



## Shock Totem 4: Curious Tales of the Macabre and Twisted

*K. Allen Wood (Editor) , A.C. Wise , Michael Penkas , Tom Bordonaro , Jaelithe Ingold , Kathe Koja , Weston Ochse , Rennie Sparks , more... David Busboom , Justin Paul Walters , Lee Thompson , John Boden ...less*

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In the fourth issue of Shock Totem, K. Allen Wood and crew have compiled yet another eclectic collection of horror fiction. This issue features previously unpublished stories from the likes of Weston Ochse, Lee Thompson, A.C. Wise, Jaelithe Ingold, David Busboom, and others. Also to be found, conversations with Kathe Koja and Rennie Sparks, nonfiction by K. Allen Wood, reviews and more.

### Shock Totem 4: Curious Tales of the Macabre and Twisted Details

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# From Reader Review Shock Totem 4: Curious Tales of the Macabre and Twisted for online ebook

## Alexis Hunter says

The dark and gorgeous cover art of Shock Totem's 4th issue is what first attracted me to the publication. On this basis alone, I purchased a copy - thinking, if the art is that gorgeous, the stories have to be as well.

And my assumption was correct. Each story had a murky beauty to it, a painful edge that reached out and grabbed hold of me. While each story was fantastic, *The Many Ghosts of Annie Orens* by A.C. Wise rocked me with its fascinating premise, its haunted nature and perfectly-worded prose. *Fade to Black* by Jaelithe Ingold, a story about ghosts and a cemetery that is far from the ordinary and cliché, made a close second for my favorite with its dark plot, its creepy setting and the twist on what you'd normally expect from a ghost story.

Even the layout and subtle artwork of this publication are beautiful. The print is just the right size, the stories well organized and well - I can't think of a single thing to say bad about Shock Totem's 4th Issue. I know I'll definitely be following this publication in the future, and meanwhile going back to their earlier issues just to get more of this dark and gorgeous magazine.

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## David says

Another collection of solid fiction. The selected stories all feature top notch writing.

There were two stories in this issue that featured cruel older brothers. In the first of these stories, "Beneath the Weeping Willow" by Lee Thompson, David is an autistic boy who struggles to comprehend how his condition puts a strain on his family. His older brother, Jacob, lets David know that he blames him. The story is told in second person POV, a risky move, but it pays off as Thompson instantly connects the reader and David. It makes for a powerful story.

The other cruel older brother story is "Dead Baby Day" by Michael Penkas. In this one, said older brother, Mark, sows the seeds of doubt in his younger brother's mind about the nature of his birth. It's classic older brother torture, sadistically implemented with confidence and menace, and Mark didn't have to lift a finger.

For the first time in *ST*, one of the contributors was also interviewed. Rennie Sparks of The Handsome Family. I learned that they're a band that a bluegrass band that specializes in murder ballads. Mrs. Sparks is the lyricist, and she explained how everyone assumed that it was her husband that wrote the lyrics. Her story, "Web of Gold", was a first person confessional written by a sociopath, about her days and nights living in underbelly of the city.

Another first person confessional was "Playlist at the End". While the narrator hides in a closet afraid of being discovered, he explains how each of the songs in his ten-song playlist reminds him of important chapters in his life. For me, it was a fresh approach to this style of story. As such, you think the story is going one way and then, surprisingly, it turns.

"Full Dental" was funny. It shows what might happen in the workplace when political correctness is taken

too far. "Weird Tales" offers an homage to H. P. Lovecraft on what the man may have been like.

There's also an interview with Bram Stoker Award winning author Kathe Koja, a poem ("Lobo") by Justin Paul Walters about regret, and the usual assortment of music, book, and film reviews. K. Allen Wood provides this issue's non-fiction essay, "Living Dead".

The last two ghost stories are "Fade to Black" and "The Many Ghosts of Annie Orens". In "Fade to Black", Jaelithe Ingold tells the story of Sasha, who works at a cemetery offering "translator" services between the living and the dead. It isn't all about making peace with the passing of loved ones. Ghosts have their own agendas. This isn't *Ghost Whisperer*.

In "The Many Ghosts of Annie Orens", Annie is at a crossroads. Ghosts, both paranormal and those from memory, haunt her. She must find a way to deal with them all somehow if she's to carry on with her life.

On to the next issue.

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### **K.E. says**

...Overall, I am well pleased with Shock Totem #4, and will be saving my pennies for the both the next issue and the three previous...

See my full review: <http://rookberg.blogspot.com/2013/03/...>

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### **Char says**

I like to read short story collections. I find a lot of new authors in this manner.

Shock Totem 4 looms large above the average collection.

Running down the stories that I liked the most:

Beneath the Weeping Willow- by Lee Thompson. I liked this one so much I bought some other offerings by Mr. Thompson. 5 Stars!

Full Dental -by Tom Bordonaro. This was his first published story and it was Freaking Awesome! Fun filled, tongue in cheek and creepy. 5 Stars!

Fade to Black-by Jaelithe Ingold. A different type of cemetery story. 4 Stars!

Weird Tales-by David Busboom. Super short, super excellent! 5 Stars!

Playlist at the End-by Weston Ochse. A short story with a music score. 5 Stars!

Dead Baby Day-by Michael Penkas. It sounds much worse than it is. 4 Stars!

A couple of other things you do not find in most collections of this type:

Bloodstains and Blue Suede Shoes by John Boden and Simon Marshall-Jones. This is a bit of a history lesson concerning horror and music. I loved it, especially the parts about Robert Johnson as I'm a big blues music fan. 5 Stars!

