

AT DEATH'S ALTAR: AN INTERVIEW WITH PHILIP FRACASSI

BY AARON J. FRENCH

Photo courtesy of Bethany Gilberston

Aaron J. French: Thanks for chatting with us. Could you tell our readers a little about your personal background and your work in the entertainment industry?

Philip Fracassi: Thanks for having me in this amazing magazine!

In regards to my background, yes, absolutely. I've always been a writer. I started writing stories in third grade and never stopped. Since I was a big reader of Stephen King, Dean Koontz and Clive Barker, I eventually took my first crack at writing horror in the seventh grade and fell in love with the genre. I continued writing, albeit with varied directions. During the aughts, I primarily wrote literary fiction, hundreds of stories and three novels, a sort of literary trilogy—"The Egotist," "Don't Let Them Get You Down," and "Happy Holly." "The Egotist" was self-published and is currently out of print, although I did recently fashion a Kindle e-book which is available online. I'm hoping all three novels will see the light of day, because I'll likely never write straight literary fiction again. Enjoying horror too much now to turn back, for better or worse.

Writing aside, I have quite a varied background—I've been a music executive, a security guard, I owned a rare

bookstore and art gallery in Venice Beach, founded and operated a publishing company, and have worked on and off in film & TV production for, well, a long time. Living in the Los Angeles area, our number one commodity is entertainment, so a good percentage of folks work, in one way or another, with film and television. Currently I split my time between writing and working as a Location Manager, which means I help find and secure any "real" location a show might need for filming, be it a city sidewalk, an office building, a house, or an amusement park. Whatever they need to get the scene. It can be a very interesting occupation, and it's a lot of fun to work on the big studio lots. Plus, working freelance means I can take off to write when needed, which is a key perk, for sure.

AJF: You've done some screenwriting. Tell us about that.

PF: I sort of fell into screenwriting. Being a writer in Los Angeles, it's a natural occupation to attempt, but it's such a brutal and overwhelmingly well-populated field that it is very hard to find and maintain any success. I was lucky enough to catch a break writing movies for children that involved talking dogs, and one of those movies, "Santa

Paws 2: The Santa Pups," from Disney Entertainment, was my first credited writing job. This was in 2011. In the five years since, I've focused all of my efforts on writing horror and supernatural-themed scripts, one of which sold in 2014 to Lifetime Television, a thriller called "Girl Missing," starring Francesca Eastwood. It's currently on demand via Amazon and iTunes. I'm still writing screenplays and am in development on a new thriller called "Vintage," which will hopefully go into production later in 2016. So keep an eye out for that one.

AJF: You create an interesting atmosphere with your writing. Which authors most influenced your craft? Why?

PF: Thank you for saying so. Let me start by saying that screenwriting is, quite obviously, a visual medium. There are very few abstract thoughts, hidden actions, pontifications or philosophizing, in a screenplay. It's Character, Action, Dialogue, Setting. So I think my work in screenwriting has allowed me to visualize, in a somewhat unique way, the scenes taking place during my stories. In turn, my hunch is that my stories—although prose-fueled and often filled with inner-thoughts and descriptive passages—maintain a strong visual element for the reader, simply because that's the way I've been trained to express myself in my work.

As far as tone, I like to think of myself as "old-school horror meets the new weird," the combination of which can create some interesting textures, for sure. "Altar" is a prime example.

In regards to authors, I've said before that there is a difference between authors I enjoy reading and authors who influence my work, whether it be the stories themselves or the way I write them. While I enjoy hundreds if not thousands of authors, there are very few I draw from that have affected my prose.

Those who have influenced me, then: from a literary standpoint, I'd say William Faulkner, for the liquidity of his sentences and phrases, Ernest Hemingway for his blunt

and brutal prose, and MR James for his ability to create a sensation of creepy, yet somehow formal, dread. More currently, Ralph Robert Moore for his intense physicality, and lastly Laird Barron, for teaching me that prose can infiltrate the subconscious and, while visiting, do some fairly significant damage. I once said, after reading Barron's "the worms crawl in," that he was a linguistic acrobat, and I still hold that he can do things with words that no other writer can. It's okay to call it genius.

AJF: Let's talk about your 2016 novella "Altar" published by Dunhams Manor Press. This is an awesome read. How did this story come about?



PF: Let me start by saying my stories would not have seen the light of day were it not for Jordan Krall and his excellent press, Dynatox Ministries. He was an early adopter of my work, and leads the charge of independent presses finding wonderful new authors.

Regarding "Altar," it's hard to discuss without giving too much away, but as with most of my story ideas, it really just popped into my head one day, at least the core concept. Sometimes, for me at least, I'll just be looking at something—in this case I was gazing lazily at a swimming pool—and a dark finger will poke my brain and I'll think, "What if?" And that "what if" is usually, uh, something fairly awful and, likely, supernatural, in the sense that it would never really happen. Would it?

