

late night library

Late Night Interview with Jeffrey Ford – *A Natural History of Hell*



If stories are an attempt to connect with and understand the world, then Jeffrey Ford's story collection *A Natural History of Hell*, out now from Small Beer Press, unearths possibilities in our sleeping hearts. The unknowable woods, the rotting house you would scurry by as the daylight wanes (but end up exploring anyway), these places hold insights into who we are, and who we want to be.

Ford chatted with Late Night Library about many things, including how he is potentially being stalked by a massive fox (or the entire countryside's army of wildlife, and just maybe escaped convicts); the act of constructing short stories; a very important distinction between grotesque and strange, including his preference for giving readers "the yips." Read on, and find the shadows peeling back to reveal...

AUSTIN WILSON: Animals feature in several of the collections' stories, sometimes as no more than pets or wild creatures, but also anthropomorphic monstrosities. What do you think we fear more: the familiar turning on us, or the attack of the unknown?

JEFFREY FORD: I think "the familiar turning on us" is actually an aspect of "the attack of the unknown." For most scary stories the mood and scene are more important than the menace. As for animals in the stories, it makes sense. I live in a house with 3 dogs and 6 cats. There are cows and goats and horses just across the road. Out back, there are deer eating from our garden and apple trees, and in the winter, I suppose, coyotes eating deer in the snow covered, stubble fields. At night, in spring, the fox comes, stands behind the garage and cries out with a sound like Satan choking on a wishbone. The animals are everywhere.

AW: That's a great way to approach writing a scary story, specifically when trying to unsettle and not simply startle. I think horror films (or thrillers, ghost stories, the many sub-genres etc.) can so easily startle someone, the focus on setting and its many possibilities falls away, whereas prose is a little more capable of eroding our comfort from the inside out. And maybe it was inevitable, but I'm imagining a terrifying and immense fox stalking your backyard, coughing all night.

JF: There's all kinds of fucking creatures around here. You can hear them creeping around out there at night – deer, coyote, foxes, possums, raccoons, etc. The dogs will just start barking seemingly for no reason, and no doubt the damn creatures are up to something in the backyard. They're not the worst varmints, though. Two summers ago this guy escaped from a roadside cleanup crew from one of the prisons and ran north from route 70. He wound up in the endless cornfields behind our house. People would spot him every now and then. He'd been in the service and had special survival skills from what they said on the radio. There were cops around with shotguns walking the straight roads between the cornfields for about a month. Somehow the escapee eluded them in a stolen truck. We were all jumpy, not knowing where he might surface, whose garage he was sleeping in.

AW: How focused are you on structure when putting together a short story? Is there a looming sense that you need to utilize a classic formula (i.e. three acts) if structure is called for? Can this happen organically as opposed to being planned?

JF: When I think about structure in stories or novels I don't perceive it as architecture or architectonic. Actually I can't completely visualize it but I feel it like an evolving music. I know writers who do think architecturally about structure and lay out a floor plan before they begin building. Poe is a writer like that, and a great one too. It's one approach. Organic, I think, best describes the approach I have. I'm about working to discover the structure as I go along, at times like I'm excavating something that already exists on its own, at other times witnessing the plot like a growing plant I can't see but can feel like music. I realize that hardly makes any sense.

AW: I think the idea of feeling a story like music makes total sense, particularly while contemplating how writing a scene that feels wrong is so similar to how an ear may pick out a single note that doesn't carry the song forward. How much editing, generally, does this style lead to?

JF: I edit as I go. Every day when I start writing, I'll bring the piece up and go back to the beginning or some prior place in the text and read through and edit as I go. When I finish that process, I start writing for the day. It's a way to read the text multiple times, fixing and pruning each day, and also a good way to fall into the story.

AW: How do you think readers prepare themselves – subconsciously or otherwise – for the shorter term investment in a short story?

JF: There are as many ways to approach the reading of a novel or short story as there are readers. To be honest, I have no idea how others would prepare themselves to read. For me, I don't consider the duration of a work, the page length, etc., when I open a story or a book. I know I'm entering the world of fiction or a world of fiction. If in reading the first few paragraphs I'm drawn to the characters, the setting, the flow of the language, and the promise of a story well-told, I don't care how long it will take me to read it. I afford stories and novels the same sense of time –fiction time. As far as what anybody else does – go for it. Saying this, I am aware that there is more to the difference between writing a novel and a story, but here I'm just speaking about reading.

