

# Reyome Rants! Or the Universal Monster Redux

By James David Reyome

Friedman, Michael Jan. *The Wolf Man: Hunter's Moon*. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2007, 235 p.

Paine, Michael. *The Mummy: Dark Resurrection*. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2007, 297 p.

*A long time ago in a horror journal far, far away...well, 564 miles, give or take a few and it was seven years or thereabouts...*

It all seems *so* long ago, no? So much has changed, and I could rant forever, really, just over the events of the past seven years. So much fodder, so little time. But it's all become so tiresome. No one listens, and anyway, given some luck, it'll be "all change" a little over 350 days from when this missive is posted and things will be all sweetness and light again.

I'll give you just a moment then to collect yourselves and stop laughing, shall I?

Now then. First things first. I suppose I should explain exactly where I've been the past few years. After all, some of you *may* just care. I haven't exactly been inundated with e-mails asking, "say Jim, when will you be back with *Necropsy*?" Oh, there've been a few, but it's not exactly as if people were knocking at my door with a battering ram, something like a scene out of the old Universal version of *Frankenstein*...

***Foreshadow*** (*more or less a transitive verb*): *To present an indication or a suggestion of beforehand; presage.*

So, what *did* happen? Well, my friends, *life* happened. My wife and I celebrated 15 years of conjugal bliss last spring. Our son is about to be a teenager. I returned to the stage (once as a monster! no, really!), and I continue to be involved in motor racing. Sometimes I even get to be on the radio—an archaic form of entertainment, to be sure, but I like being part of it. And I'm told I have a face for it. I get to meet lots of interesting people too, and sometimes practice the interview skills I learned back in journalism class in high school. I prefer writing, myself, to doing it live; it's much easier to edit out swear words in post-production. Besides, it's *way* more fun making stuff up than reporting reality. Easier, too.

Then there was this bit of madness generally referred to as "NaNoWriMo." Some of you may have heard of it; some of you may have even participated. It's National Novel Writing Month, the goal of which is to have participants sit down and write at least 50,000 words of an *original manuscript* during the month of November. In 2006 my muse was positively stitch-lipped. This year, I couldn't shut her up, and the goal was

surpassed around the 21<sup>st</sup> of the month: the result—another unfinished novel (this makes four), but one with a pretty damned fine start. I believe there's another 75K in that one. I've also penned another half dozen or so short stories—I've honestly lost count—at least two of which I think are good enough to shop around, probably in the next few weeks. Who knows, maybe this time next year I can actually lay claim to being a Working Writer. At last.

So yes, I have been incredibly busy, at least lately. The heart problems which sort of took me off the field a while have kinda sorta cleared up, and I am somewhat back up to speed, which is pretty neat. P. J., my only begotten son, has (rather abruptly) decided that he likes hiking—o, frabjous day!—and has accompanied both the Great Dan McDowell and me on a couple of nifty walks, and in about six weeks he shall undergo a rite of passage of sorts, a trip into and out of the South Cumberland's stupendous Big Creek Gulf, which is quite a splendid walk for a young man. Or a middle-aged one.

Things have been tough up here in Casa del Boom, the World's Absolutely Genuine Original Split-Level Trailer®. When you make your living doing something a whole lot of people already do, the earning potential goes way down. And apart from our seasonal gig at the Speedway, there's not a whole lot of money coming in, and to be completely honest, there's been some times when I could hear scratching at the door, and I knew it wasn't one of the cats either. It was the wolf...

***Foreshadow:** (to reiterate...jdr) To present an indication or a suggestion of beforehand; presage.*

Not as if that weren't enough, of course. It's been as cold as a tomb lately, and our furnace expired like an eager archeologist excavating an Egyptian Pharaoh's last resting place. More money (and more of that ***Foreshadow*** stuff too) and more stress. To top it all off, we've had some pretty severe personal crises lately, most particularly with the terrible illness afflicting one of the members of my family, specifically my Mummy...

***Foresh**...oh, never mind.*

Oh. And then, just a few days ago, tornadoes. Tornadoes! Yes, one to the north, one to the south, and the latter perhaps a bit too close for comfort. But that passed like the dust of an Egyptian sandstorm, and I swear, I'll try and not use the word "foreshadow" even once more during the course of this missive. It was a bit of fun, but all silliness aside, it's well and good for a lead (J-101, bay-bee), but substance...ah, who needs that anyway. And now we've come full circle, and I'm back to that *a long time ago, far, far away* business.