But from that core idea comes the flowering of all the other ideas that go into it. In this case, I wanted that

core idea—a fairly implausible, but not totally unrealistic, disaster—to be something much bigger, something thematic and, as I said, supernatural. I thought a lot about the loss of innocence, and about shining a light on the awful things that happen in the darkest corners of childhood. Then it was just a matter of creating some different perspectives, adding a dash of family drama and a pinch of nostalgia and, Viola! Horror.

AJF: One of the things I like about your writing is that you don't shy away from addiction, family problems,

dysfunction—that sort of thing. It seems a common theme in your stories. Is it deliberate?

PF: It's not deliberate, and I'm not sure where it stems from. I had a very standard, happy childhood. I have two loving parents and a big family of very well-off, stable folks. So your guess is as good as mine.

I will say that I have a tendency to champion the children. I enjoy writing from a kid's perspective, but in a mature, complex way. I like giving kids a voice, a real voice. Maybe it's because I have a teenager, but there's definitely a part of me that wants to explore the complexities, real emotions and incredible suffering and decisions we make while growing up. The contrast between bitter, narrow-minded, calloused adults and the wide-open, sponge-like optimism and fear of a child is a sandbox I certainly enjoy playing in. Things like dysfunction and addiction exacerbate those relationships, among other catalysts, so that's likely why they rear their ugly heads. There's a lot of truth to horror, and I think that's one of the things that makes it so damn important.

AJF: "Altar" is a cool blend of vintage '80s with Lovecraftian undercurrents (literally). Could you tell us some of your favorite aspects of this novella?

PF: One of the things I wanted to do with this story was to create a continuous raising of stakes. Meaning, just when you think things can't possibly get any worse, they do. And then they do again. And again. There's nothing more entertaining, especially in this day and age, than pure surprise. Twist endings, unforeseen character choices, decisions made by the author or creator that legitimately shock the reader. We've seen this from the ending of "The Sixth Sense," to the bloody wedding during "Game of Thrones." Folks love to be surprised, and that's one of the primary things I wanted to do in this novella.

I don't want to just scare the reader; I want to surprise them.

AJF: You have another novella out with Dunhams Manor Press called "Mother" (2015). Tell us a little about that one. Do you prefer novellas as a format to novels?

PF: "Mother" is the story of what a marriage can become when neither member has fully established their personalities, their goals and their life ambitions. They have not fully become the person they are going to be, in other words. They're not done changing. Into what? Well, that's the surprise, and often not a pleasant one.

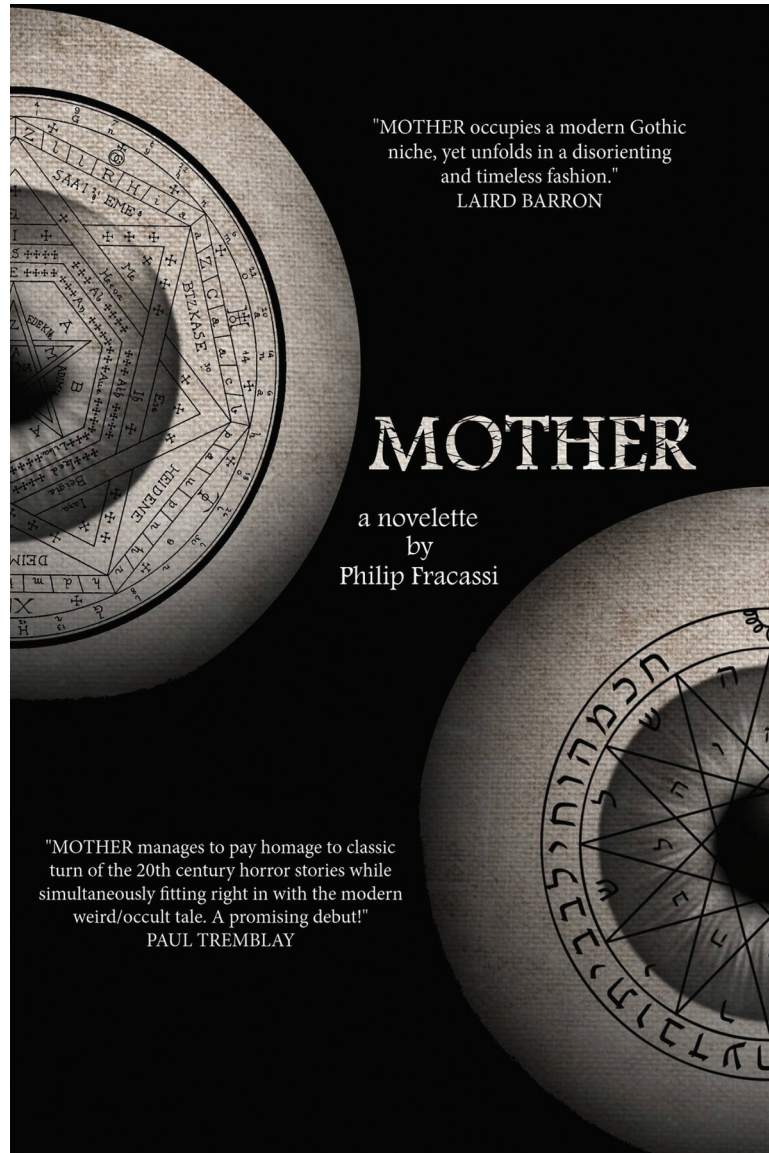
Whether it be from marrying too young, or being fooled by the other person's personality, marriages are often traps rather than unions. That said, this is really the core idea, and what sprouted from that germ was something much more sinister and monstrous.

