

John Stanley is one of the country's leading authorities on horror, science-fiction, and fantasy films. He sees virtually every horror movie and reviews them in his unique "Creature Features Movie Guide." Stanley's book is an indispensable treasure for fans of the horror, sci-fi, and fantasy genres. (Mail order information is available at <http://www.netwizards.net/~creature/>)

Stanley also was a staff writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle* Sunday Datebook for many years, and he was the second host of "Creature Features," which aired every Saturday night on Channel 2 (KTVU) from 1971 to 1984. Stanley started hosting the show in 1979, replacing Bob Wilkins. In March, 1990, I had the opportunity to talk with Mr. Stanley at the *Chronicle*. At the time, his book was in its third edition.

**Q:** Your book, "Revenge of the Creature Features Movie Guide," contains almost 4000 capsule reviews of horror, sci-fi, and fantasy films. Did you actually see all of the movies in the book yourself or do you have an editorial staff assisting you?

**A:** Gee, I wish I did. You know I see all these other movie guides that come out on an annual basis, and it's getting to the point where they have to have four and five page introductions to get everyone's name in who helped review the movies that came out during the past year. I'm afraid I don't have that luxury. I see as many films as I humanly can. And normally, if I'm working on the guide, I will see four or five films per week. This is an average. This consists of movies on videocassette, movies I might catch on television, like movies for TV because those are included, or it might be a movie on the big screen.

**Q:** So how many do you end up seeing usually in any given year?

**A:** Last year, I saw over 500 movies...

**Q:** Do you ever get tired of the genre? It usually seems as if there are at least five horrendously awful horror flicks for every good one.

**A:** It's probably more like nine bad ones to every good one. Yeah, I do get tired sometimes, and when I feel that coming on, I switch over to other kinds of films that I like. And I like westerns and I like musicals, especially. And I will watch a few of those, and pretty soon I've rekindled my desire to go on.... And another way I keep myself going is quarterly I bring out what I call "The Shock Supplement," which is a quarterly update. And each issue contains about 125 new films of one kind or another, which are eventually going to go in the guide. But by creating that supplement quarterly, I force myself to see 125 movies at least during that period.

**Q:** So do we have the possibility of another book in the works, on westerns or musicals?

**A:** No, one is enough, particularly when you consider that of all the genres they're producing these days, horror, science fiction, and fantasy comprise probably 40% of all the films that are turned out. So that makes my job unusually difficult—to keep up. And I do try to keep up. I really do. I want the book each time to be as fresh as possible. And I'm seeing not just new films, but I'm also seeing films that resurface on television. Sometimes, I'll go back and see a film a second time, because in five and ten years, your perspective changes and your taste changes and you realize that there are some things in this film you haven't talked about that you do want to talk about. So it's important not only to see new films but old films, revivals and things like that.

**Q:** What draws you to horror?

**A:** Well, yeah, I've thought about this. I think there are two factors. One, is the very fact that I've got the book in motion. Okay. And it's a perennial favorite now, and it's something that I can constantly renew and update. Sometimes the circumstances of life just lead us to these things. But I do have a great interest in film, of which part of that interest, of course, is the horror genre. So I really think this book didn't just happen by accident; I don't mean to give that impression. I do have a great, great love for it. And that love grows as I see more and more films being made, as I see new horizons in horror films, as I see new special effects and new directors coming along trying to push the edge out a little further. That's the real joy of doing this book. It's to discover those films which push the edge out. And you say, "Wow!" Like the first time you saw *Star Wars*—that's what you're looking for....

Recently I just re-reviewed *They Came From Within*. I hadn't seen this film in a long time, in more than 15 or 16 years, and I suddenly realized now the perspective of history since then. I'm able to look at that film and now realize that within it are the antecedents of *Alien* and the whole slasher genre to come. This film is a trend setter. So I'm now able to put that in the next book; I've rewritten that particular paragraph and that will give me a little bit better perspective of the history of these films.

**Q:** What do you think draws the masses to horror films? And, in particular, what was the appeal of the slasher film, which was so alarmingly popular in the early '80s?

