

THE CUSTODIAN

A Novel

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By

JON AYLWARD

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Coordinator, MFA in Writing
University of Saskatchewan
Department of English
Arts Building, Room 319
9 Campus Drive
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5A5 Canada

OR

Dean
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
University of Saskatchewan
116 Thorvaldson Building, 110 Science Place
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5C9 Canada

ABSTRACT

The Custodian is a novel of speculative horror, one that proposes how archetypal monsters are not only real but have also adapted to the social dynamics of the present. Oscar Pryce, the story's eponymous custodian, has worked for the last forty years cleaning up after 'clients,' vampire-like beings who have evolved from feeding on humans relentlessly to only once a generation. Reporting to a man known as the Employer, Pryce becomes complicit in the disposal of their victims, keeping the existence of clients hidden from the rest of the world.

When he is diagnosed with brain cancer, Pryce's perception of reality begins to change. Guilt hampers his work. Memories of a past life – and a past love – resurface. He soon suspects his partnership with the Employer was not of his own volition and with his health declining rapidly Pryce is forced to make a difficult decision: either expose the Employer and his kind to the world or join their ranks.

The Custodian is an allegory on the relationship between essential workers and their employers, how the integrity of the former is often undermined by indifference in the latter. Pryce breaking away from his employer's influence is also allegorical, in this case, a symbol of more recent events where essential workers are hailed as unexpected heroes. Similarly, Pryce's quandary of giving up humanity for immortality is emblematic of the struggle faced by all working-class citizens, to do whatever is necessary in order to survive.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

To know horror is to know one's self, to achieve a spontaneous sense of worth by confronting and overcoming some existential crisis. In horror fiction, threats such as these are either culturally constructed (supernatural) or internalized (psychological) in nature. Across all forms, however, horror fiction "is characterized by an ontological ambiguity, wherein the reader (and often the characters) wavers between a naturalistic and a supernatural explanation" (Clasen, 113). In his introduction to *Collected Short Stories: Volume Three*, Richard Matheson compares his writings to a set of "systematized delusions," that is, the projection of personal conflicts which are ascribed to the supposed hostility of others (5). My thesis *The Custodian* explores this approach through its protagonist Oscar Pryce, a character that exists in a compromised psychological state but is also forced to contend with supernatural phenomena.

Pryce, an aging custodian, is tasked with cleaning up after 'clients,' vampire-like beings who have evolved from feeding on humans relentlessly to only once a generation. Reporting to a man known as the Employer, Pryce becomes complicit in the disposal of their victims, keeping the existence of clients hidden from the rest of the world. When he is diagnosed with brain cancer, Pryce begins to doubt assumptions of the job long held to be true and if working for clients was even a decision made of his own accord. Additional themes explored include classism, love and loss, guilt and atonement, and the persistence of memory.

The Custodian is a work of speculative horror, not to be confused with Gothic fiction. While many definitions of either term exist, Gothic in this case signifies "the lack of reason, morality, and beauty of feudal beliefs, customs and works" (Botting, 13). Here, lack of reason bolsters the suspension of disbelief rather than strain it, causing the reader to accept on faith

those things they know not to be real. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, for instance, suspension of disbelief is reinforced through legend, nuance and an epistolary structure, lending credibility to a fantastical narrative. In speculative fiction, "the 'impossible' is both accepted and made plausible through a material, physical rationalization, not a supernatural one" (Selling, 22). Just as the vampire becomes demythologized under the scrutiny of science in Matheson's novel *I Am Legend*, *The Custodian* similarly debunks legends relating to the archetypal vampire by addressing them in a broader scientific context. History, for instance, recalls the genocidal nature of Elizabeth Báthory, a Hungarian noblewoman who tortured and killed hundreds of young women in the sixteenth century. In chapter five, her actions are contextualized as a form of scientific method where (conditional) immortality is achieved and the continuation of her kind becomes assured. Similarly, in chapter twenty-five the Employer compares the regenerative cycles of a client to the life-cycle reversions of *Turritopsis dohrnii*, nicknamed "the immortal jellyfish" (Martell et al. 391). In this manner then, suspension of disbelief is reinforced through reason rather than blind faith.

While conflict in *The Custodian* is predominantly internal (Pryce's search for identity) or personal (Pryce's relationship with clients or friends), externalization stems naturally from the unpredictable nature of clients and the threat they pose to Pryce and his loved ones. The vampire was the most logical trope to facilitate this, given Pryce's experience with blood as well as his preoccupation with death. The persistence and adaptability of the vampire is an allegory for the persistence and adaptability of communicable diseases. As Kate Buckley from the University of Mississippi writes, "the folklore vampire represented not only sexual, religious, and societal deviance, but also the threat of invasive values from other cultures, symbolized by the spread of vampirism like a disease" (17). This has proven to be a salient point in Stephen King's novel *The*

Stand and especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, where societal deviance triggers a crisis with far-reaching and irreversible repercussions. Thus the danger to Pryce is twofold, putting him in a high-risk category for disease as well as predation. Inexorably, however, all external threats trace back to a form of inner conflict as Pryce agonizes over how his relationship with clients will endanger the ones closest to him. Just as a worldwide pandemic imposed forced isolation upon Neville in the aforementioned *I Am Legend*, so too does Pryce's knowledge of the unknown force him to keep his loved ones at arms' length.