You see, I wrote a review a few eons ago in these here pages about a series of books featuring the old Universal Monsters. You know those characters. All that foreshadowing business I've been going on and on about probably should've given you all the clues you needed a long time ago. We're talking the guys and ghouls you grew up on, the ones we hate to love but do anyway. Boris and Bela and Dwight, oh my! The whole grisly crew.

Well, they're back again seven years later, with a new publisher and new writers, which considering how bad the last batch were, is most fortunate.

The Wolf Man and Frankenstein's Monster and his Bride and the Mummy, and that scaly critter from the eldritch Lagoon, they're back in town, friends, and they mean business. And why shouldn't they? They've got half a century plus of devoted fans. They've got dozens of spinoff and flakey remakes (*Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter*, anyone?) and even a mega-successful parody and, not to forget, a hit Broadway musical! Heady stuff, this. So, again, why not? If Frankenstein is back, why *not* resurrect the Wolf Man? Or the Mummy? Yes, the Mummy has been remade fairly recently, and pretty well at that, but that's not reason to let the dead rest, is it?

Well... Let's revisit the previous iteration of Universal Monster novels, shall we? After all, I wrote the review. Read it at your leisure; it's on this site somewhere amidst all the other Rants I've spewed. Suffice to say I found the books lacking in so many ways that I spent more time ranting than I did reviewing, and I concluded with, "Universal's monsters deserve a better legacy." And I don't mind affirming I was right, too. So. Enter Dark Horse.

That's right, *Dark Horse*. You know these folks, or you ought too. *Barb Wire*, *Dr. Giggles*, *Sin City*, *Hellboy*, and, most recently, *300*, and that's just a few of their originals. They've also got a hundred or more licensed properties, most of which you will know on sight, but chief amongst which is yon fair Buffy le slayer du Vampyre. So they know their stuff. Or they should, anyway. So why *not* them as the new torch-carriers for the Universal Monster legacy?

First, there's *The Wolf Man: Hunter's Moon* by Michael Jan Friedman (Dark Horse Books 2007) Now, let me begin this examination the same way I began the one of seven years previous: I *really, really* wanted to like this book. I did, honestly. It's the *Wolf Man*, for heaven's sake. He's a friend of the Gypsies, which almost makes him a brother to me. But Mr. Friedman commits an unforgivable sin in his work: *he turns Larry Talbot into a wuss*. And...and...a boring one at that!

Now, please pardon my heaping of scorn, but how on earth do you take a guy like Larry Talbot and make him nearly wholly uninteresting? I'm not sure, but Friedman somehow succeeds. This book was a tough plow, indeed. What's especially sad is that it all starts so *well*. Ever wonder where the curse that created the first lycanthrope originated? Well, it's explained here, and it's probably the highlight of the entire story. That's just in the first fourteen pages, mind you. Then we find Talbot apparently being rescued (from his crypt?) by some unknown heroes in a chase that winds its way through a chapter and some change before he is finally deposited at a locale called Fair Haven, where he learns he is in the Company of Wolves—the Order of the Wolf, anyway. And their only purpose in life, they say, is to protect whoever is carrying the curse of the Wolf. From who and what? Why, the Enclave, of course, which is explained as some mysterious cabal bent on destroying the last surviving werewolf.

But why protect the Wolf Man? This does take some explaining, and Friedman endeavors to do so. But it all seems a bit much, and maybe, just maybe, the author is attempting a bit of foreshadowing himself. Anyway, the thought crosses the reader's mind rather early that the Order is not quite what it seems, and when Fair Haven is attacked whilst Talbot is out on one of his full moon adventures—when you gotta go, you just gotta go, you know, he *is* the Wolf Man, after all—he's sure it's the shadowy Enclave that's responsible. But I was not. The lone survivor, the lovely Antoinette (who is Larry's quasi-love interest) hides and guides Talbot toward what he presumes is safety, but by now you've probably figured out the rest, and so had I long before the climactic scenes took shape. Strangely, they're some of the most finely-drawn portions of the book, and if the middle two thirds would've been near as gripping, I might just have been able to highly recommend *Hunter's Moon*. But, alas, they're not. So I can't. The Wolf Man will have to wait a few more moons before he finds a tale worthy of his history. Still, there is more hope for this series than with the rather sophomoric efforts of seven years ago, and it lies, appropriately enough, in a freshly opened tomb ...

