Toronto.

“The Candle” — This one might be my favourite story in the book. I'm not sure if a writer is allowed to pick favourites, but “The Candle” is dear to me, and it's a story that people seem to really enjoy, as well. I wrote it while my wife and I were renting the first floor of a house in Peterborough. The couple in the story isn't us, but all of the details are real. The creaky old house, the smell of oats from the Quaker factory, and the question of whether or not one of us remembered to blow out the candle before going to bed. Even the lingerie store called I See France is real, although the place has since closed. I know that because... well, nevermind.

So there you have it, the notes to my first collection of short stories. Of course, the stories behind the stories are never quite as interesting, but that's why the good ones go at the front of the book and these ones are put at the back.

I want to thank you for sticking with me to the end, and for buying *Every House Is Haunted*. (If you just downloaded these notes off my website without picking up the book, I should tell you they won't make much sense reading them on their own. Why not swing over to Amazon or Chapters and pick up a copy? I'll wait.)

I've got another book coming out in November 2012, this one a collection of Felix Renn stories called *SuperNOIRtural Tales*. There are some story notes in that book, as well, and while I can't promise they're any more entertaining than the notes you've read here, I can assure you the stories themselves are some of the best I've ever written. If *Every House Is Haunted* represents my beginning as a publisher author, then *SuperNOIRtural Tales* is my future.

Ian Rogers
Peterborough, Ontario
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