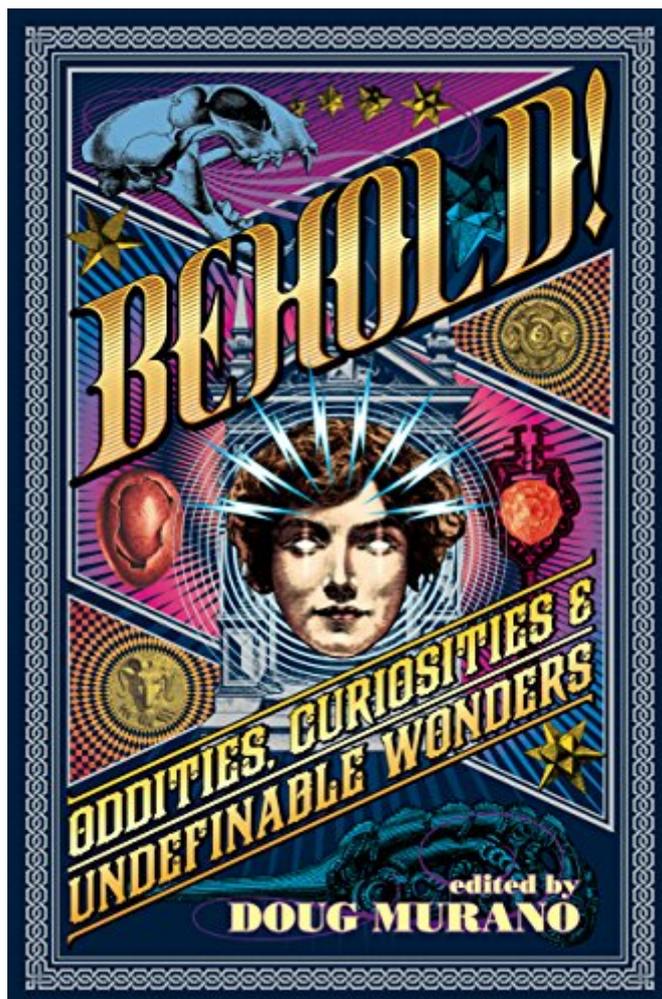


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Behold!: Oddities, Curiosities And Undefinable Wonders



Synopsis

Want to see something weird? Embrace the odd. Satisfy your curiosity. Surrender to wonder. From Crystal Lake Publishing and the Bram Stoker Award-nominated co-editor of the smash hit *Gutted: Beautiful Horror Stories* comes *Behold! Oddities, Curiosities and Undefinable Wonders*. Sixteen stories and two poems take you into the spaces between the ordinary and the imaginations of some of today's masters of dark and thrilling fiction. A travel writer learns the terrible secrets at a hotel that's not at all as it seems. A disfigured woman and her daughter explore methods of weaponizing beauty. An amateur beekeeper acquires an object that shows her the true danger of the hive-mind. Drifters ride the rails seeking something wondrous that could change their fates forever. A strange creature that holds our very existence in its hands shapes the lives of two lovers to touching and devastating effect. A young man helps his grandfather and something much more monstrous atone for bargains made during wartime. And much, much more!

Featuring Clive Barker, Neil Gaiman, Ramsey Campbell, Lisa Morton, Brian Kirk, Hal Bodner, Stephanie M. Wytovich, John Langan, Erinn L. Kemper, John F.D. Taff, Patrick Freivald, Lucy A. Snyder, Brian Hodge, Kristi DeMeester, Christopher Coake, Sarah Read and Richard Thomas. Foreword by Josh Malerman. Illustrations by Luke Spooner. Cover art by John Coulthart. Brought to you by Bram Stoker Award-nominated editor Doug Murano and Crystal Lake Publishing.

