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Seton Hill Professor **SCARES** Up Some Laughs

an interview with jeannette author
Michael A. Arnzen

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Mike Arnzen thinks scaring people is a lot of fun. In fact, he's so good at it that he is a two-time recipient of the Bram Stoker Award from the Horror Writer's Association. This is no small accomplishment for someone who, admittedly, began writing horror because he thought he could do it better than Stephen King. But there's more to this Seton Hill professor than just being one of the most respected writers in the horror genre. He's also a poet, essayist, and instructor in Seton Hill's innovative MA program, Writing Popular Fiction. The Laurel Mountain Post caught up with this very busy Western Pennsylvania fright master at this year's World Horror Convention in New York City and got a chance to talk with Mike about horror, teaching, and fuzzy bunnies.

LMP: Tell us about yourself.

I was born in Amityville, NY – home of the Amityville Horror House. I moved to Colorado when I was 12. Later I went into the Army for a couple of years. When I was stationed in Germany I met my wife, Renate. After the Army, I got my PhD in English from the University of Oregon, and now I'm teaching at Seton Hill University.

LMP: Did coming from Amityville have any influence on your interest in horror?

Actually, I like to think the thing that influenced me the most was MAD Magazine! That and the movies I watched as a kid. My dad used to take me to all the horror movies and cover my eyes when there was too much blood and gore. I would hear people screaming around me and wonder what was going on! That really helped produce my imagination. As for the Amityville Horror house, I remember when the murders took place, but as for the whole "horror" part – people in town were saying things like, "can you believe they made a book about that?"

LMP: Your first novel, *Grave Markings*, won a Stoker Award for Best First Novel. What did it mean to you to win it?

Well, for one thing, it certainly helped with my self-esteem. When you're a writer you're constantly getting rejection slips, so when you get an award from your colleagues, you realize that rejection doesn't matter all that much anymore. You realize that the genre has embraced you. No matter how many rejection slips you get, you can look at that statue and say, "Stephen King has one of those things in his house too."

LMP: Is King a major influence on you?

Oh yeah. One of the reasons I started writing was because I was a heavy-duty Stephen King reader. I was in the Army reading Firestarter and thought, "I can do this." So I started writing and quickly realized just how hard it is, and how good King is.

LMP: How long have you been writing?

I've been writing seriously since 1986 and publishing since 1989.

LMP: Along with being a horror writer, you're also a Professor at Seton Hill. What do you teach there?

I teach in the Master's Program, Writing Popular Fiction. Seton Hill is a great place to teach. It is small enough to allow me to teach a variety of courses like Horror Writing, Composition, and Literary Criticism.

LMP: What is the most rewarding part of teaching at Seton Hill?

Seton Hill Professor SCARES Up Some Laughs



an interview with jeannette author Michael A. Arnzen

by Laurel Mountain Post Fiction Editor Drew Williams

The most rewarding part? That's hard to pin down to one thing, since I'm really just doing what I love all the time. It's my dream job, and I remember thinking the job description was custom-built for me. How many people ever really get to say that? But if I had to choose a favorite element, it would be the students. I don't think any other teaching position would allow me to work so closely with a horror or mystery writer. Usually English teachers always have to be "cheerleaders" for the classic works of literature, but the students in our program come to me already full of energy. Their passion is contagious, and just inspires me to write, and to become a better writer. That might sound sappy, but it's true.

LMP: Along with being a novelist, you're also a poet.

Yeah, I got into writing poetry in college. It became a fun, creative work space for me. It was always a playful thing for me.

LMP: That playfulness shows, you're definitely not the "typical" poet. You write some rather unusual stuff.

Yeah. My grandmother once asked me to write a poem about fuzzy, little bunnies. So I wrote a horror poem about them called "Slippers." It's in Gorelets.

LMP: What is Gorelets?

It's a collection of short poems I wrote specifically for a palm pilot. Each poem fits on a pilot's screen. I also did illustrations for the poems. Then I set up a website for people to download the poems onto their PDA's. I got a laugh imagining all these business people downloading all these sick, little poems.

LMP: There's obviously a lot of humor in your work. Do you think horror and humor naturally go together?

Oh definitely. I think humor and horror are related in a way that they both come from the body in an uncontrolled way. I'm the kind of person who laughs when I'm afraid. I laugh when I'm nervous, and I think a lot of people do. There is something very human about laughter; after all, only humans laugh. And horror has to have some kind of humanity about it in order to be meaningful. The stuff that takes itself so seriously and has no humor, is usually stuff people don't relate to.

LMP: You recently published a new novel, *Play Dead*. What's that about?

