

Writers that inspired me: Clive Barker

Fraser Ayres

I grew up on an estate in Leicester in the 1980s, raised by my mum, who with limited resources did everything in her power to encourage my love for books. And it was a love. I loved the way they felt in my hands, the smell of new pages, the oil of old pages. (You know, even to this day, I still can't really deal with eReaders...) I basked in words and spelling, revelled in creating out of disparate letters and letting my mind run riot on concepts and worlds painted in my mind's eye by wordsmiths.

When we went grocery shopping, I would be let loose on the WH Smith books section. Quickly, the books for my own age became boring and I stumbled across a book that I knew I wasn't supposed to be reading, but it called to me – *Nightbreed: The Making of the Film* by Clive Barker.

Every Saturday I would read a little more and receive a glimpse into an entirely other world. Ancient monsters made personable, a catacomb sanctuary of misfits and outcasts, a tireless villain who pursued our anti-heroes ceaselessly, more monster than those he pursued... It was exhilarating.

I quickly connected the dots and realised that Clive Barker was in fact a prolific artist who had written entire universes that I could get lost in, and the film *Nightbreed* was actually based on a book called *Cabal*. I moved quickly from there to *The Hellbound Heart*, which told a unique and forbidden love story, then *Imajica*, that spanned realms, his *Weaveworld* set in the intricate fabric of an ancient carpet and, of course, the six *Books of Blood* collections, where short stories were the sinewy and horrific backbone of an anthology of horror. And then, on the flipside, children's books such as *The Thief of Always*, which is still a classic today. Written at a time when children's books were patronising, it was frank and captivating to young and adult minds alike.

Barker is one of the few authors whose work I HAVE to get as soon as it's released; his storytelling is still entirely unique. My cupboards are filled with first editions and signed copies of his work, alongside his forays into graphic novels and artistry over the decades!

He has an ability to transport the reader into entirely new circumstances and worlds, whilst still keeping a firm, reassuring hand on those that choose to go on that journey with him. Where many would draw upon familiar tropes of aliens or monsters we already can name, Clive Barker creates entirely new mythologies and characters that have stories to tell that we've never heard or seen before.

He's also a prolific painter, playwright and artist, and that is one of the incredible things about Clive Barker; his ability to remain entirely mercurial in his practice and his content. He writes incredible horror but also captivating children's stories; he expresses worlds beyond our own in a way in which imagination and reality intermingle seamlessly; but he can

make the abhorrent beautiful and the abominable relatable. He is truly a master weaver.

And today, his work continues to influence many writers, including myself, as well as bleeding into the fields of cinematography and filmmaking in which his work set the bar for 'realism' in the 1980s when dealing with the fantastic.

Clive Barker has been a striking influence on my life since I was a child, and now as an adult, his driven, artistic push in all directions inspires me, not only in my own creativity but in how I approach it. A refusal to be pigeonholed, an understanding that the most heinous and the most sublime can coexist (I'd argue, as I'm sure Clive Barker would, that perhaps they bring a richness to each other...). And, with an understanding that art can come in numerous guises, perhaps most importantly, to have the courage as an artist to pursue those forms that enable the purest form of storytelling, no matter what they may be. Although, that does mean that everything I write myself I do have to run through a filter... 'Have I nicked that from Clive Barker?'

Fraser Ayres

Fraser is an award-winning actor/writer/director as well as CEO and founder of the TriForce Creative Network and dandi.org.uk; an organisation set up in 2003 with a core ethos of 'inclusivity' that promotes equal opportunities in the entertainment industry.

He is mixed race (Barbadian/Scottish), born and raised in Leicester, from a single parent, working-class family. This very much informs all his work on and off-screen.

Fraser is responsible for creating the only comedy panel show about Black history, *'Sorry, I Didn't Know*, and his writing includes *In the Long Run*, *Eastenders*, and *Lagging*, alongside radio productions such as *Maynard* for BBC Radio 4 (receiving the 2021 Imison Award) and *Space is the Place*, a five- part dramatization of the lives of the jazz greats for Jazz FM.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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