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INTRODUCTION

BY ERIC J. GUIGNARD

THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA IS AN exercise in disparities, a country both bleak and beautiful, rugged while idealized, urbane yet still untamed, and has produced some of the greatest literary authors of the 20th and 21st centuries, with names coming to mind such as Mary Gilmore, Patrick White, Thomas Keneally, Tim Winton, and Peter Carey, amongst others, and notwithstanding the subject of this book: Kaaron Warren.

Kaaron's writing, like her native homeland, is filled with similar seeming disparate affectivities: rich passion turning to cruel heartache, bitter catastrophe preceding joyful triumph, ebullience until emotional devastation, all in storylines that wend, at their leisure, along a path of subtle life hues, often set in domestications from which a character is thrust or encounters those vagaries of fate that are to be most feared.

And she seems oft to manage it all within the span of only a few brief pages.

Widely hailed as one of Australia's—and the world's—premiere writers today of speculative and dark fiction, Kaaron Warren has published four novels, multiple novellas, five collections, essays, and well over one hundred heart-rending tales of horror, science fiction, and beautiful fantasy, and is the first author ever to simultaneously win all three of Australia's top

speculative fiction writing awards (Ditmar, Shadows, and Aurealis awards for *The Grief Hole*).

Her award-winning short fiction regularly appears in anthologies, magazines, and other publications across the U.S., Europe, and Australia as well as being reprinted routinely in *Year's Best* compilations. Her short story "A Positive" has been made into the short film, *Patience*, and her first-ever published short story "White Bed" was dramatized for the stage.

And, for all she has accomplished, Kaaron is still easily accessible to fans, willing to help others, and, quite simply, a joy to work with, particularly that she was kind enough to participate in this project, the second *Primer* designed to showcase diverse modern voices around the world of leading dark fiction short stories.

Author and journalist Lucius Shepard, in his introduction to *Dead Sea Fruit* (2010), regaled Kaaron also as spanning of disparities, a foremost example of those who can bridge the constrictive labels between "Stylist" and "Storyteller," describing her prose as "holding a profound sway over his emotions." For lack of expressing anything more eloquently, I repeat his sentiment; this because I love great stories and, more, I love great stores that are unique in the way they're told, and, even more than that, I love great and unique stories that can make me *feel*.

Although Kaaron Warren has been writing published fiction for over a quarter century, it wasn't until about 2010 or 2011 that I encountered her work. One of her first short stories I read was in a second-hand science fiction anthology that was given to me by an ex-felon acquaintance who was in rehab for drug addiction. He used both substance abuse and science fiction as "escapes from life," but while one means gave him hope toward something invigorating in the future, the other ultimately killed him. That book contained Kaaron's tale, "Ghost Jail," and perhaps because of its subject—tortured ghosts and those tortured living who can see

them, along with the search for redemption, for peace—and *who* the book came from, the writing struck me very deeply. It was surreal and meaningful, multi-voiced and, ultimately, about that very struggle to escape poor circumstances, to find freedom, peace.

Shortly thereafter I read “All You Can Do Is Breathe,” which is emotionally wrecking, yet the trauma comes subtly, by the loss of the ability to find joy in life, in this narrative by something out of the protagonist’s control: a haunting, sucking creature. Much the same for “The Edge of a Thing,” which by its ending, a wealthy and loved father is promised to lose all by a wronged ghost: “Your son’s seed will be poison. Your daughter will be barren. We wish great unhappiness to your family. Your wife will come to hate you as the mongoose hates the snake. You will not be an ancestor.”

Passages such as those bring me bitter despair.

And yet there are joyful stories by Kaaron too, beautiful reflections, such as the hopeful and compassionate “The Speaker of Heaven,” the sweet fairy tale-esque “Born and Bread,” and the beautifully redemptive “Death’s Door Café.”

So it is that the disparities in our surrounds, in our lives, in ourselves, are able—at their best and their worst—to be captured by Kaaron Warren.

Midnight cheers,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric J. Guignard". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

—Eric J. Guignard
Chino Hills, California
January 29, 2018



ABOUT KAARON WARREN

MY SHADOW EXISTENCE: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT

FOR MOST OF MY LIFE I'VE CARRIED ALONG A shadow existence. Many of us do: that other self, the one most people don't see. We present a public face to the world, that is the public existence.

