

# Not Pulitzer Prize Material, But Sarrantonio Knows How to Entertain

By Robert Butterfield

Sarrantonio, Al. *Halloweenland*. New York: Leisure, 2007. 293 p.

Short stories don't always translate into novels very effectively (I feel that even Dan Simmons' fine *Carrion Comfort* and Daniel Keyes' excellent *Flowers For Algernon* both may have worked better as the nearly perfect short-fiction that they originated from), but Al Sarrantonio has managed to surpass his short novella *The Baby!*, turning it into the full length novel, *Halloweenland*. This is not to say that either *The Baby!* or *Halloweenland* are in the same league with either of the aforementioned works. They are not. But both the novella and the novel are entertaining pieces of fiction by a writer who has honed his craft over the years. And they both are presented—two for the price of one—in Leisure Books *Halloweenland* edition.

To lengthen the novella, Sarrantonio has changed the ending of the first piece, and incorporated a new sequel featuring a sinister carnival (shades of Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*) which comes to Orangefield, the setting for three previous books by Sarrantonio: *Orangefield*, *Hallows Eve* and *Horrorween*. Orangefield is supposed to be a sort of focal point for the supernatural each year at Halloween. I have not read the previous books, but the town itself was not drawn as compellingly in *Halloweenland* as a similar town, Pine Deep, in this past year's *Ghost Road Blues*, the Bram Stoker Award winning first novel by Jonathan Maberry. Where Sarrantonio's book really comes to life is in the depiction of the carnival, which bears the name of the book's title.

The story itself features an incident of concern to two characters (the hero and the villain) that have apparently been featured in previous Orangefield sagas. The incident is the pregnancy of one of the town's inhabitants, a pregnancy that may have occurred as a result of the Marianne Carlin's making love with the spirit of her newly deceased husband, Jack. The hero, Bill Grant, a hard-boiled, hard-drinking detective, wants to protect the woman from the villain, Samhain, the Lord of the Dead. Samhain wants the possible offspring of the unnatural union. If this sounds a bit pedestrian, a little like young-adult fiction, well, I would venture that seems to be at least a part of Sarrantonio's target-audience. After all, one of the less sympathetic characters sprinkles his speech with the expletive "effing." While Grant is well-drawn, the flimsy (both in substance and in a literary sense) Samhain doesn't really do much for me as a villain.

However, the little girl who is not featured in the novella but is prominent in the novel is genuinely creepy. And whatever shortcomings and creaky plot contrivances need to be overcome, Sarrantonio, a fine writer, manages to be more than up to the task. Ask

yourself this: how many writers can actually make an internet document search seem exciting?

I realize that I seem to be paying this novel a lot of back-handed compliments. In actuality, *Halloweenland* is well-worth investing some time in, if just to see how a good novel in the horror genre is created, by someone who actually knows his craft. If you are not in search of a life-changing experience, then *Halloweenland*, a compelling horror/detective story, should fill the bill nicely.

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