

“CERTAIN THINGS ASSOCIATED WITH NIGHT”: T.E.D. KLEIN

New York City, 1986

By John C. Tibbetts

T.E.D. Klein worked for four years as the founding editor of *Twilight Zone* magazine. His first two publications, *The Ceremonies* (1984) and *Dark Gods* (1985) have been hailed as modern classics in the realm of contemporary gothic horror. Stephen King called *The Ceremonies* “the most exciting novel in the field to come along since Straub’s *Ghost Story*.” Klein currently divides his time between New York City and upstate. His most recent book is a collection of stories, *Reassuring Tales* (2006). I have to thank Jack Sullivan for facilitating our first meeting. This interview transpired in Klein’s apartment in the Upper West Side in August 1986. (*Bracketed materials in italics indicate Ted’s update on 12 July 2010.*)

INTERVIEW

JOHN C. TIBBETTS: Tell us about the “T.E.D.”

T.E.D. KLEIN: That’s largely affectation, but I’d rather leave it a little mysterious. On my birth certificate, you’ll see “Theodore Donald Klein”—and as for the “E,” well, that can stand for anything you like.

JCT: Your books and artifacts and mementoes are everywhere around us. It’s really a wild collection! I can’t help but wonder what all this tells us about you. Give me a brief inventory, will you?

TK: Over there’s a table with some standing frogs, and behind me is a tarantula in a glass globe (and on the bottom of the base is a warning about consuming the contents).... I’m looking at a little statuette on my bookshelf of an H. P. Lovecraft figure, Wilbur Whateley; he’s holding a carpetbag and a copy of the dreaded *Necronomicon*, which Whateley tried to steal in “The Dunwich Horror.” Hanging from the ceiling are models of lighter-than-air aircraft. There’s a flintlock and a couple of Civil War swords on the wall above the mantel.

JCT: You’re a born collector, I guess. And books! Lots of books!

TK: I’m unable to walk past a bookshop without stopping in to buy something. And you know, my stories are as cluttered as my apartment. Personally, I can’t write at all unless I read a bit first—to prime the pump, I suppose. So I depend on other books. Horror seems to me a fairly tradition-conscious genre. It’s hard to imagine somebody writing well who’s never read his predecessors. Maybe this has something to do with the limited number of plots, or at least the limited number of things that are actually scary. [*Subsequently I wrote a little booklet called Raising Goosebumps for Fun and Profit, which contains what I claimed at the time were “the 25 Most Familiar Horror Plots.”*] Chances are you’re not going to come up with an original idea; what’s important is the

treatment. And it helps to know how earlier writers have dealt with the same human fears.

JCT: Even readers not familiar with your work may know your name from the *Twilight Zone* magazine.

TK: I was its first editor. It premiered in the spring of 1981, and I finally left it, a bit burned out, in the spring of '85, after about 40 issues, I guess. It took up all my time, though somehow I was able to complete *The Ceremonies* during that period. I would occasionally sleep in the office, on a big leather couch. If I came home at all, it was at one or two in the morning, trembling with fatigue. Still, working on *Twilight Zone* was a dream come true; I'd spent my boyhood reading pulp SF and fantasy magazines, but I never imagined I'd actually have the chance to edit one. [*And ten years later, I had the fun of editing another monthly, a true-crime magazine called CrimeBeat.*]

JCT: What was the best thing that came out of those *Twilight Zone* years?

TK: Meeting the very interesting people that populate the field. However, dealing writers and illustrators taught me one thing that might seem a little shocking—how much nicer and more pleasant illustrators are than writers! Writers tend to be a fairly egotistical and competitive, whereas I invariably found the artists quite charming.

JCT: What kinds of chores occupied a lot of your time?

TK: The correspondence—just answering the mail—was particularly time-consuming. And of course, we had our quota of crank readers. We got weird threats, invitations to join various religious cults; we got earnest letters about encounters with saucers.

JCT: As long as they write and do *not* come down to the office!

TK: People would show up unexpectedly. It used to make me a bit nervous!

JCT: You seem to reveal in *The Ceremonies* your own love of literature through the main character. He's struggling to write a doctoral dissertation on the gothic novel. What about that?—are today's scholars ruining the fun of those old books by analyzing them to death?