Then there is the face most people don't see. Sometimes those secrets are large and never to be revealed. Sometimes, we realize people knew the truth all along.

My shadow existence as a child was twofold. I lied every single day about my religious background, and I wanted to be a writer. I *did* write, novels and short stories I told no one about, confessed to no one, scrawling them by hand onto scavenged paper, scraps, and notes I still have, or had, until a rat died in a box stored in the shed.

My religious background was unusual and not something anyone would understand in suburban Melbourne, where I grew up. It was weird enough we were vegetarians, something I couldn't hide. That alone got me noticed. But the other stuff?

I didn't tell a soul.

Things I remember: A first kiss in the Bay at South Melbourne while my family were chanting Hare Krishna in the ashram a few blocks away. This boy saying, "Are you one of those *vegitarianists*?" when I told him I didn't eat meat, and, when he saw two Hare Krishna women walk past in saris, he said, "I hate those

people.” Me saying nothing because I didn’t feel I belonged to them. They were in my shadow existence. I started writing my first novel around this time. Red ink in exercise books, about prejudice and teen gangs and violence. I used everything I saw, translated into story on the page, but not the stuff that was actually happening. Not the huge feasts and the chants, the hours spent making flower necklaces for the gods (and that smell still makes me sleepy, the smell of chrysanthemums, because I was so tired making those necklaces). All of this annoying, more than anything else, let me be clear. None of it abusive.

Soon after I spent time in New Zealand on a Hare Krishna farm. They had me collecting money for them on the streets of Auckland but we didn’t say that, we said we were collecting for teenagers on drugs or something, so there was a shadow self within my shadow self. I kept a diary at the time for my best friend, every last bit of it a lie. I lied about where I was staying, what I did all day. While my friends were swimming in the lake or sleeping all day, I was getting up at 4 a.m., dressing in a sari, being told that I was disturbing the bachelors so I needed to cover up even more. I was eating delicious food, sleeping on the floor of a caravan, writing letters homes to friends that didn’t describe the filthy unemptied portable toilets, left for days past the time they should be collected because the contractor didn’t like the Hare Krishnas.

I was being called a prostitute by a man who worked on the top floor of one of the offices. Apparently watching me collect money made him very angry, although why he was staring down at a fourteen-year-old on the street he didn’t say.

All of it grist for the mill. All of it stories in the making. I still get caught sometimes using shadow existence terminology in life and in my stories. Words like “take rest” and “isn’t it.” Words stick with me, like the guru telling us that the only pure pleasure was passing stool.

I wrote a story called “The Animodes Revolt” at this time,

inspired by a piece of equipment at my grandmother's house. When I was at her house I was myself; no shadow required. My absolute self. She knew about the religion. She knew I wanted to be a writer.

Before the Hare Krishnas there was Transcendental Meditation. Lots of blessed-out, very kind adults. What I remember: The apple crumble they all brought to Pot Luck Suppers. The stink of one of the women, who wore a particular kind of shirt, nylon, flowery. Whenever I see a shirt like that at a second-hand clothing shop I think of her and her stink.

The tedium of meditation. It was boring, as an eight-year-old, sitting still for twenty minutes, so I wrote stories in my head.

The night I remember the most, although I may have dreamt it, is the night after the day my bedroom was used to initiate a record number of people. Thirty, maybe? Forty? A lot. My room was full of incense, and cleaner that it had ever been, and white cover on the bed that was new for me. But that night, I was riven with nightmares. Dreams and visions of things flying. And I wonder, I really do, if all of that poured out of the people being initiated. All their stories floating around and entering me. When people ask me where my stories come from, sometimes I'm tempted to tell them *there. In that room.* I'm writing the stories of all of those people, which is why my characters can seem alive. They are alive. They were.

For a while I stopped thinking I was a writer. No, I always wrote, but I stopped thinking I'd ever succeed. I wrote dozens of stories in this time, all typed up on an electronic typewriter.

My shadow self, believing in itself even when I didn't.

