

Basketball and the Elusive Rogue Mackerel: Poppy Z. Brite in the 21st Century

An Interview by
Paula Guran



Did you read Poppy Z. Brite's latest story in last month's (July 2001) issue of *The Spook*? Readers familiar with Brite's work — or even her reputation as a visceral "new gothic" writer — might have been surprised with "O Death, Where Is Thy Spatula?" The author of four novels, a biography, and two short story collections, Brite's work has, in the past, been unfairly noted as "shocking and fascinating in about equal measure."

Plastic Jesus, an author-illustrated novel-la published last year by Subterranean Press, was inspired by the murder of John Lennon. Some Beatles fans may have been "shocked" by Brite's fantasy, but if they were then they obviously don't understand what John Lennon and Paul McCartney were all about. More importantly, it seemed — like "Spatula" — to indicate a new literary direction for the talented 34-year-old writer.

She hopes it is. "I seem to be veering away from horror in my longer work. This isn't a conscious choice, and many of my recent short stories could still be called horror, but *Plastic Jesus* and the novel I'm close to finishing definitely couldn't."

"I'm proud of what I have written, but having been back in New Orleans for eight years after living elsewhere, I'm interested in portraying a more realistic and (at least to me) more interesting version of the city than the spookified, prettified version in my previous books."

"It's a change in perspective," she says, "a clearer way of seeing my hometown after having been away for too long. When I lived elsewhere, New Orleans became glamorized in my mind. Living back here (and getting out of the damn French Quarter — it's great in its way, but too full of tourists and transients to be a representative part of the city) has totally changed the way I feel about it and want to write about it. I still love it dearly, but more in the way you love someone after years of a good marriage — dealing with their warts, stinks, and bad habits too — rather than through the rosy lens of a long-distance relationship."

Brite cites John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* as her favorite New Orleans novel. "I read it at least once a year, and it influences me more each time. In my recent work, the Toole influence manifests itself more (I hope) in the portrayal of New Orleans as a place of Divine Stupidity. I could never hope to match Toole's characters — they're brilliant. And you know, as grotesque as they are, I

believe he truly loved them."

Brite won't reveal what the almost-finished novel is about. "Talking about work in progress only brings sorrow. I can tell you some things it isn't: it's not horror, not dark, not even sexy. I didn't consciously try to go in the opposite direction from what I've done before; this is just what showed up and wanted to be written. I am as surprised by it as anyone else is likely to be."

For better or worse, Brite found herself cast in a certain image that for the last few years hasn't been totally appropriate. A 1997 *Alt.culture* description of her (still on the Web) gives the idea: Former Goth/stripper/artist's model whose first novel *Lost Souls* (1992) earned her a reputation as an Anne Rice for swingers. (Like Rice, she lives in New Orleans.)...Okay, she did have some interesting part-time jobs before being able to support herself as a writer. Most writers do. But, as she puts it, "New Orleans is my hometown. I returned here because of my memories and my family. I'm not a Rice fan and have always found it silly that people (usually people not very familiar with my work) would make that assumption. To me, it's about as far-fetched as comparing Dennis Cooper and Dino DeLaurentis because they both live in L.A. and have produced entertainment about serial killers."



Back to *Alt.culture*: Brite's stories are typically steeped in decadent, doomed romanticism, her characters practicing bisexuality and vampirism... "I wrote exactly one novel about vampires, ten years ago; I wouldn't say vampirism is 'typical' of my work. It's a hell of a thing to saddle somebody with. Stephen King has written as many vampire novels as I have, Dan Simmons twice as many, but they managed to escape the taint somehow. It's that girly thing, isn't it?"

(Maybe so. Maybe women are somehow inexplicably seen as some sort of sequential tarts who do best churning out reliably repetitious work. Once established as a name-the-category novelist, the safe route is, after all, to stay in the groove. But very few people — thank goodness — remain the same as they were in their early twenties. Why should a writer?)

Young, female, and attractive, Brite was seen by many fans as a sort of Goth goddess in her earlier years. She admits she wasn't entirely innocent of providing at least some of the fodder feeding the image monster's appetite. She did pose artistically semi-nude and, as our *Alt.culture* source says, Brite has also freely discussed an unusual domestic arrangement that has

doubtless informed her work: she lives, she has said, in a stable ménage à trois with two men. You can almost hear her sigh at this mention. "This lasted for less than a year, but it's my own stupid fault for talking about it to the press. I'm pleased to report that I only have one husband now and am much happier than I was in that 'stable' (HA!) three-way."

Even though she's still perceived as being someone she isn't, Brite can live with it. "Let this be a warning to anyone who becomes well-known at age twenty-five and consequentially does a lot of growing up in the public eye, even as tiny a 'public eye' as it may be for a writer. What the hell, though; my only real concern is the work, and I think my 'image' has interested more potential readers than it's turned off."