Tales from the Darkest Depths. Interview with the editor: What kinds of short stories will readers find in this anthology? Doug Murano: I wanted this book to encompass a lot of the things I love about weird fiction, fantasy and horror as well as give a tip of my cap to some of the things I loved growing up. So, it's not exclusively a horror anthology, though you'll find there's plenty of darkness and dread throughout the book. It was important to me that the stories throughout the anthology embraced and celebrated the odd so you're not going to find stories of big-top exploitation or carnival freak shows here. The closest, perhaps, you'll find to this angle is in Lisa Morton's story but that piece turns the freak-show trope on its head and aspires to something much more daring, interesting, and, ultimately, haunting. Some tonal touch-points for much of the book are actually Jim Henson's work like *Labyrinth* and *The Dark Crystal* particularly in the *Undefinable Wonders* section. I also drew tonal influences from Guillermo del Toro's filmography, especially his Spanish-language films like *Pan's Labyrinth* and *The Devil's Backbone*. As in those films, there's terror and darkness here, but there's beauty, wonder, and magic, as well. In other words, the book is willfully bizarre, wide-ranging, and beautifully strange.

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Customer Reviews

I was provided a digital ARC in exchange for an honest review. I'm going to be honest: I rarely finish reading anthologies. Sometimes, the work just doesn't resonate with me; other times, I simply don't have enough time to read through it before the Next Big Thing on my reading list is released. So, when I accepted an ARC of Behold! Oddities, Curiosities, and Undefinable Wonders, I did so with the explanation that I'd try to have a review ready for launch day, but would make no promises. But then something happened that almost never happens for me: I read the whole thing, and here I am, writing a review on launch day. Every story in Behold! is excellent. With a lineup like this, you can't really go wrong. Check this out: Clive Barker, Neil Gaiman, Ramsey Campbell, Lisa Morton, Brian Kirk, Hal Bodner, Stephanie M. Wytovich, John Langan, Erinn L. Kemper, John F.D. Taff, Patrick Freivald, Lucy A. Snyder, Brian Hodge, Kristi DeMeester, Christopher Coake, Sarah Read, and Richard Thomas. I won't recap all the stories here but I will leave those for you to discover but I do

want to give mention to several stand-out favorites in the collection: Brian Kirk's "Wildflower, Cactus, Rose," Hal Bodner's "The Baker of Millepoix," John Langan's "Madame Painte: For Sale," Erin L. Kemper's "Amelia Wake," Patrick Freivald's "Ed Pruitt Smoker," Sarah Read's "Through Gravel," Stephanie Wyotivich's "An Exhibition of Mother and Monsters," and each story will take you through a gauntlet of emotions, and I feel like these pieces best exemplify what Doug was going for in this collection: the bizarre, the unsettling, the fantastic, the magical, and the heartbreaking. Doug Murano has done a wonderful job curating this collection. From the cover art by John Coulthart, to the interior design by Lori Michelle and illustrations by Luke Spooner, to the content itself, this book is a full package of speculative tales that lives up to its promise, a carnival sideshow of prose and poetry that will spark your imagination and break your heart. Buy it!

I took one look at the cover and decided I had to read this. I wrongly assumed it was about the carny life and ever since reading *Geek Love* by Katherine Dunn I've been drawn to those types of books. These stories aren't about sideshow freaks and pop-up carnivals but they're mostly pretty good despite that. The book is broken up into three sections. Oddities, Curiosities & Undefinable Wonders. I enjoyed more of the stories in the first two categories and started to feel a little fatigued by the end. This is typical of me and short story collections and likely says nothing about the collection but there it is. Let's start with the ODDITIES. Larue Dime Museum by Lisa Morton Julia is intrigued by two old photos she discovers at an antique shop and brings them home. Soon her life has turned into a creepy Twilight Zone episode. This tale sets just the right tone for this collection. *Wildflower, Cactus* by Rose Brian Kirk The price of beauty and the ugliness of human nature leads two women down the path of body modification and helps them find their power. "The world is a mirror. What do you want to see?" I wish this story had been a bit longer but I truly enjoyed what was there. *The Baker of Millepoix* by Hal Bodner A heartbroken man buys a bakery and gives it his all (and that's all I'm saying!). Before long, miracles start to happen. I do believe this was my favorite story in the collection. It has it all. There is a great setup, character building, fabulous storytelling and even a little humor. You must read it. *Jacqueline Ess: Her Will and*

Testament by Clive Barker I've read this one twice before in Clive Barker's Books of Blood Vol. 2. I nearly skipped it this time around but am glad I didn't. Jacqueline discovers she has a grisly talent that terrifies her a little. It would terrify me too. It's a pretty dastardly power. But once she realizes what a rush of power it brings, she develops a new lust for life. She perfects her talent and wields it to exact revenge and rid herself of pesky men. It's dark, bloody, visceral, horribly humorous (if you're warped) and classic Clive Barker. Even on this, my third reading, I enjoyed it as much as I did the first time.