I moved with my family from Melbourne to Sydney. I thought at the time I wanted to work in advertising, and I did for a while. I thought I wanted to be a copy writer but realized quickly that it would take all my ideas, all of my fictional thoughts. So I edited video tape in a studio in the basement of the agency, and I wrote

stories there, novels, snippets, notes, and ideas, all of it on scraps of paper, scrounged notebooks, many thousands of words.

I met the man who'd become my husband, who still is my husband, and we moved to Canberra together.

You find that when you move to a new place, you are the person you are at the moment you arrive. You aren't the old person, the other person, you are *that* person. So when I arrived in Canberra, I decided I'd be a writer. We moved for my husband's job, so I had to be sure I had an identity of my own or be lost in it all. So I was a writer, and soon I sold my first short story (1993, "White Bed," in *Shrieks: A Horror Anthology*, Women's Redress Press). We travelled back to Sydney for the book launch and I read the opening to the story, my knees shaking so much the hem of my dress vibrated.

Then children came along and the writer self sank into the shadows again. People wanted to talk about babies and sleep and feeding and mashed pumpkin, about which school and where on holidays. I did write during those early years, though, snatching moments when I could. Using the many hours we spent watching trucks to *think*, to observe, to fill myself with images and ideas. I published during this time and won my first award, the Aurealis Award for Short Horror Fiction ("A Positive" first published in *Bloodsongs* magazine). This kept me going through it all. I love the 'mother' part of my existence, but the importance of maintaining the 'writer' part of my existence can't be underestimated.

In Fiji there was a new kind of shadow existence. We went for three years for my husband's job, so we were in the diplomatic corps. I was a 'trailing spouse,' so-called. But I was a writer, too. I explored the town of Suva, I spoke to people, and I wrote and wrote and wrote. I finished two novels there and dozens of short stories. I sold my first three novels (*Slights*, *Walking the Tree*, and *Mistification*, to Angry Robot Books). I hosted dinners for people

from many countries, I made abiding friendships with fascinating people, and I listened, observed, absorbed.

We're back in Canberra now. Life isn't always an adventure but I try to find adventure in small things. In my interactions and observations of people. In finding treasures like a small box of bus tickets from 1993, collected by someone. Each journey a note of this person's existence.

When my husband got very sick a couple of years ago (he is well now), someone said, *you'll have to give up being a writer* and I thought, *no*. It actually did me some damage, her saying this, but I am about 80% writer. It's so much a part of my identity that I don't know who I'd be otherwise. What I'd do. What I'd think about. How I'd spend my spare moments if I wasn't reading odd books for ideas for stories, or constantly observing the world around me.

I've been a writer for most of my life and some parts flash at me, images that influenced my writing even though I can find no trace of them in any story.

Which makes me realize that my shadow self is not shadow any more. The writer is flesh.

So who is the shadow now?



A BIOGRAPHY

KAARON WARREN PUBLISHED HER FIRST SHORT story in 1993 and has had stories in print every year since. She has lived in Melbourne, Sydney, Canberra, and Fiji. She's sold many short stories, four novels (the multi-award-winning *Slights*, *Walking the Tree*, *Mistification*, and *The Grief Hole*), and six short story collections. Her most recent novel, *The Grief Hole*, won the

ACT Writers and Publisher's Award, a Canberra Critic's Circle Award for Fiction, a Ditmar Award, the Australian Shadows Award, and the Aurealis Award. Her stories have appeared in Australia, the US, the UK, and elsewhere in Europe, and have been selected for both Ellen Datlow's and Paula Guran's *Year's Best* anthologies.

Her next novel will come out in 2018 from Omnium Gatherum Books.