That started out as my Master's thesis, so it is kind of experimental. I've revised it over the years, and it has just come out in its completed form from Raw Dog Screaming Press. The book is like a deck of cards with fifty-two chapters and broken into four parts like the suits. The premise is that there is a game

of poker played by some compulsive gamblers and staked by this rich casino owner. He gives the players these disposable cameras and tells them to take pictures and make their own deck of cards that will be used in the game. Soon it turns out that the people who are in these pictures are turning up dead.

LMP: Do you play poker?

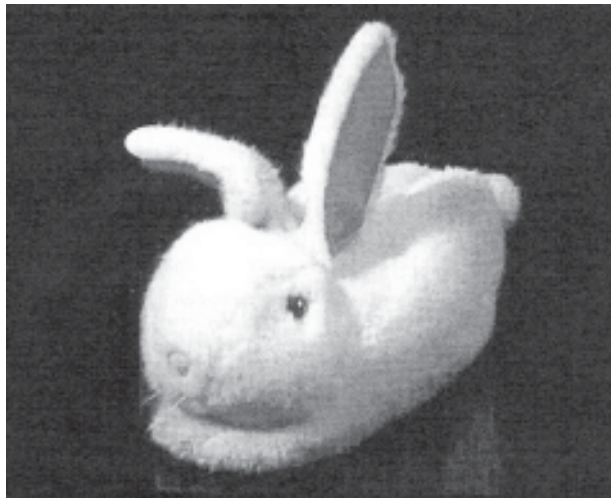
Oh yeah. I love it. Actually, I just competed in a charity poker tournament. I played for a childhood literacy program called In2Books (in2books.org). The program provides free books to kids and then sets them up with an adult pen pal and the two have an opportunity to talk to each other about the book. It's pretty cool.

FUZZY BUNNIES

the eyes roll back
and accusingly glare
when my feet slide forward
and hot rabbit innards
squirt between my toes

only then do I see
why these furry white skins
are called slippers

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LMP: So what are you working on now?

I'm putting together a new fiction collection for a small press that is interested in doing a "Best of Arnzen" book with a few stories, poems, and essays. I'm also working on a new novel set in Western PA about a twisted veterinarian.

LMP: Do you think the Westmoreland County area is a good setting for "horror" stories?

Definitely! Just the other day I tried taking a short cut from Jeanette to Irwin, and ended up lost in a

maze of roads that all seemed to lead to cemeteries no matter which way I turned. It was bizarre. Plus there is so much history here; everything from the run down factories to the battlefields has so many tales to tell, so many ghosts of the past to unleash. At the same time there is so much hidden beauty and wonder. Plus, we've got a lot of "characters" in the area.

LMP: Last question. Star Wars or Star Trek?

(Laughing) Oh, Star Trek for sure.



A native of McKeesport, PA, Drew Williams received his PhD from Indiana University of Pennsylvania and teaches creative writing at North Carolina Central University. His first novel, *Night Terrors*, was named Sime-Gen's novel of the year for 2001. He lives in Fuquay-Varina, NC with his wife, two kids and a finicky cat. Keep up with Drew at his website: www.drewwilliams.com or send an email to DrewWilliams@LaurelMountainPost.com.

Keep up with Michael Arnzen at www.Gorelets.com - try the online refrigerator magnet poetry !

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- **Continuity** — Students currently in grades 2-5 participate with increasingly complex curriculums and book choices each year.

For more information or to get involved, contact **In2Books** at: 1250 Connecticut Ave. NW Suite 200 Washington, DC 20036, Tel: 202.223.5300, or www.In2Books.org.

**"horror has to have some kind
of humanity about it
in order to be meaningful"**

MEET THE AUTHOR Michael A. Arnzen

October 7th, 7pm

Barnes & Noble
Monroeville Mall, Monroeville, PA
Play Dead Book Signing

October 8th, 7pm

DV8 Espresso Bar & Gallery
208 South Pennsylvania Ave, Greensburg, PA
Poetry Reading featuring
Gorelets, 100 Jolts, and Rigormarole

October 22nd

Ligonier Valley Writers
Scottdale, PA
Horror and Fantasy Writing Workshop

October 27th, 7pm

Barnes & Noble
Monroeville Mall, Monroeville, PA
Guest Visit with Short Story Book Group

October 29th, 7pm

Barnes & Noble
HWY 30, Greensburg, PA
Reading and Play Dead Book Signing



Mary's Laurel Mountain Post Online Trivia Contest

log on to play:

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Jennifer Diana of Blairsville,
who received a \$10 gift certificate
from **The Tree House of Ligonier!**