**A:** Well, I think the appeal is vicarious. When we read about a plane blowing up in the air and

bodies falling miles to the ground, it's pretty horrifying. But when we go to a movie and we see a girl entering a dark, gloomy house and she's kind of walking around not knowing quite what's going on—but we do know what's going on—I think we are able to live these kind of terrible things but in an entertaining and enjoyable way. And therefore, as I say, it's vicarious. It stirs our blood up. We want to participate with that person, but when we do we don't get hurt. We're not the ones who are going to get slashed or cut up.

And as far as the unfortunate popularity of the slasher films—they just went on and on and on forever—it's one genre that seems to have been imitated to death. That and the "Mad Max" films. That genre seems to have finally died out. They both seem to have finally died out. But it really does trace back to who was going to the movies or who continues to go to the movies: the teenager. There was a movie made for the teenagers, for those from 15 to 25, in which again they could make this active participation, but with people they could identify with: students who are out in the woods stupidly wandering around. They could identify with that.

**Q:** Which horror films of the 1980s stand out in your mind as being especially innovative and imaginative?

**A:** There's no doubt in my mind that the two films—and they really came out at the end of the '70s—that sparked the genres of the '80s, were *Alien*, from which we began to get all of our movies that now blended the two genres together—the horror and the science fiction—and then the *Mad Max* film, which also came out the same year, 1979, which gave us all of our post-holocaust sequels since. I think these two films have been most imitated and, of course, the slasher film—those go back to the '70s. That really is more deeply rooted in middle to late '70s and then trails off into the '80s. But I would say those two trends probably are the most noticeable when you look back over the past decade. Can you think of any I haven't thought of? There could well be another. Gee, the space adventure movie has really not been in vogue since the last *Star Wars*, except for the *Star Trek* series which continues. Even that has begun to wane a little bit. The last film [*Star Trek V*] did not perform that well at the box office. So I really see the science fiction film not in the vogue that we thought it was going to be. I think the "Golden Period" was from late '70s to the early '80s.

**Q:** Do you think the failure of the last *Star Trek* movie was so much a result of people losing interest in science fiction or just the fact that the movie, as I said in my review, sucked Dilithium crystals? It really was the weakest of the series.

**A:** Yeah. I think when you have a series movie, people have expectations. And when you have a good film, like the one that preceded it, *The Voyage Home*—the one about the whales—I think your story line has to at least come up to that if not improve on it. And I think William Shatner had a good premise, which was basically the Enterprise goes in search of God, but it was the fulfillment of that premise where the film fell short. It was still an entertaining film in that you got a lot of the characterizations in the interactions of the crew of the Enterprise. But ultimately, you have to have a satisfying story that resolves the whole thing, and he just didn't have it in this case. It is a hard theme to resolve. How do you resolve the search for God? No one ever has. And I think Shatner just wrote himself into a corner, and nobody could really write their way out of it.

**Q:** How would you characterize the current state of the horror genre; is it in a creative phase?

**A:** Probably it's in a special effects creative stage. I wish, however, it were in a story creative stage. So many companies have gone bankrupt or belly-up in the last year or two that it sort of indicates that as good as the special effects are in these kinds of films, audiences are still looking for a good story. You're still looking for some characters to support those special effects. Some people. Some live people we can identify with. And I think the failure to be able to write the stories can be traced back to the death of the studio system. We now have a system where anybody who can raise financing for a film, who's good enough to go out and make a deal, is now in a position to make a movie. And usually that person also provides the script; either he wrote it himself, or she did, or it's purchased. But the education in taste for film and for story has been lost. There's no longer the battery of screenwriters available who have learned the task of screenwriting and who have perfected the art and are able to produce screenplays that have those characters and have those plot twists and so on that good movies really need. That's lost. We now have the individual who may not be very trained in writing, but he's trained in making a deal. Do you ever go to see a movie because it's a good deal? "There's a good

deal playing down at the Roxie.” (Chuckles) Nobody talks or thinks that way. We go to see the final product. We go to see the movie, and too often we’re disappointed.