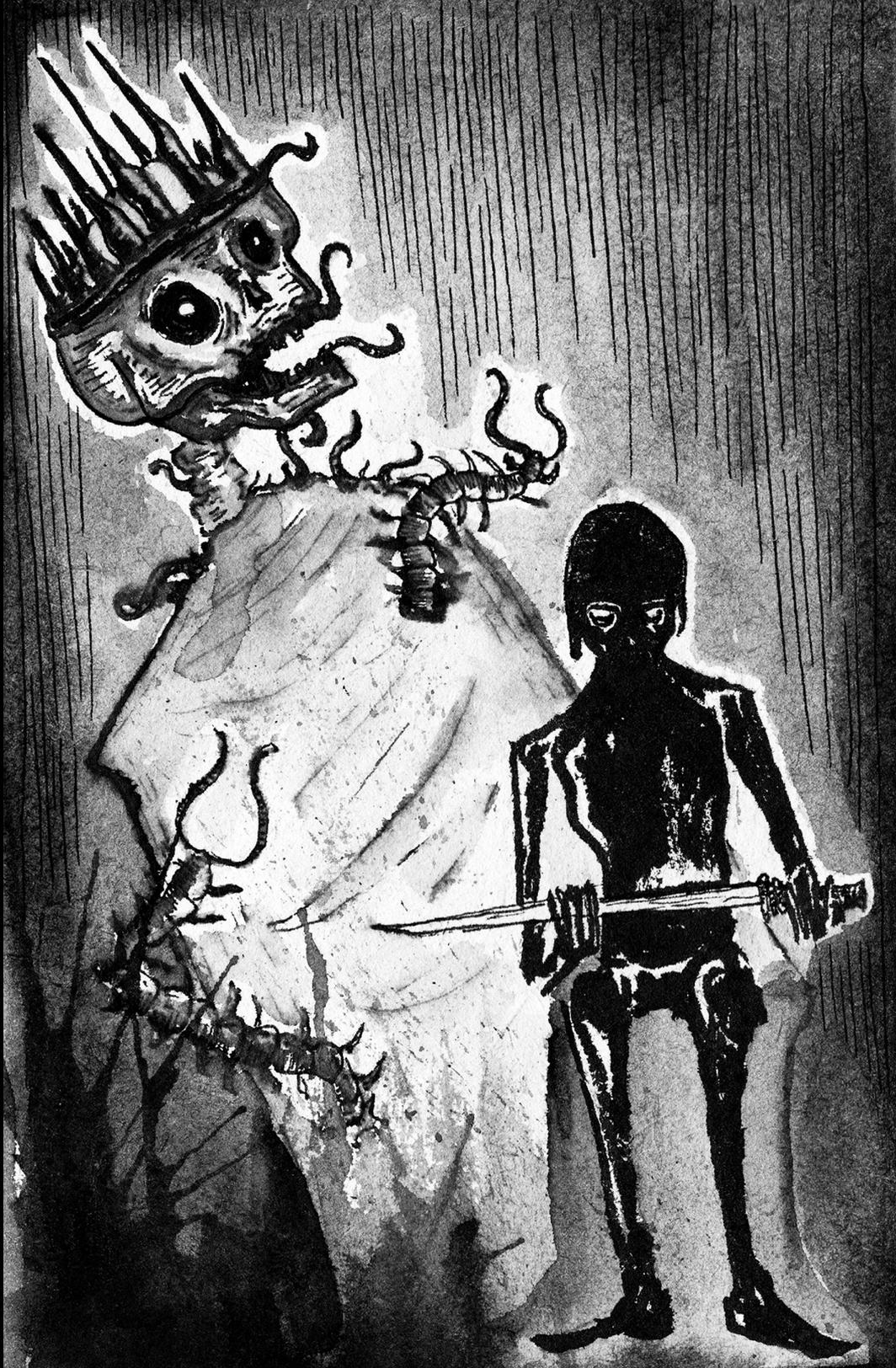
She has recent stories in Ellen Datlow's *Mad Hatters and March Hares*, *Looming Low* from Dim Shores, Nate Pedersen's *Sisterhood*, Cemetery Dance's *Dark Screams* series, and *Bitter*, a novella, from Cemetery Dance.

Kaaron was a Fellow at the Museum for Australian Democracy, where she researched prime ministers, artists, and serial killers. In 2018 she will be Established Artist in Residence at Katharine Susannah Prichard House in Western Australia. She's taught workshops in haunted asylums, old morgues, and second-hand clothing shops, and she's mentored several writers through a number of programs.

Kaaron works two days a week in a second-hand bric-a-brac shop, which provides her with endless ideas for stories.

She will be Guest of Honor at the World Fantasy Convention in 2018, New Zealand's Lexicon 2019, and StokerCon in Michigan in 2019.