TK: I'm just glad *someone's* reading them, even if they're grad students, because I'm afraid otherwise nobody would. I did spend a summer by myself on a farm reading gothic novels, pretty much like the hero of *The Ceremonies* does. God knows you need time on your hands to get through them, but they have their own old-fashioned pleasures. And, as in the novel, I found myself rather beleaguered by certain things associated with night in the country. I'm somebody who goes to a cabin in the woods and stays by the fireside instead of venturing out. [*That's somewhat less true today. For the past twenty-two years I've been spending my weekends upstate, in a house at the end of a dirt road, surrounded by woods—though I do still spend most of my time indoors.*]

JCT: One of the really striking things about the book is that you demonstrate how just minutes away from downtown New York City, you can uncover the most primeval kind of wilderness.

TK: [*That, alas, is also less true today—considerably so.*] Just this past weekend, I was driving in Jersey, and it always amazes me how beautiful and bucolic and secluded parts of that state can still be. But as far as my young hero finding a pagan cult out there, well, that's imaginary—though I suppose it might be nice to think that such cults *could* exist so close to the city.... And there are odd cults *within* the city, even on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. At any rate, I was playing with the theme of pagan cults feeding into what became Christianity; I was influenced by some of the things I was reading at the time.

JCT: Who are these writers, and are they among your heroes?

TK: There's Arthur Machen. Fascinating man, too little known today. Born in 1863 and died the year I was born, 1947. I feel fortunate, at least, for having shared the earth with him for exactly five months. I would highly recommend a long story of his called "The White People," a very strange story, mostly told from the point of view of a teenage girl who has odd experiences of a kind of ancient pagan magic in the woods near her home. There's an undercurrent of sexuality to it, as well. It's a story that, unlike most, seems to have been written from *within* the world of the supernatural rather than from outside it. It has a feeling of authenticity about it—very powerful. No real plot, just wonderful style, and very compelling, written in a kind of hypnotic prose. Machen's best books may very well be his three volumes of autobiography, but he also wrote a haunting autobiographical novel, *The Hill of Dreams*. Like its hero, he was born in the Welsh countryside and journeyed to London as a young man to be a writer. He starved for a while and was extremely lonely. The novel depicts the contrast between cold, unfriendly London and the Welsh hills, where Roman legions had camped centuries before. It's a very special book.

JCT: And I have to ask you about other writers you cite frequently in *The Ceremonies*, like Charles Maturin.

TK: His book *Melmoth the Wanderer* is a massive gothic novel, rather intimidating, I think. It's ideal reading if you're going on a long, leisurely sea voyage! It's the sort of gothic that has stories within stories within stories. It takes you all over the world and depicts incredible atrocities, like those of the Inquisition, all served up on an epic scale.

JCT; And there's Fritz Leiber. . .

TK: Yes, author of *Our Lady of Darkness* and stories like "Smoke Ghost." He translates gothic horrors into the modern urban landscape, and does it beautifully. I also admire him because he created the City of Seven-Score Thousand Smokes, Lankhmar. That's where his Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories take place—a wonderful fantasy city, with aspects of

the Baghdad of the Arabian Nights. A perfect setting for tales of swords and sorcery, with its thieves' guild and seedy taverns, wharves, palaces, underground passageways...

JCT: One of the stories in *Dark Gods* really hit the jackpot, didn't it?

TK: Well, "Nadelman's God" won an award at a World Fantasy Convention. It's about someone who makes up a god, but then the god becomes real. I guess I'm intrigued by the by-no-means-new idea that gods don't invent men, it's men that invent gods. As a writer, you have the sense that when you create something, it gets away from you and takes on a life of its own. Look at the Manson gang, how they latched onto *Stranger in a Strange Land* and that Beatles song, somehow twisting inspiration out of them. I remember learning that some weird quasi-religious cult out in the Northwest—possibly, if memory serves, on an island in Puget Sound—was raided by the authorities and that among the books found in the house was *The Ceremonies*; and also that some murderer here in the East, some deranged kid who'd sacrificed a friend in the woods, may also have owned a copy. Yet there's really nothing in the novel that would promote or encourage or inspire such an act; I suspect that what must have appealed to these people was simply the title. Also, of course, "Nadelman" plays on a writer's paranoia about fans. In the story a kind of creepy, slightly maniacal fan fastens onto our hero for his own purposes.

[JCT: *Catch us up on your writing projects today.*

TK: *In recent years I've written very little, and always as the result of personal arm-twisting or some financial inducement. Writing has never come easy; I'll take advantage of any excuse to avoid it. And I have to admit that, along with slacking off in writing fiction, I read far less of it than I used to, and almost nothing that qualifies as fantasy or horror; like many another middle-aged man, with mortality breathing down my neck, I'd rather read history or science—subjects I somehow managed to skip back in college. Still, I may have a thing or two left to say. God knows I'm still filling notebooks with odd little ideas.]*