"People expect you to keep doing the same thing forever, but that doesn't mean you have to. I feel no obligation to live up to any expectation except that of good writing. I think people who like my work can see that it's about more than sex and violence. I'd rather risk failure than bore myself. When *Lost Souls* achieved some success in 1992, nothing would have pleased my publisher and some of my readers more than for me to crank out a sequel or two, but that was never an option — it just didn't interest me.

Although currently preoccupied with finishing the novel, she did recently enjoy the NBA finals, but was disappointed to see San Antonio get eliminated so early. "I love David Robinson and Tim Duncan. Now we're waiting to see whether we will get to keep our NFL team in New Orleans or not. I didn't use to like watching sports that much, but now I find them relaxing."

Brite's been somewhat piscatorially obsessed of late with the elusive rogue mackerel. "I've been obsessed with this ever since I read *Close To Shore*, Michael Capuzzo's book about a series of shark attacks that took place on the New Jersey coast in 1916. People didn't believe sharks were dangerous, and one of the suggested culprits was a giant rogue mackerel. In-

trigued with this possibility, but not convinced that a mackerel could bite someone's legs off, I've been bothering chefs, fishermen, and anyone else of my acquaintance who might be in a position to know. So far, the consensus seems to be the mackerel is not one of the great killers of the sea. I can't explain this fascination except to say that I am a Monty Python fan from way back."

Sports? Killer fish?

Poppy Z. Brite has always written what she writes because that's what she writes. Don't ever expect her interests or her life to be confined by someone else's presuppositions. The genius of her fiction lies in her ability to reveal herself and that revelatory power is fuelled by the never ending process of self-recognition.

If it weren't, Poppy Z. Brite might have wound up as Danielle Steele on absinthe or maybe Judith Krantz with kudzu. ~

Calling Dr. Brite: Does Poppy Have a Brand New Bag?

An Investigation by
Paula Guran

The central character of "O Death, Where Is Thy Spatula?" (and an earlier very short story, "Monday's Special") is a likeable, logical sort who approaches what she sees as a problem and solves it rationally. Of course, her rational approach uses voodoo and involved self-mutilation, but she's definitely not what many would term a "typical" Poppy Z. Brite character. She is a professional, heterosexual female whose only brush with decadence involves fine cuisine. Her occupation is coroner and her name is, significantly, Dr. Brite.

"The life of Dr. Brite is my other life," says the author. "You can see this when she makes fun of her former literary ambitions. When I was very young, I was already fascinated with guts and the workings of the human body. Before I wanted to be a writer, my career ambition was to be the coroner of New Orleans."



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FOOTWEAR

Writer Brite doesn't foresee involving coroner Brite in a novel. "Brite has now appeared in two short stories, and the short form seems to be a good medium for her. I like the idea of several tangentially connected stories rather than a novel."

In most places the coroner is a political appointment and the actual autopsies, etc. are performed by a medical examiner trained in pathology. Dr Brite, however, does the real work. "Everything's different in New Orleans," Brite explains. "We don't have an M.E. Our coroner, Frank Minyard, is a pathologist and performs all the functions (autopsies, police liaisons, and so forth) that would be performed by the M.E. in most other places. As well, he is an accomplished trumpet player and a very fun guy."

Before you start thinking examining the dead is a little creepy, stop and realize just how popular forensic pathology is these days: HBO has hit Autopsy specials, Patricia Cornwell's Dr. Kay Scarpetta is the Chief Medical Examiner of Virginia and stars in a best-selling (and beginning to be somewhat imitated) series of books, the L.A. County Coroner's Office has a gift shop. Dr. Brite's fictional occupation is both fairly mainstream and potentially commercial. Is there a chance — ?

"God help me, I'll farm her out! Well, not really," says Brite. "I enjoy the Scarpetta books for their attention to gory detail, but Cornwell's writing is certainly not something I'd want to emulate. And I've never had much luck in retail, so that leaves out the gift shop."

More seriously, Brite feels, "If there is a single core of meaning to 'Spatula,' I think it's that, having sawed off skull tops and removed brains, Dr. Brite is convinced the dead stay dead — and yet, because she loves Devlin (or at least loves his cooking), she has enough faith to try this impossible thing."

Poppy Z. Brite's new literary "bag" is, perhaps, more whimsical than morbid, more thoughtful than hip, and offers more hope than angst. But at the same time there's nothing in her writing that's really so new — just more refined, more mature, more accomplished.

If there is any major theme running through her stories and novels it may be our obsessive search for an ephemeral something that we can't quite define. That hasn't changed. As John Lennon and Paul McCartney wrote: "What do you see when you turn out the light? I can't tell you but I know it's mine." ~

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THE SPOOK

August 2001

Issue No. 2

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The Spook online magazine is published by FILMCITY productions.
P.O. Box 281, Warrensburg, New York 12885
(518) 623-3220

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twelve times a year at thespook.com All rights reserved.

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