Pryce's conflicted nature is also evident in *The Custodian's* narrative structure. While written in the third-person point of view from the perspective of Pryce, the story is also accompanied by a series of first-person passages told through the eyes of an unnamed narrator. The identity of this speaker is kept ambiguous until the story's conclusion, although specific interactions made by Pryce offer clues to the speaker's identity. For instance, while Pryce speaks with a private detective about a legal matter in the main narrative, the reader becomes attuned to the fact the speaker may, in actuality, be a detective themselves. The reason for this approach is encapsulated by 'The Liar,' a classification of unreliable narrator in a 1981 study which William Riggan defines as "a mature narrator of sound cognition who deliberately misrepresents [himself], often to obscure [his] unseemly or discreditable past" (172). Similar to William Hjortsberg's novel *Falling Angel*, where a beleaguered detective's search for a murderer leads back to the detective himself, *The Custodian* is plotted to offer an unexpected resolution but also one that makes holistic use of the story's constituent parts. Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, structured in a similar manner, also provided inspiration to this end.

The conflict most critical to *The Custodian*, however, is between Pryce and the Employer. Here the dichotomy between hero and monster is tantamount to that between Apollo

and Dionysius, the basis of which forms the Nietzschean dialectic of tragedy. “Around the hero, everything turns to tragedy” (Nietzsche, 90) and in Pryce’s case, his awakening also proves to be his undoing. An ordinary man, Pryce is a well-paid but otherwise indentured servant who had his memories stripped away long ago. While serving in an official capacity Pryce comes across as aloof but dignified, qualities also shared by the butler Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*. When tasked with a cleaning, Pryce works with purpose and clinical detachment, similar to the butcher Mahogany from Clive Barker’s short story “The Midnight Meat Train.” It is only when cancer asserts itself and he is able to break free of the Employer’s influence that Pryce takes on a more human persona. A sense of filial responsibility takes hold as Pryce uses his wealth to help Ivy, a young, recently turned client who ekes out a meagre existence while fighting to regain custody of her son. Pryce’s determination to work becomes replaced by a determination to help, a trait reminiscent of Willy Loman from Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. When memories of his former life as a private investigator finally surface, his intellect threatens to undermine the simplicity of life with his partner Diane, much like the janitor Charlie from Daniel Keyes’ *Flowers for Algernon*. Yet it is through this arc that Pryce is finally able to fight back, assuming a near Dionysian edge against his former employer’s tyranny.

By contrast, the Employer exists as a Dionysian force in every sense of the word. Affluent, intelligent and immortal, he takes his cue from a host of similarly themed figureheads within the vampire subgenre. With the eloquence of Stoker’s *Dracula*, the pragmatism of Joshua York from George R.R. Martin’s *Fevre Dream*, and the psychic influence of Rudolfo Zginski from Alex Bledsoe’s *Blood Groove*, the Employer is a horror to be reckoned with. But “from even the greatest of horrors, irony is seldom absent” (Lovecraft, 312). For all of his power and prestige, insurmountable age has left the Employer with a critical flaw: long-term amnesia. His

own struggle mirrors that of his faithful servant and in their own respective plights, both characters meet each other halfway. Each possess something the other lacks yet both remain dependent on the other for answers pertaining to their own identity.

Thus by drawing from literary influences to shape Pryce and supernatural influences to shape the Employer, an ontological ambiguity, as defined by Clasen, finds its intended form. Nietzschean dialectic, a philosophy inspired by the playwrights of Ancient Greece, has also encouraged me to make use of my background in theatre to craft engaging scenarios between characters through the use of dialogue and subtext. Various dramatic principles (i.e. Chekhov's Gun) have also been used to create emotional resonance in key events later in the story.

In writing *The Custodian*, I have laboured to render a story with qualities similar to other works of traditional horror but also a story that will bring some needed context to the plight of the working man. If Matheson is to be believed, that art is born in part from the projection of the artist's own personal conflicts, then I would submit no artist is more conflicted than the essential worker. Having worked in a similar capacity, I bring a unique perspective to the existential threat all essential workers face during this trying time in our history. Like Pryce, however, I too understand the importance of leaving one's work at the workplace.

Jon Aylward

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

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