

Interview with Justin Behrens, author of “Bad Paths”

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Justin Behrens, who is here to talk about his new book, “Bad Paths.”

After living on both coasts of the United States and holding various occupations from stained-glass window restoration to computer programming, Justin Behrens currently resides in his home state of Iowa.

Tyler: Welcome, Justin. I’m glad you could join me today. “Bad Paths” sounds like a very emotional and frightening novel. I understand the main character, Greg Dameron, was separated from his family at a young age and doesn’t remember them. Will you tell us how this separation took place?

Justin: Greg and his mother left their hometown when he was only a few years old, cut off all ties with their family, and spent Greg’s childhood and teenage years roaming the country, moving from state to state.

Tyler: Why does Greg now return to Iowa?

Justin: Estranged from his mother for the past decade, Greg returns to his hometown after his mother dies unexpectedly, to attend her funeral. He reunites with a family he doesn’t remember, and discovers a terrifying secret he’ll never forget.

Tyler: Will you tell us about the family members still alive in Iowa whom Greg meets upon his return?

Justin: Greg’s aunt Katelin and uncle Ron live in an old Victorian house secluded in the woods off of a winding gravel road a few miles outside of town. Katelin is his mother’s sister, and although Greg has no memory of her, she remembers him fondly from when he was a toddler and still lived with the family in the same house she now shares with her husband, Ron.

Tyler: What does Greg find out about his family once he returns home?

Justin: Greg realizes that everything is not what it seems. Beneath their simple, friendly demeanors, his aunt and uncle are hiding a dark family legacy founded in innocent blood and unspeakable acts. Greg discovers that his family’s legacy is very much alive, and eager to welcome him into a history of insanity and death.

To make matters worse, there are strange things lurking in the woods around the Dameron house, skulking around like the shadows of nightmares. Monsters should not exist, but for Greg they do. He can see them, and they can see him.

Tyler: Justin, you mentioned Greg discovered a terrifying secret about his family. Can you give us a hint of what that secret is, or will that be giving away too much of the plot?

Justin: Well, I can’t say much, but it’s about the legacy of Greg’s family and the creatures that dwell in the woods. Other than that...it’s a secret.

Tyler: How about those scary monsters that exist in the book. Can you give us a clue as to what kinds of monsters they are?

Justin: They're an amalgamation of ideas and concepts. They're not really ghosts, but are somewhat ghostlike. They're not really demons, but are somewhat demonic. I'm not really sure what they are. That probably sounds strange since I wrote them into existence, but sometimes a story takes on a life of its own. When that happens, I no longer feel like I'm completely in control of what's going on. I feel like a reporter, standing on the sidelines and watching things happen, furiously trying to scribble down notes about what is unfolding in front of me.

I'm almost certain I'll be exploring these particular creatures further in future writing. I like them.

Tyler: I would like to hear more about those monsters in a future book. Justin, our reviewer at Reader Views commented that the book is "gory" but people do have different levels of squeamishness. Do you think it is gory?

Justin: I would agree that there are some graphic scenes that could be called "gory." But as you pointed out, people have different levels of squeamishness: what may shock one reader may barely cause a reaction in another. I think that it's important to make the distinction between gore for gore's sake and gore within the context of a story. The graphic scenes in "Bad Paths" are there because the story called for them. They help to move the story along in exciting and frightening ways.

If you're a fan of horror novels, I don't think "Bad Paths" will necessarily shock you with gore. You won't run screaming into the night. I hope it scares you, creeps you out, and makes you consider sleeping with the lights on; but I think you'll remain safely in bed, as long as you don't let your hand fall over the side and hang in that dark area between the bed and the floor. You can't trust that place, and even if you sleep with the lights on, you never know what's under there.

In the end, "Bad Paths" is a horror novel. It can't all be butterflies and rainbows.

Tyler: Very true! Justin, why Iowa for the setting of your horror novel?

Justin: I try to follow the writing adage of "write what you know," to an extent. I was born in Iowa, and although I've traveled extensively and lived in several different states, I've spent a good portion of my life in Iowa. I currently live in the state. I know the area, the people.

When you write in a genre like horror, filled with speculative creatures, plots, and situations, it's your goal (or at least it's mine) to make the unbelievable believable, or at least plausible. One of the ways I try to accomplish that is to present the unbelievable in settings that seem believable, with characters that seem real. I feel I'm most effective in doing so when I write about what I know, about settings and descriptions I can intimately describe by pulling elements from real life. Obviously I don't know what it's like to run for my life while being chased by a monster. But I know how the air smells in a small Iowa town after it rains. I know how the leaves change colors in autumn. I know what it means to detassel corn.