You can find her at <http://kaaronwarren.wordpress.com>, Instagram is kaaron_warren, and she Tweets @KaaronWarren.



GUARDING THE MOUND

ONE OF THE BOYS CAME BACK A MAN, HIS ARMS marked, his feet cut and bloody.

Din looked on as the boy, now a new man, showed the stone he had sharpened and used to kill the meal they would all share. Nobody noticed Din.

“I’ll go out next,” Din said. “I’m old enough.” He said it loudly and often until the new man noticed. “Din, you stay with the women. You cannot be a man when you are the size of a child.” Everybody laughed, slapped Din, slapped the new man. Din crouched down and crawled through their legs to get out into the night air. Someone smacked his arse and said, “Hi ho, little Din,” and he turned to snarl but no one noticed, no one cared.

“I’ll do it,” he said. He stood by the entrance to his underground home and took up a sharp stick. He scratched markings into his arms and legs. Then he began to run.

The animal howls were louder at night. The noise of them frightened him but he knew that was part of the test. He wondered what he was supposed to do next.

The moon shone a path and Din began to follow it. He felt no hunger; his belly was full of the new man’s feast.

He walked, enjoying the freedom.

The moon stayed bright and Din walked till he was tired. He found a stone along the way and chipped at it till it was sharp. Then he found a hollow tree and hid inside behind its branches,

waiting for a kill to come. His eyes drooped and the warm air inside the trunk made him sleepy, so sleepy . . .

He awoke with the sun in his eyes to the sound of voices and smiled, thinking his people had come to look for him.

Then he heard them speak and realized by their accent they were strangers. Din scrunched his eyes tight, thinking they wouldn't see him if he curled up small.

"Look at the size of him," a man said. They poked him with a stick.

"Child."

"I'm not," Din could not help but answer.

They laughed.

"Of course you're a child."

"I am a man," said Din. He held his arms out, showing the deep, fresh marks there.

"Only just, hey?"

"Look at the size of him," someone said again. Din shrank back.

"It's all right. No need to fear. We are hunting animals, not you. Why don't you climb out?"

"I'll wait for my family."

The men talked amongst themselves. Then one of them said to Din, "Are you from the moles who lived underground?"

Din gasped at the insult. "It is safe there. The animals don't get us."

"But it's dangerous living underground. You're safe from wild animals but someone could just come and cover the entrance. How would you get out?"

Din heard them sheathing their weapons. He cautiously moved forward.

"Are your weapons away?"

"You're very observant, boy."

"I'm not a boy."

Din heard the sound of someone drinking.

“Do you have water?”

“We do, my friend. Plenty to share. And meat, too.”

Din cautiously climbed out of the tree. He saw six tall men with dirty faces, brown arms.

“Good for you,” said one. “Brave.” He patted Din on the back. He smelled of burned meat, blood. “I am the Chieftain’s Man. I know bravery. Are you hungry, my friend? Come share with us.” Din shared their meat.

“He’s very small,” said one of the men.

“My father grew not much bigger. I will stay small, too,” said Din. He felt brave to say the words, to accept the words.

“And what job do you expect to take?”

“I am very patient. I can watch the lake for the moment the ice cracks. I can watch the sky for the sign of breaking rain. I can watch a sick face for a sign of fever breaking.”

The men exchanged glances. One of them said, “Tell me of your people,” and Din told them of his home, how close it was. How enclosing and how the people talked little. He could hear the Chieftain’s Man talking a distance away. “He seems perfect.”

“You would say that. Otherwise your son is in line. Your son will be starved to keep him small.”

“I know.”

Din heard a catch in the Chieftain’s Man’s voice.

“The Chieftain will not be happy you have used his time for your own gain.”

“Spoils of war,” the Chieftain’s Man said. He came back to Din.

Din said, “My family don’t think much of me. They didn’t think I could become a new man.”

Din’s new friend said, “That’s no good, boy. You should come with us. You are brave and strong, Din. We need someone like you. We don’t hide underground like moles. We have built houses on the earth. The air we breathe at night is fresh.”

EXPLORING DARK SHORT FICTION #2: A PRIMER TO KAARON WARREN

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