



Entertainment News

Exorcising Demons

By: Amy Brummer , TimeOFF Bucks County

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Evil lurks in 'Little Knives,' a short-story collection by Yardley, Pa., writer Christopher Davis.

It isn't the monster locked up in the Gothic castle that you have to be worried about, it's the vampire who attends your AA meeting, or the werewolf who just started cutting your hair.

In *Little Knives* (iUniverse, 2004, \$15.95), a collection of short stories by Yardley, Pa., writer Christopher Davis, evil lurks in dark places and broad daylight, taking the form of words, birds, fungus and even living, breathing humans.

Like folktales culled from around the globe, the stories speak to the attitudes of an era or a region, peering in on modern-day Chicago, 19th-century Savannah, Ga., or the battlegrounds of World War I. Individually, the stories are punchy, quick reads, and as a collection, they serve as a reminder that fear is ancient, and can crop up in both familiar and unexpected places.

"They are not simply stories about werewolves and vampires and ghosts," Mr. Davis says. "I mean they are on the surface. But they are really stories about us, about our own guilt and repression. And ultimately, they are stories about where we live and who we are."

Mr. Davis, who grew up in Richboro, explains that while every place in America has its ghost story, Bucks County is blessed, or cursed, with a lion's share due to its rich history. A fictional river town in the Delaware Valley serves as the backdrop for "Fruits of Labor," a story that taps into three different time periods and reflects on the changing nature of the region. In Wickweko Woods, the spirit of a Lenni Lenape Indian, a 19th-century farmer and a modern-day family intersect, weaving together a short history of the property where their paths cross. As these living and dead spirits continue to serve their individual agendas, their efforts at stewardship over the land end with tragic consequences.

"I think a lot of what makes any tale real," Mr. Davis says, "whether it's horror, or science fiction, or even romance, is grounding it in a sense of place and time with people doing things that people really do. The joke of horror is often, 'Why did they go into that house?' If there is one overriding principal



TIMEOFF/AMY BRUMMER

Christopher Davis' short-story collection features diverse settings such as Chicago and World War I battlegrounds.

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through it all, it is that if at any moment a story becomes too fantastical, it no longer holds appeal for me. There has to be some sense of reality that takes a wrong turn."

For this reason, Mr. Davis is diligent about researching the background of his stories. He says one of his pet peeves is when something takes the reader out of the story because it is historically or culturally inaccurate. Therefore, he delves into the larger backdrop of his stories, whether it is France during the Crusades, the setting for his story "Somewhere, Beyond the Sea," or a medical condition like claustrophobia, which factors into his story "Heirloom."

"I have to do so much research because I wanted all the facts to be right," Mr. Davis says. "I read a lot about people who were claustrophobic. If they see hair in a sink they will freak out, and they shave off their eyebrows, and it is a real condition. Once I understood what that condition was all about, I had fun playing around with what effect that would have on a marriage."

Judging by his cleanly shaved scalp, it is not hard to imagine where some of Mr. Davis' ideas might come from, though he blames his hair-free coif more on the cruel fate of balding than a compulsive disorder. But he does admit that the obsession of writing these stories took its own toll on his wife, Amy, who had to tolerate his preoccupation, as well as proofread pages.

"Some writers use the metaphor of birth when they talk about writing," Mr. Davis says, "and I think that is very positive, but it doesn't work for me. Exorcising one's demons is the metaphor that works for me. Maybe it is because of the subject matter, but it really is appropriate, because I would lie in bed at night, unable to sleep because I had to finish a character's story."

A graduate of LaSalle University in Philadelphia, with a master's degree in English literature from the University of Delaware, Mr. Davis is a great fan of the short story. He wrote *Little Knives* while between jobs, in the economic downturn after 9/11, keeping a schedule of one story a month. Each written with a different narrative voice, the stories skip through time and place. Whether looking through the eyes of a young Confederate widow, or eavesdropping on demonic crows intent on breaking up a marriage, Mr. Davis' stories are layered with details and nuance, and he cites Edgar Allen Poe and H.P. Lovecraft as his strongest influences.

"The two writers differ," he says, "in that Poe had narrators who were unreliable. If it is a first-person narrative, you have to wonder, 'What is this person's motivation?' and Poe was fantastic at that. The unreliable narrator was something I fell in love with from a very early age. Lovecraft was on the other side of it. His characters weren't so real, but his places were just creepy. They were so immersed in the reality of New England that you come away thinking, 'If I could only describe a place like that.'"

In fusing these two components, Mr. Davis adds a further dimension by bringing a passion for history and culture to his stories. Written in a subtle, engaging manner, the stories are not particularly gory as much as they are chilling. In the World War I story, "No Man," a downed aerial-reconnaissance photographer must choose between sure death by enemy fire, or share a trench with corpse-eating ghouls. By focusing on the development of the character and scenario — a frightened British man seeking refuge in a Canadian army unit under attack by the Germans — Mr. Davis sweeps the reader along in the suspense. Fueled by a sense of compassion for the photographer, and the relationships he forms with the soldiers in the company, the reader is likely to be equally unnerved by the chloride gas attack that occurs as by the ghouls.

"I think that is the safe thing about writing," Mr. Davis says. "What is really scary is a car accident. Or the World War I story — I don't think the horrible thing about that story is that there are ghouls in the trenches, but on that date, at that time, it was the first chemical warfare, the first time gas was used and that is horror to me. It is terrible to me that we would figure out new ways to more economically and efficiently kill one another."

"What horror fiction allows the writer and the reader to share, is a way to escape those real fears and exorcise them in some more healthy way."

Little Knives is available on the Web at www.barnesandnoble.com and www.amazon.com. On the Web: www.littleknives.com

