

Lost in the Southern Gothic Fun House: Bloated Corpses, Talking Heads, and Goat Men

By Tony Fonseca

Joe R. Lansdale. *The Bottoms*. New York: Time Warner-Mysterious Press, 2000. 328p.

Mitch Cullen. *Tideland*. Chester Springs, PA: Dufour, 2000. 192p.¹

Growing up in South Louisiana, I have always sensed something intrinsically gothic about the geographic area generally referred to as the South. Perhaps it is the often perfectly breezeless summer air, as if time itself were stopped, or the blinding brightness of the sun reflected off of the whitewashed above-ground tombs, or the overgrowth of briars and weeds that shelter and hide countless gnats, fireflies, and spiders. Writers like Faulkner have always latched onto this typical Southern imagery, adding to the mix their depictions of the grotesques who often populate Southern Gothic Literature—if not the actual South itself. Whatever the reason, the rural South has traditionally been, and still is by the looks of Joe R. Lansdale's *The Bottoms* and Mitch Cullen's *Tideland*, the perfect setting for the grotesque worlds of gothicism and horror.

Though similar in their uses of the Texas landscape, these two novelists take disparate roads to arrive at the same atmospheric eeriness which is the Gothic. Although it is filled with gore and demented humor, *Tideland* is at heart a character study of a poor eleven year old girl named Jeliza-Rose. Cullen's heroine gives the word ingénue new layers of meaning. A morbid version of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Tideland* pulls no punches: Cullen has Jeliza-Rose keep her dead father around for days, unaware that he is rotting (she thinks he is just passing gas), and he has the local female hermit who once had an affair with Jeliza's father do a crude, homemade embalming on the body— one witnessed by the eleven year old—so that the body can be kept in her shack. Yet Cullen isn't simply going for what Stephen King in *Danse Macabre* calls "the gross out.. What makes *Tideland* effective is that Cullen draws us into the world of a lonely little girl who is so poor that all she can afford are doll parts, a world where a young child is so isolated and alone that she places Barbie heads on her fingertips and holds conversations with them while braving various adventures no child should face alone, including learning to survive on her own in the middle of nowhere.

While *Tideland* is Faulknerian in its emphasis on the insanity of life and death in the rural south, *The Bottoms* pays homage to the gothicism of Poe and Doyle. It reads like a "supernatural" detective mystery, albeit one transplanted to the deserted area of Depression Era East Texas. I'll make it no secret that I often think that detective fiction is the toughest genre for a writer: the challenge is to create a crime scene that is fascinating and a criminal who can elude the reader for hundreds of pages, but one who nevertheless

must be careless enough to get caught. So more often than not the criminal is too easy to identify early on in the novel, or is simply uninteresting—a prop brought on at the text's end to allow the case to be solved. Yet Lansdale transcends this fate (even though *The Bottoms* is highly predictable as a detective mystery) through his writing style and flair for character development.

The Bottoms is an excellent example of Lansdale's tapestry method of weaving together a novel. Lansdale starts with a singular storyline, that being the main plot line concerning a young boy and his sister, two children who find the mutilated body of a black woman, and the ensuing investigation that their father, a barely on-the-wagon alcoholic who happens to be sheriff of the small Texas town, conducts. The crux of the novel is the tension between two stories: It is a tale of the murders of poor blacks in "the bottoms," and of the difficulty in enlisting help to bring to justice a white killer of African-Americans (at one point a black hermit is lynched by a mob of townspeople for the killings); and it is a tale that analyzes the repressed male sexual psyche, a phenomenon which can lead to the creation of a man who mutilates women once they become sexual objects in his eyes. At times it seems that the investigation itself actually gets in the way of what is an otherwise gripping novel about race relations and long held secrets in a small Texas town. And as with other horror detective novels, such as Stephen Dobyn's *The Church of Dead Girls* and Boris Starling's *Messiah*, as well as horror/detective films such as David Fincher's *Seven*, the actual trapping of the criminal is a let down. What is more interesting is the horror behind the crime, the psychological makeup of the demented mind which produces the need to maim and kill—and the terror that this produces in would be victims.

Both novels show quality writing by the authors, and both share endings that albeit a bit unsatisfying, don't detract too much from the overall excellence of the works. Cullen's strength is in the raw power of his ingénue, as we view the cruelty of the world through her eyes, the eyes of a child whose abusive mother has died of a drug overdose and whose father simply drops dead after running away to his childhood home—an abandoned farm in Texas. The harsh lessons of life are not lost on Jeliza-Rose, as the reader sees in this scene where she talks with her favorite Barbie head, Classique, about one of the other heads, which had been desecrated when she bought it:

Cut 'N Style was unprotected on my pillow, surrounded by the torso, dismembered arms and legs. At Kmart, I once studied a brand new Cut 'N Style in her box. With hoop earrings, hands poised for clapping, red hair hanging to her butt, she was a stunning doll. Her baby-blue eyes glowed, and her Astronaut Fashion dress with matching go-go boots was an inspired touch. Years ago, my Cut 'N Style's head had been even more stylish than Classique's and that's why Classique hated her. In an effort to clean the black ink from Cut 'N Style's forehead and eyes, I poured nail polish remover over her face, just a few drops. But it smeared the red paint on her lips, blemished her plastic cheeks, and

didn't put a dent in the ink.