**Q:** What do you foresee for the genre in the 1990s?

**A:** Well, we sort of get back to the same problem: who’s educating the producers in how to write scripts? I don’t know. I would like to see more and more that the studio take a stronger entrenchment to where it can train writers and afford to find better writers to develop the scripts. However, as we see in our statistics in *Variety* and *Hollywood Reporter* all the time, fewer and fewer studio movies are being made and more and more independent movies are being made. But even now, it looks like the independents are having a hard time.

I just spoke to a filmmaker who just came from South Africa, where he’s lived for four or five years. And he was telling me that almost all the money that is now needed to produce American films is coming from abroad, from Europe or from other foreign countries. That’s sort of reflected in the fact that so many of what they call mini-major distributors and production companies have gone belly-up in the last year or two. So I don’t know. It’s hard to see which directions the trends are going to move in. And I don’t really see the signs that they’re going to move in good directions, but I hope they do.

**Q:** What sort of impact has horror critic Joe Bob Briggs had on the industry?

**A:** Well, Joe Bob Briggs makes fun of these films in a tongue in cheek way. Frankly, I enjoy reading Joe Bob’s material. He’s sort of making fun of the films. And yet he is calling attention to them, and he is giving them a sense of time and place and respectability, even though he’s making fun of them. His writing raises the hackles on a lot of people, and the rest of us chuckle and understand what he’s doing. But he is reaching a vast public; he’s going to be on the Johnny Carson show this week, which gives you an indication of his popularity. And the man, of course, is syndicated on radio. He’s got his column. He’s in the movies occasionally in guest roles and so on. So I don’t think he’s harmed it in any way. I think he’s probably given it a shot in the arm; he’s made it more interesting than it otherwise would seem.

**Q:** How concerned is Briggs with giving serious critiques of horror movies?

**A:** He probably understands the genre better than anybody. I’m sure he does it all with a straight face, because I’ve met Joe Bob and his face is never any other way. (Laughs) He’s a very mild-mannered, soft-spoken Texan. If you were to put him at a table with ten other men, to pick him out as Joe Bob Briggs, you probably wouldn’t do it. You’d probably pick the big, beefy looking red-neck. But he doesn’t look like the stereotype that he writes as at all.

**Q:** Many people may not realize that you’ve actually had experience in filmmaking. I know you’ve made at least one film. Can you briefly describe your film career?

**A:** Well, my brief film career has consisted of one feature movie. It was quite an undertaking, almost an epic in terms of the genre and what it usually offers. We had huge crowds in this movie and a big cast of characters.... Oh, we just did all these incredible things. Unfortunately, the film received mixed reaction, because I think it’s a mixed film. I think there are parts of it that are successful and parts that are not. I learned an awful lot making it, and I feel like one day I would like to go on to do other things, just bearing in mind next time: don’t try to make an epic on \$50,000—just (chuckles) two people in a room, that’s all I need next time.

**Q:** “My Dinner With Andre: The Horror Movie.”

**A:** Right. That’s the idea.

**Q:** What was your exact role in the film? You wrote it?

**A:** Yeah, I wrote, produced and directed and edited and mixed the sound effects and did just about everything. You know, Oliver Stone was on the radio recently, and Larry King asked him about his very first movie. And Oliver Stone’s first film was a horror movie.... And he said it was the hardest thing in the world he had ever done—that all of his movies since then, all the ones that won the Academy Awards and so on, were much easier. And I really related to that, because sometimes a movie is almost a one-man project, which makes it impossible. The whole responsibility of it falls on your shoulders, and that can be an awfully debilitating weight to carry around for a year or two.

But I must say this in defense of the film: it was the first time that the theme of “fandom” was really dealt with in a movie. Fandom, of course, being the readership and viewership of movies, books, and television as they relate to science fiction, horror, and fantasy. So the setting of our film was a

convention, and the main character was a vampire-actor from Hollywood.... And there was a comic book store owner. And there was a mystery writer involved. The various elements of fandom were brought into the story. And there was a censor even who was trying to censor comic books, who got into the act there. So we were trying to say something; we were trying to make a statement not only about our appreciation and respect for the genres, but we were [also] trying to say something about censorship and movies and the love for all of these things. And that was to the film's credit.