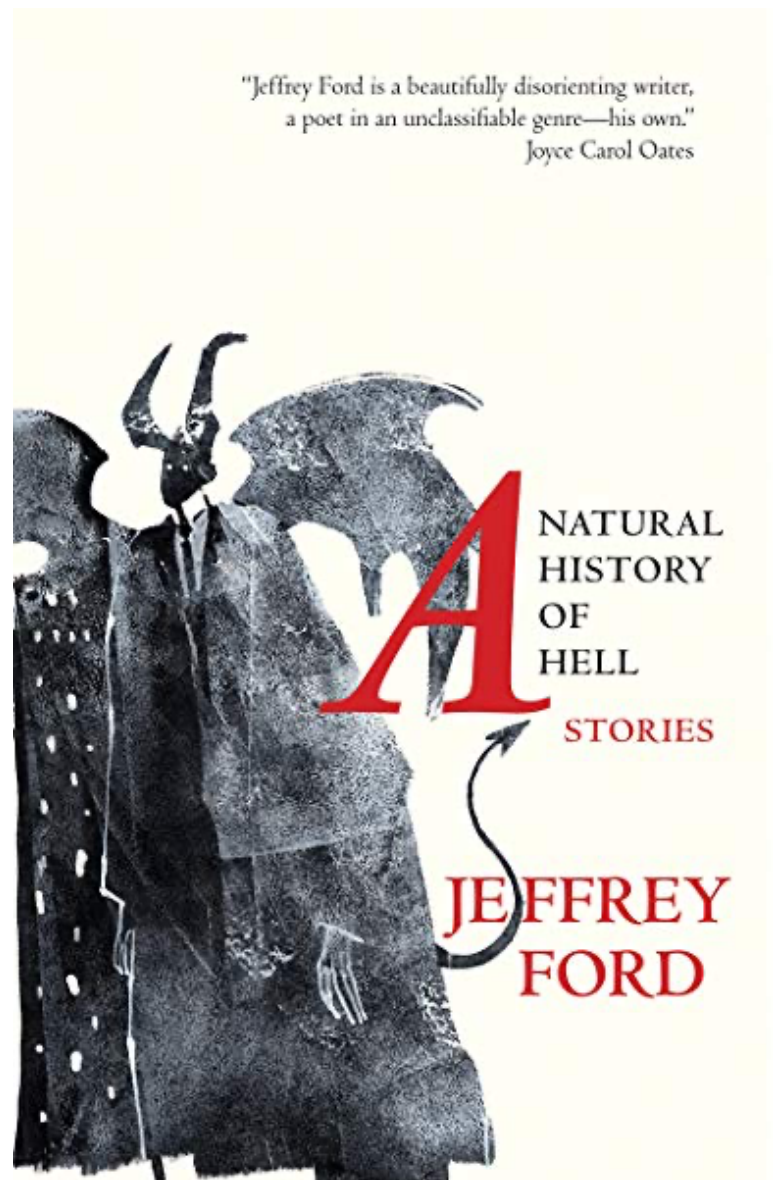
AW: God makes an appearance as a character in one short (title withheld to maintain the story's narrative), with an uppercase 'G'. Is the moment satirical, sacrilegious, or something else entirely?

JF: I know what story you're referring to but I can't remember what I was thinking when I wrote it or whether I was thinking at all. I do recall sitting out back on a summer afternoon and watching a surprise cool breeze sift through the silver backed leaves of a tulip tree and thinking about that story and how fucking weird it was. Other than that I'm a blank on it. I usually leave this kind of stuff to the reader to figure out. Since you ask, though, I think the moment is not satirical but what the story wanted it to be. Satire, I think is a kind of illegitimate offspring of exposition, using fictional techniques often even though it's an essay. There was no meaning consciously inferred by God's turn in the story.

AW: I love how fucking weird that story is! And God showing up fit it wonderfully, too. Also knowing you were sitting out back and watching a breeze shift silver leaves struck me as incongruous at first, but a detail from the story occurred to me – the aforementioned wings – and now it seems perfectly apt. It makes me wonder if the leaves influenced the wings, and if so, what may have influenced God showing up.

JF: Wow, the wings. Nice touch. I had no idea. I don't know why God shows up in it. There's a lot to ponder in that story. I leave it to readers to have their way with it.

AW: Readers are given many striking images – a hand floating in stew; wings covered in fish scale, to name two from a single story – and the sense of horror is driven by visuals. Are you always drawn more to the grotesque, or what would be considered “strange”?



JF: The distinction between grotesque and strange, the two words that you use in your question, is that the grotesque is something like the monster in a story (a definitive physical entity), the focus, whereas the strange is the setting, the mood (more enveloping and pervasive. They both inform each other but personally I'm far more interested in the strange than the grotesque. To write a ghost story, you don't need a ghost, just a haunting. The same monster can appear in two stories, one as a fierce, cunning predator, and the other, as a clownish buffoon, depending upon the setting and the mood.

AW: Is setting and mood the first aspect of a story you focus on, after the initial idea?

JF: Actually, I may get the idea for a story by focusing solely on setting and mood. I don't know other writer's experiences, but it seems to me that stories will come at you from all different avenues and angles. Get the setting and the mood right in your mind sometimes, and that combination will dream the characters into existence.

AW: While you're writing stories intended to unsettle or scare, do you ever feel the emotions sought in readers? Or are you disconnected from those possibilities? Protected against them?

JF: Intention is something you may not know for many months or years after a story is written, published, and read by others. In fact you may never know, so it's problematic to speak about it. I'm not big on scaring – like the cat jumping out of the closet in the haunted house in a 1950's ghost movie. I'd rather engender a case of what my father-in-law called– the yips. He told me that when he was a kid his older cousin, Walter, took him to Coney Island, and they saw a guy pull a wheelbarrow full of bricks with wires attached to his eyelids. "Gave me the yips," he said.

Jeffrey Ford was born on Long Island in New York State in 1955 and grew up in the town of West Islip. He studied fiction writing with John Gardner at S.U.N.Y Binghamton. He's been a college English teacher of writing and literature for thirty years. He is the author of eight novels including *The Girl in the Glass* and four short story collections. He has received multiple World Fantasy and Shirley Jackson awards as well as the Nebula and Edgar awards among others. He lives with his wife Lynn in a century old farm house in a land of slow clouds and endless fields.

[Austin Wilson](#) writes comics and prose, his first graphic novel, *Re*pro*duct* is now available for [pre-order](#) from Magnetic Press, and he has a short story in the *Mythic Indy* anthology. Favorite authors include Nora Ephron, Michael Chabon, and Ray Bradbury. Find him on twitter at: <https://twitter.com/austinRwilson>.

Posted by Late Night Library on: October 31, 2016