I strive to write in a way that causes readers to suspend their disbelief, to think, "Logically I know the things in this story couldn't really happen, yet emotionally it still *feels* like they could." Basically I'm sprinkling little truths into the big lie that is a novel.

Tyler: Justin, have you been influenced by any other horror writers or horror films in writing horror fiction?

Justin: Definitely. I've always been a big fan of horror stories and horror films. When I was a young child, my mother told me that the Boogeyman lived in the oven, in the hopes that I'd stay away from it and not hurt myself. Instead, for quite some time it caused me to open the oven door and stick my head in there looking for him. I really wanted to see the Boogeyman.

I think part of the reason that I write horror is because I've spent my life reading it. It seemed like a natural extension. Over the years I've subconsciously absorbed the basics of storytelling by reading great stories. I'm a voracious reader, and could probably spend the better part of a day compiling a list of favorite authors. Instead, I'll just name a few off the top of my head, in no particular order: Stephen King, Clive Barker, Bentley Little, Neil Gaiman, Scott Smith, Dean Koontz, to name but a few. Oh, and Dr. Seuss. Although not horror, my love of reading started with him and his red and blue fish.

I'm kind of old school when it comes to movies. The original "The Shining" will probably always be one of my favorite movies. "The Exorcist" still scares me no matter how many times I watch it. "Poltergeist" is great—who doesn't hate that clown?

And for the record, I never saw the Boogeyman in the oven. But I never hurt myself either. So I guess it all worked out.

Tyler: Why do you think horror fiction is so popular today?

Justin: I think there will always be a group of people who like to be scared. While the demand for horror might fluctuate, there will always be a core group of readers who simply love the horrific. I do. I always have. What's not to love? Monsters, ghosts, insane killers, blood, death, destruction. That's good stuff.

You feel more alive when confronted with death. Being scared is fun. Reading a good story that takes you to another place, a nightmare landscape filled with fear, is almost magical. And there's nothing better than discovering an author for the first time who has the power to transport you to that landscape of horror with nothing but words.

Tyler: Would you disagree that the fascination with horror reflects what's wrong with our society today—that we feel the real world is frightening and we create horror novels as representations of what we secretly feel about our lives?

Justin: I think that the real world can definitely be frightening and we use horror as a way to cope with what we can't control. We as a species seem to have an almost obsessive need to classify everything, to know everything. Everything has to have a name, a purpose, a place in our lives. What we don't understand, we often react to with fear. The unknown seems to scare us. Horror is the unknown. It's the unnamed, unclassified thing that we can't control. It's the monster in the closet, it's the thing we hear creeping across our bedroom floor in the middle of the night, it's the fear that we'll wake up and discover that our children have disappeared from their beds and can't be found.

In horror fiction, we try to classify those fears, we try to understand them. We write them down, give them names, and put them safely in books. We control with words the things we can't control with actions.

Tyler: Did you ever give yourself nightmares while writing "Bad Paths"?

Justin: That's an interesting question. When I was younger, I suffered from very vivid and intense nightmares on almost a nightly basis. Sometimes I wouldn't wake up until after I was out of bed, out of my room, and running away from whatever sharp-clawed, pointy-toothed, hungry thing that was always trying to catch me (and sometimes they did). Around the time I became a teenager I stopped recalling dreams, any dreams. I haven't remembered more than a handful of dreams over the last two decades. I'm sure I dream, I just don't remember them. Maybe it's some kind of coping mechanism to deal with my overactive sleeping imagination.

I may very well still be having nightmares and subconsciously translating them into stories, writing them down. "Bad Paths" may *be* a nightmare. I don't know.

Tyler: What do you plan to write next? Do you think you'll stick with horror fiction, or will you try your hand at something else?

Justin: I'm currently writing another horror novel. It seems to be what I'm supposed to do. I don't consciously sit down and say, "Okay, I'm going to write something scary." Yet it ends up happening regardless, and I don't see myself stopping anytime soon.

Maybe someday I'll write about butterflies and rainbows. Perhaps the butterflies will have an appetite for human blood.

Tyler: Now that would be a unique horror novel. Be sure to come back and talk about that one! Thank you for joining me today, Justin. Before we go, will you tell our readers where they can find out more information or go to purchase a copy of "Bad Paths"?

Justin: “Bad Paths” is available for purchase online from retailers Amazon and Barnes & Noble and can also be ordered through most bookstores. It is also available through wholesalers Ingram and Baker & Taylor.

Tyler: Thank you, Justin. I wish you many nightmares on the pages you write, but not in your sleep.

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