"Now she's a complete freak," Classique said. "Get rid of her."

"I can't," I said. "What if it happened to you?"

"Then you should kill me."

In this world of throwaway dolls and disposable people, Cullen allows Jeliza-Rose to find moments of tranquility, and these moments make up some of the more beautiful passages in *Tideland*:

"You bend so you don't break," I whispered as the Johnsongrass slapped across my hands, half-singing the song my father had written about me: "You bend so you don't break, you give and you give, but you can't take, Jeliza-Rose, so I don't know what to do for you."

And I continued along the trail for some time—winding left, then right, then left again—until it ended at a grazing pasture sprinkled with foxtails and the last bluebonnets of late spring. A breeze shuffled through the humidity, and the sky was already dimming. But the low-growing bluebonnets were still radiant, so I carefully stepped over them while moving further into the pasture.

For Jeliza-Rose, these wondrous moments are short-lived, because for the impoverished, the unwanted, and the unloved, every silver lining disguises a cloud. The perfect pasture is littered with an old burned out school bus left near the train tracks after a horrible accident, and even when Jeliza-Rose finds tranquility within desecration, sitting among the ashes of the bus seats while naming and talking to the fireflies around her, her peace is shattered by the rattle of an oncoming train. Cullen plays these same notes throughout *Tideland*, mixing beauty with grotesquerie, dignity with insanity. In *Tideland*, the dead aren't really dead, and the living aren't really alive. And happy endings aren't possible, for life in Cullen's grotesque Texas landscape is as fragmented as Jeliza-Rose's dolls.

Lansdale, likewise, keeps *The Bottoms* from bottoming out by presenting the gothic world of The South through the eyes of a child, in this case the son of the town sheriff. Harry Crane relates the story of how he and his sister Thomasina were sent out into the woods to put the family hound dog out of its misery—only to make a gruesome discovery when they find the mutilated body of a local black woman tied up near the river bottoms. The naiveté of the Harry's point of view is what builds the tension in the novel, as he reacts with a child's innocence towards the ugliness of life: He witnesses his father's alcoholism, the racism of the locals, the autopsy of the dead woman, his father's feud with a lifetime friend due to jealousy. And he lives in a world that forces him to acknowledge the existence of perverts and serial killers. It is Harry's innocence that allows the suspension of disbelief in the reader, so that the Goat Man in the woods becomes a believable monster:

As we went along, there was more movement in the thicket next to us, and after a while I realized that whatever it was it was keeping stride with us. When we slowed, it slowed. We sped up, it sped up. And not the way an animal will do, or even the way a coach whip snake will sometimes follow and run you. This was something bigger than a snake. It was stalking us, like a panther. Or a man.

It was moving along the bank on the opposite side, down near the water, under the bridge. You couldn't see it good, because it was outside of the moonlight, in the shadows. Its head was huge and there was something like horns on it and the rest of it was dark as a coal bin. It leaned a little forward, as if trying to get a good look at us, and I could see the whites of its eyes and chalky teeth shining in the moonlight. It made a high keening noise, like a huge wood rat being slowly crushed to death. It made the noise twice and went silent.

Lansdale's other strength, characterization, is evident throughout *The Bottoms*, which is populated by local color types, such as the aged African-American matriarch who knows everything about the town's history, including its dark secrets; the kind-hearted hermit who lives in a shack on the woods and is a friend of the sheriff; the crotchety old doctor who is one of the town's biggest racists and therefore hinders the investigation; the school marm who is also considered the best catch in town by all the bachelors; the quiet war veteran who hides a dark secret. Lansdale weaves the various histories of these characters together, as Harry uncovers, piece by piece, the clues to the puzzle of the town's serial killer. Though the identity of the killer is predictable, the dark secrets of the townspeople uncovered by Harry, including those of his own father and mother, are what *The Bottoms* is really about.

As I mentioned earlier, both novels' endings seem unsatisfactory: In *The Bottoms* the killer is caught when his path crosses with that of the Goat Man, and in *Tideland*, the inevitable result of mixing dynamite with a naive Jeliza-Rose and her "boyfriend", a thirty year old male with the mind of a child, is played out to its logical conclusion. But both of these novels are more about the journey than the journey's end, as they both offer an enjoyable ride through the funhouse that is the southern gothic landscape.

¹*Tideland* was made into a film in 2006 by Terry Gilliam of Monty Python fame. Gilliam's movie is extremely faithful to the script, and I would highly recommend it to anyone who has no hang-ups about what he/she sees on the silver screen, since the tale involves death, necrophilia, childhood sexuality, mental retardation, and explosive violence.