An Exhibition of Mother and Monster by Stephanie M. Wytovich This is a damning poem on those who glee in the sideshow freaks. Now I almost feel bad for my little fetish.

Next up: CURIOSITIES I love shops filled with old treasures. The creepier the better.

Madame Painte: For Sale by John Langan Intrigued by a "must be kept outside" sign accompanying a strangely painted garden gnome, you decide to bring it inside and learn more about its story. And it's a horrible story, indeed! It's devilishly evil and I adored it. How come the old crap I bring home never has such a sinister secret life?!

Chivalry by Neil Gaiman Gaiman's dry wit is on full display as he tells this tale about a stubborn old bitty who stumbles upon the Holy Grail and refuses to part with it! Sir Galaad brings her all sorts of gifts in order to get it back but she is not at all impressed. If I had the ability to laugh out loud while reading, this would've been the story to make me to do it. Simply charming.

VERY IMPT. BONUS NOTES: I just discovered that Levar Burton reads this in episode 7 of his new podcast! Drop everything and go listen!!

Fully Boarded by Ramsey Campbell I know Ramsey Campbell is a legend in horrorland but his writing has never quite worked for me. The same goes here. This story is about a travel reviewer, a wristband and some truly terrible hospitality. I'd give this a three. It was ok, slightly on the "meh" side of the scale and not my favorite here.

In Amelia Wake by Erinn L. Kemper This story is slathered all over with grief. It's about a group of brothers who are watching over Amelia Earhart's plane and about a slithery thing that hides in the shadows. I thought it was slightly eerie but slow and it ended too suddenly.

A Ware That Will Not Keep by John F.D. Taff A dying man shares a terrible story from his past. Now this one was took my breath away. It's a creative and haunting little tale and that ending? Damn, that will be hard to forget.

Earl Pruitt's Smoker by Patrick Freivald A bee keeper's old smoker brings one woman the freedom and excitement she so desperately craves but it also brings out the worst in her. This is such an imaginative and chilling little story that smacks you in the face with the consequences of your darker side. As a Guest at the

Telekinetic Tea Party Stephanie M. Wytovich A whimsical poem that takes a dark turn. This one, at least, didn't leave me with the guilts! Hazelnuts and Yummy Mummies Lucy A. Snyder This tale lures you in with the funny but then takes a sad turn as a woman faces the one moment she wishes she could redo. And, finally, we have UNDEFINABLE WONDERS. This is the part of the collection where my attention began to wane. I only found one of the stories exceptional and completely engaging. The rest were a little bit of a struggle for me to finish. The Shiny Fruit of Our Tomorrows by Brian Hodge This story follows a bunch of down on their luck train hoppers as they attempt to find a tree that is rumored to have magical powers that may lead them down a better path. It's strikingly real but maintains a sense of wonder but was missing a little certain something for me. The Wakeful Kristi DeMeester This is a weird story about a teacher, a bad relationship, a strange little girl and a terrible garden. Is it a tale of madness or something else? I am left unsure but I do know that it left me feeling unsettled. Knitter by Christopher Coake My favorite of the undefinable wonders. The author creates a dark vision of another world where people are trying to live their lives while attempting to avoid ever seeing a creature they call "knitters" who have a devastating power that they use at will. It has a fairytale like feel with a pitch black undertone, hypnotizing prose and an ending that hurts. Through Gravel by Sarah Read There is a society living underground who call themselves "The Kindred". As time goes by, their numbers shrink but a newbie arrives with new ideas that will invigorate their group but The Kindred's greed may be their downfall. This story didn't do it for me. I cannot explain the reasons. Hiraeth by Richard Thomas I may have been out of steam by the time I arrived at this story because I didn't understand it. It could be my lack of brain cells that caused me to miss nuanced symbolism or whatnot but honestly I'm too tired to think and don't want to work this hard to comprehend a short story. It's about a poor farmer's son who has a hole running through his body, a prickly tree with forbidden fruit and the pain the hapless boy brings upon himself I think. It was weird, that's for sure. Anyway, I'm beat and that's all I have. There is some wondrous storytelling within these pages and, even though some of the stories weren't meant for me, it's most definitely a collection worth checking out!

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