Ultimately, "Mother" is about that dark night when you're lying in bed next to the person you're supposed to love, supposed to know better than anyone else in the world; but when you reach out your hand to touch them, something different lies there, something you have no understanding of, and now you have to live with that person, and bear the subsequent consequences. For better or for worse.

In the case of "Mother," the latter.

In regards to novellas versus novels, it really depends on the story. Is it a "scenario" story? In other words, is something bad happening to someone and

I'm there to relay the information? If so, then a novella, or novelette, might be the way to go. Or, am I world-building? Is there background information and a large cast of characters coming into play? Is this a 3-Act drama? If so, then a novel might be the proper length. I've used this example before, but take two Stephen King classics, both novels: "The Shining" absolutely needed to be a novel. Lots of background, lots of world-building with the Overlook and the ghostly residents. Now take "Cujo," a novel that would have been much better as a 50-page novella. It's fleshed out to 300 pages by needless side-stories that have, ultimately,



"MOTHER occupies a modern Gothic niche, yet unfolds in a disorienting and timeless fashion."
LAIRD BARRON

MOTHER

a novelette
by
Philip Fracassi

"MOTHER manages to pay homage to classic turn of the 20th century horror stories while simultaneously fitting right in with the modern weird/occult tale. A promising debut!"
PAUL TREMBLAY

no part of the real story, which is the rabid dog and the terror he inflicts on those who get in his way. So the answer is that the story dictates the length, not the writer.

AJF: Who are some of your favorite authors currently active in the genre?

PF: Oh gosh, how much space do you have? Well, let's play this like someone who's never read horror outside of the King/Koontz/Barker triumvirate. Here's just a few: Laird Barron, Adam Nevill, Ralph Robert Moore, Paul Tremblay, Joe Hill, Jeffrey Ford, Stephen Graham Jones, Ray Garton, Ronald Malfi, Brian Keene, John Langan and S.P. Miskowski are a good start.

On the up-and-coming side of things, I've greatly enjoyed Ted E. Grau, Gemma Files, Christopher Slatsky, Jordan Krall, Michael Wehunt, John Claude Smith, Lynda Rucker, John Boden, Damien Angelica Walters; and I've recently read books by Jonathan Janz, Brett McBean, John Foster, Chris Kelso, Mike Griffin, Scott Adlerberg and John McNee that I liked quite a bit.

Allow me to throw a few publishers out there, as well: Word Horde, Undertow Publications, JournalStone, Sinister Grin Press, Raw Dog Screaming Press, Lazy Fascist Press, ChiZine, Shock Totem, Dim Shores, Dynatox Ministries... these are all presses putting out great writing that readers should invest in. I could go on for pages...

AJF: That's a great list. And finally, what interesting projects do you have on the horizon and what are some of your long term writing goals?



PF: On the screenwriting front, as mentioned, I'm working on revisions for my supernatural thriller, "Vintage" and am planning to write a feature film adaptation of a Christopher Ropes short story called "Complicity" in the upcoming months, time permitting.

I have a lot of stories banging around right now, and I've sold a few stories to be published in 2016, two of which will be put out by Ravenwood Quarterly and the associated press run by Travis Neisler. I also have a novelette being published in a new anthology, based on or inspired by murder ballads, by the wonderful Egaeus Press, which is due late in the year. I believe there's a story in an upcoming issue of *Dark Discoveries* as well! So check that out.

Looking forward to next year, there's a lot of crazy news. I recently signed a publishing deal that will include a novella, a collection (my first!) and potentially a novel in 2017 with

the wonderful press, JournalStone, home of such authors as Laird Barron, Jonathan Maberry and Christopher Golden. Talk about a dream come true! Lastly, in a very exciting turn of events, I am in talks to create a novelization for a major entertainment title, which would be a bit of a game-changer for me.

In terms of goals, it's fairly simple. I'd like to be able to support myself as a writer, however I need to piece that together. I want to keep writing movies and horror stories because I really do love it and find it incredibly fulfilling. If I'm able to write until I'm 90 and have a roof over me and an idea in my head that might terrify a few people, then that's a deal I'm happy to take. That's the great thing about being a horror writer, you never want to be anything else.



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