**Q:** We haven't even mentioned the title. Why don't you give the title and mention whether it's available on videocassette?

**A:** Yes, it is. It's called *Nightmare In Blood*, and it was released by Video City, over in Oakland, and to my knowledge, it's still in stock. And it did fair when it came out; they sold a few cassettes. But it was never a runaway hit or anything. But yeah, it's still available. You can pick it up from any Video City dealer.

**Q:** Your movie guide is published by Creatures At Large Press, your own publishing company. What prompted you to get into the publishing business?

**A:** Well, a famous science fiction writer once said I had done an immoral thing to publish my own book. Later, he came back and he recanted. He said, "Now that I've seen what you've done with your book ... it's really a wonderful thing that you're doing." It came about quite by accident, really; I had no intentions of ever being a publisher. But a friend of mine who worked on the fringes of the publishing world came to me when I was the host of "Creature Features," and he said, "John you should put out a book that somehow involves 'Creature Features.'" And it just so happens that I had the original manuscript for The Creature Features Movie Guide, which I had not been able to sell to anybody in New York. I couldn't give that manuscript away in Manhattan. I had tried every publisher and been turned down and had pretty much given up any thought of going on from there. But given his remarks, and him inspiring me, I decided to give it a try, and we published an edition which did very well—which sold 10,000 books over the course of two years. And it was picked up by Warner Books in New York; now, you see, the big boys in New York were beating on my door to get the book because I had proven that

it had a little running power. And they put out a nice second edition, which was basically a repeat of the first but there was some new material I had been able to update during the intervening years. And then the biggest edition and the best edition came out two years ago in 1988, under my own imprint, *Creatures At Large*.

We've also printed a book by Robert Bloch.... It's a collection of short stories that were originally published in the '40s, and they had gone unreprinted. Bob Block would not allow them to be reprinted; he felt that they were dated. They were fractured fairy tales. He would take a famous fairy tale and he would build a brand new story around it with the character of Lefty Feep who was a race track tout of the '40s. So the stories have this wonderful Damon Runyon style to them, and they have a lot of puns and word games in them. And there are rhymes; Bloch rhymes his sentences sometimes. And they're a lot of fun to read. So we've published the first collection of nine stories, with an option for two more.

And just this past year, we brought out a book entitled Them Ornerly Mitchum Boys, which is by John Mitchum, Robert Mitchum's brother. It's an autobiography of their years growing up together and their separate careers in Hollywood and the intertwining of their careers. I think it's a nice book; it has 356 photographs in it. It really gets into the Mitchum legend in some areas that other books have not. So I hope that the book has made a contribution to the history of Hollywood and movies and all the things that I like so much.

**Q:** Are there any other books in the catalog you wanted to mention?

**A:** There are a couple of novels that were put out by other publishers that I wrote many years ago, and I always have a few of those on-hand to sell if anyone's interested—World War III, which is a fantasy novel that I wrote many years ago. It's an interesting story. Originally World War III was a screenplay called "Sarge;" this was in the late '60s. And "Sarge" never got made as a film, but I took that screenplay years later and wrote it into a novel.... But during that period when I was trying to sell it, Adam West saw the script. This was shortly after "Batman" had left the air. And Adam West called me, and he said, "You know, I've been looking at a lot of scripts. And I've been looking for something that I could play that's totally different, that I could star in and really get into a different kind of characterization. And this is it; I

really like this character.”

So he took an option for a year, but he couldn't find anybody in Hollywood who was willing to push the edge—because this was a satire on war movies. It just pushed the edge in the wrong way, I guess. And at that time, it just couldn't make it. And then Burt Ward, who played Robin, read it. And there was a young part in there, and he wanted to play the young part. So for a while, Adam West was trying to sell this as the first combination of Adam West and Burt Ward [since “Bat-

“Batman”], and unfortunately it never sold. In fact, I think all of Adam's efforts to do a film like that or some variation of it, where he or he and his co-star could get off into a new tangent, just never happened. And Adam West's career, as you know, just never took off. And it's too bad; this film might have done something interesting or different for them. Maybe not. It's hard to say. But it would have been interesting to see what would have happened.

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