Living Dead: A Personal Apocalypse by the editor of this collection, K. Allen Wood. It is a touching, poignant story about an alcoholic father. What makes this story different is that it is true. 5 Stars

In short, I found this collection to be most excellent and unique. I will be looking forward to more of them.

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### **Donald Armfield says**

Shock Totem always gives me the creeps but this one gave only a mild chill in the air for me.

Beneath the Weeping Willows I read previously in a collection of Lee Thompson's work. The Many Ghosts of Annie Orens by A.C. Wise was great always find it eerie when children talk to ghost.

As for the rest of this anthology it's always worth checking out Shock Totems magazine.

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### **Lisa Cleveland says**

This had a great selection of stories, and I'll admit that although I started reading it because Michael Penkas has a short in it, "Dead baby day," I stuck around for the rest of the stories. I've become somewhat obsessed with finding stories from Michael lately. He really does need to collect his shorts into one book for me! What I didn't care for were the movie reviews, and interviews. That's just me though, as it's nothing I have an interest in. Yep, I'd recommend Shock Totem. I was impressed with the short stories.

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### **The Grim Reader says**

#### **Great shorts**

Love Shock Totem to death. Usually a five out of five read for me but two of the shorts just didn't float my boat this time. Don't be put off though. Different strokes for different folks.

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### **Steve Bouchard says**

My favorite of this batch: Tom bordonaro's "Full Dental" for it's irreverent look at how ridiculous being PC can really be.

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### **Jenny says**

I want my money back. The stories in this magazine are completely ridiculous. I've read better stories in online zines for free. The problem is that the editors or the folk "writing" these weak tales think they're being literary by writing in the second person viewpoint or in the present tense. It's been done before and a million times better than here. The stories are mind-numbingly boring - they lack all the essentials that make for good literature, or even a good genre story. After reading the cringe-worthy editorial I was hardly surprised the editors thought this rubbish worthy of publication. None of the situations is horrific. All the stories are cliché bound. I mean, take the first story, the cliché-sounding Beneath The Weeping Willow, which is

(apparently) about an autistic boy. "Everything blurs in a rainbow of colors but all of those colors are only shades of black and white" - errrm, okay, so that doesn't make sense for a start. No it's not synesthesia, it's just plainly ridiculous. Not only is the story poorly written but the author obviously has no knowledge of autism. I'm sure the author of this drivel equates autism with backwardness.

Another, *The Many Ghosts of Annie Orens* by AC Wise, another cliché-sounding title, is written in the present tense and just doesn't work on any level. The writing is infantile. The story is nonexistent. I read it in frustration and gave up before the end. It was too irritating to read through.

I hoped *Web Of Gold* would be better - not as pretentiously written as the others, but it fizzles out to nothing and ultimately was as meaningless as the others. None of the other stories fare any better. And what's with the word "Mommy" and "Mom" in these silly stories?

A major problem with horror fiction today is too many of those writing it are unimaginative and know only abuse horror, children in abusive situations, children or adults being abused physically and/or mentally. I'm tired of this kind of thing. It was done to death in the eighties.

I made the mistake of judging a magazine by its cover. I won't be wasting my money on *Shock Totem* again. Gave it a rating of one for the artwork on the cover, the only thing worth paying for in the magazine.

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## Gef says

Lee Thompson was charitable enough to give away a few copies of *Shock Totem*'s latest issue, and I was lucky enough to snag one. When it comes to periodicals, I buy the electronic versions exclusively because of shipping costs to Canada, so this was a real treat. I bought and read a Kindle edition of *Shock Totem* #1 not too long ago and was eager to read some more.

This time around there was a very diverse ensemble of authors from varying backgrounds, with established names like Weston Ochse, as well as first publications for authors like Tom Bordonaro. There's also a couple of interviews, one with Kathe Koja that turns into an opining on the state of publishing today, and a chat with one of this issue's contributing authors, Renny Sparks, that includes discussion about her music career. And one of the missing sections from digital editions is the book review portion, with some interesting looks on books, films, and albums by John Boden, Robert J. Duperre, and the witticisms of Ryan Bridger. There's also a brief essay by head honcho, K. Allen Wood, that provides a surprising punch to the stomach.

As far as the stories are concerned, this issue begins with a tragic gem by Lee Thompson called "Beneath the Weeping Willow," about Davey, a young autistic boy's ordeals within his family as he and his older brother, Jacob, cope with the break-up of their parents' marriage. The story is told in the rare second-person perspective, which is a hard nut to crack, but Lee seemed to have the perfect story in which to use it. As for the relationship between Davey and Jacob, it's heartbreaking and all too believable.

From there, we jump into the absurd with the debut story of Tom Bordonaro, "Full Dental," about an office worker at his wit's end over the demonic coworkers he must work alongside. Tom wanted to approach this story in the same way you might approach a sketch comedy routine, and I think he hits just the right note with the juxtaposition of bloody mayhem and office politics.

I think my favorite story of the bunch came from a very short story by Michael Penkas called "Dead Baby Day." Now, before you get your quills up, the title is a tad misleading. It's really about two brothers. Unlike, Lee Thompson's Davey and Jacob, Michael's Luke and Mark don't have quite so caustic a relationship. Mark does rib his little brother about his origins as they lay in their beds. You know how big brothers are sometimes: a-holes. Well, Luke's imagination starts running wild when Mark tells him about Dead Baby Day, which happens to fall on Luke's birthday. Creepy, funny stuff.

There's plenty more packed into the 130 pages and is a kind of three-ring circus for dark fiction. Don't like the clown car? Then stick around for the lion tamer. And make sure you read Cafe Doom Competition winner's story, "Fade to Black," by Jaelithe Ingold. It feels a tad predictable at first, but the ending remedies that.

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