The Mummy is an interesting entity, fictionally speaking, and a tough sell for a writer and reader alike. There's a lot to the story, and by that I mean a lot of back lot stuff, legends and standards to which must be adhered, and to tackle the likes of this in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century must take some fortitude. I am pleased, then, to note that Michael Paine exhibits all that and more in *The Mummy: Dark Resurrection* (Dark Horse Books 2007). He also exhibits a profound disdain for Pittsburgh, but that's for another review. He will have some explaining to do with the Chamber of Commerce, though. While Paine does make the "hero" of the piece, one Josh Brandt, more of an anti-hero, Brandt is at least an *interesting* anti-hero. Yes, he is self-absorbed, he is foolhardy, and yes, at times he is just plain stupid. But I suppose such stereotypical behavior is only to be expected from a person who is the scion of a wealthy family, not to mention a chip off the old Pyramid block: his grandfather and father were both "researchers" (Egyptians call them "grave robbers") and both died at the hands of Imhotep, the legendary Mummy who walks cursed because, so we're told, he made the mistake of getting the hots for the sweetie of Anubis. You know, the Egyptian God of the Dead. Not the sort of guy whose lady I'd be wanting to make time with, but such is love, I suppose.

So, here we have young, brash Josh Brandt, who, against the advice of pretty much everyone he knows and loves, is attempting to follow in the footsteps of his ancestors, and in doing so, redeem them, perhaps. He is financing a dig in search of a long lost tomb of one princess named Ankh-es-en-Amun. Now, with all this foreshadowing (damn! another dozen lashes!) you've just *got* to know that said princess was the aforementioned heart's desire of our well-wrapped friend Imhotep, and if you've got the idea that young Mr. Brandt is about to kick over the Egyptian version of a hornet's nest, well, you're spot-on. The deaths come swiftly and with imagination; there is *so much* dead bodies can do! Paine does a fine job with the gut-twisting, and even had a veteran of my stripe gagging a time or two. Nothing truly gratuitous, mind you, just loads of heart-rending *fun*. This story is everything the Wolf Man novel could've and should've been, and more's the pity. An imaginative subplot surrounding various members of Brandt's family falling victim to the apparent curse of Imhotep works wonderfully well, even sickeningly

so, especially when Josh goes ahead with an ill-conceived birthday celebration for his grandmother, with an uninvited guest: Ardeth Bey.

Ah, but there's more! The way in which Brandt's schizophrenic sister figures into the story is one of those twists that you see coming a mile away, yet when the climactic moment does finally arrive, it's still got *impact*. Ardeth Bey would be pleased that he's received the star treatment he so richly deserves, and with a wonderfully abstract non-ending, this book gets a well-deserved thumbs-up from yours truly.

*Coulda, woulda, shoulda* is what I thought the last time the Universal Monsters got turned into novels, and maybe I'm right in thinking it's just not practical to try to update the great stories of the past to 21<sup>st</sup> Century standards. But *The Mummy* seems to point (with a bony finger, of course) that there may be hope yet. A spine implant for the Wolf Man in volume two would be of great help, but the Mummy's wrapped up nice and tight and is ready to dance. That's a helluva party right there. A pretty damned fine effort from Dark Horse, and I hope the rest of the series carries on likewise.

By way of closing, and with due honor: it's been loads of fun doing these reviews. I'm usually a bit behind everyone else so far as deadline is concerned, but Miss June and the wonderful Tony (whom I have yet to have the pleasure of meeting, we *must* rectify that!) have ever been patient, and I surely appreciate that. June at least knows I have been thus since J-101. It has (mostly) been a joy being asked to review stories of the genre I so love, and I will miss it; if the opportunity ever comes to resurrect *Necropsy*, I hope to be among the first on the list. Till then, I can be found on the web at [reyome.net](http://reyome.net), where I'm always happy to receive insults, death threats, and large amounts of money. Do drop by some time, and if you're ever in Nashville during racing season, come out and join us some Saturday night at the Fairgrounds.

Love and kisses, blood and guts,

James David Reyome

*Necropsy: The Review of Horror Fiction, Volume XXVIII (Winter 2008)*