

# The Horror of Pretentiousness

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## THE GREAT AND SECRET SHOW

By Clive Barker

Harper & Row. 550 pp. \$19.95

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by David Foster Wallace

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Today less an art than an industry, a pop genre like horror is nevertheless its own literary province with its own evaluative standards. Good horror fiction knows its job and proceeds to do it efficiently. Aiming to stimulate pretty basic parts of the readerly psyche—to titillate, shock, agitate, scare, to provide both escape and reassurance-quality horror takes care to seem above all unpretentious: i.e., to keep its conceits simple and its settings banal enough to be familiar. By these modern standards, the fictions of Stephen King up through, say, "Cujo" represent nearly perfect American pop horror: Ensouled appliances run darkly amok in a world of Fritos, flatulence and trailer-park angst.

By the same standards, King's putative heir, Clive Barker, has produced in "The Great and Secret Show" a really disappointing novel. A Manichaeian soap opera billed by the author as about "Hollywood, Sex and Armageddon," Barker's novel is really just a derivative mix of King's apocalyptic "The Stand," the hell-beneath-suburbia shticks of "Poltergeist" and "Blue Velvet," the celebrity-bashing voyeurism of a Jackie Collins or Sidney Sheldon, and the sophomoric metaphysics of undergrad fantasy. Plus it's pretentious beyond belief.

One R. Jaffe, an unhappy postal worker, happens on an ultra-secret cabal of crazies who keep informing each other (through the U.S. mail!) that "America had a secret life ... the world was not as it seemed." Jaffe commits some murder, does some time-hitchhiking, makes the sort of windy proclamations to the audience we associate with cartoon villains, and before we know it has coerced a brilliant but fatally flawed all-purpose professor, one R. Fletcher, into developing a mysterious alchemical cordial that seems able to enhance evolution, alter body into spirit, induce psychosis, raise the dead or give people nasty Christlike stigmata, depending on authorial whim. This stuff transforms Jaffe and Fletcher, now "Dynasty"-type nemeses, into sort of odd archetypes of Really Good and Really Bad. Jaffe is the bad one. He keeps announcing to whoever will listen that he wants to use "The Art" to draw aside "The Veil" to reveal "The Shoal," "The Ephemeris" and the oceanic "Quiddity" that separates "The Cosm" from "The Metacosm" and the latter's sinister residents, "The Iad Uroboros."

Few of these ponderous terms are even explained, much less given referents, except via pronouncements like: "Quiddity is the sea. And in it are islands, called the Ephemeris"; and "This was an Art in defiance of flesh. All the profoundest certainties were forfeit in the face of it."

Amid all this forfeiture of profound certainties, the superhuman but awfully randy Jaffe and Fletcher are busily impregnating virgins in the small California town where their battle's brought them. The resultant hyper-evolved offspring grow up in a few pages, hate each other or fall desperately in love, and in *The Present* release the entombed spirits of their opposed fathers on the community and the universe. The resulting melodrama of sex, gore, celebrity, bad science and worse cosmology, drawn out to an excruciating 500-plus pages, leads to a mysterious Art-induced tear in reality's "screen," the epiphany that "The whole ... world's a movie," an imminent invasion by meta-creatures who resemble mountains covered with fleas, some heroic mystical puzzle-solving by a Hollywood screenwriter and a burned-out tabloid journalist, and salvation by atomic blast.

Lots of things make this novel too pretentious to like. The misuse of scientific and philosophic terms, for one thing. There's lots of alarming prose, here, stuff like: "It was twenty years since that life-shattering day when he'd found the symbol of The Shoal"; "He wasn't the only one reeling before this revelation"; "Reason could be cruel; logic could be lunacy."

But most of the pretension in this novel is a function of the fact that Clive Barker demands that the reader take him seriously but declines to do the artistic work necessary to make his story believable or even coherent. A contempt for his characters—none of whom even comes close to being 3-D—is matched by an odd condescension toward the reader that has Barker constantly telling you how to think and feel about everything in the book—e.g., the evil characters "shamble" and "cackle"; the good guys "stride" and "laugh heartily"—and playing fast and loose with the very concepts and theories he litters the story with. Physical laws are suspended and then restored (a nuclear explosion can vanquish creatures and seal holes that are in defiance of all physics) as it suits the author. One minute people are reeling before hideous revelations and shaking fists at the sky and declaring their shattered lives will never again be the same, and the next minute they're eating a bologna sandwich and negotiating with their editors about how to write the world's end as an Enquirer expose'.

The novel is not without some cool sections: a parodic battle between the TV stars who represent human dreams and the icky caterpillars that embody our fears; and a wonderful description of a talk-show comedian's plunge down a haunted hole would make a great short story: "Johnny Carson in Hell." But, for the most part, the same dull dispiritedness the British Barker so relentlessly attributes to his American characters pervades his own "The Great and Secret Show." Too long by half, and basically just silly, it seems the work of one of those dreaded commercial successes who've become so impressed

with themselves they no longer think they have to work at being interesting. Perhaps, if this tome doesn't do well, Barker will return to the gooey enthusiasm for straight pop horror that made him an '80s staple.

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The reviewer's books include *Girl With Curious Hair* and, with Mark Costello, the forthcoming *Signifying Rappers: Race and Pop in the Urban '80s*.

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