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One Punk’s Guide is a series of articles where Razorcake contributors share their love for a topic that is not traditionally considered punk. Previous Guides have explored everything from pinball, to African politics, to outlaw country music.

Razorcake is a bi-monthly, Los Angeles-based fanzine that provides consistent coverage of do-it-yourself punk culture. We believe in positive, progressive, community-friendly DIY punk, and are the only bona fide 501(c)(3) non-profit music magazine in America. We do our part.

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I've been rejected a lot—roughly six hundred and fifty times since I started counting a decade ago. Not by love interests and not by jobs, but by potential publishers. More often than not, the rejections come via form letter: “We appreciate your interest in (insert publisher name here). We reviewed your story. Unfortunately, it’s not right for us.”

Rejection is just part of being a writer. It still stings though. I believe in the stories I create. I work hard on them. Like most writers, when I get a rejection I sometimes can’t help but think the editor didn’t get what I was trying to do.

In the late 2000s, I got a rejection that forced me to turn that question on myself. It forced me to reevaluate how I define my writing. It forced me to ask, “Do I get what I’m trying to do?” That rejection opened my eyes to a new genre of fiction.

The rejection, which was particularly abrasive, came from a horror publisher. You see, up until that point, I thought I was a horror writer. I mean, my stories typically have monsters in them, so they must be horror, right? What else could they be? This rejection letter answered that question.

It said, “We don’t publish bizarro fiction.”

What The Fuck Is Bizarro Fiction?

There is a book called The Haunted Vagina. It’s about a guy who hears noises emanating from his girlfriend’s crotch, so he goes spelunking in her vagina and discovers another world inside, a world where animated skeletons wander around, threatening the poor citizens, who seem to be made of gummy candy. Written by a madman named Carlton Mellick III, this book is a cornerstone of the bizarro genre.

After getting that fateful rejection letter, I dug into this and other Mellick books. There are nearly fifty of them now, all with outrageous titles like The Menstruating Mall, Armadillo Fists, Razor Wire Pubic Hair and Satan Burger. Then I moved on to explore other writers in this burgeoning literary movement.
I discovered a genre that contained everything I was looking for in books. Not surprisingly, these were the same qualities that attracted me to punk when I was a teenager. Bizarro fiction is crazy, energetic, fast-paced, and raw. It’s weird and fucked up. It’s DIY. It’s a legit literary scene and anyone can be a part of it.

But what the fuck is it?

Back when there were mom and pop video rental stores, the good ones had a cult section where they tossed the movies that didn’t fit anywhere else: the David Lynch films, the Troma flicks, El Topo and Pink Flamingos. Bizarro Central, the online home of the genre, describes bizarro fiction as the cult section of the literary world. That’s as good a definition as any.

What ties the genre together is a commitment to doing weird, surprising shit. Elements of horror and science fiction are common. Grossness is not unusual. Humor is almost always present. However, no two bizarro books are the same.

Mellick’s books tend to be written in a relatively straightforward narrative style. Weird shit goes on in the story, but the writing itself isn’t that weird stylistically (although there may be the occasional doodle or a chart like the one in Punk Land showing the things the narrator would like to see shooting out of his pet dildo’s pee hole, like ninja stars and Watermelon Ice Gatorade).

On the other end of the spectrum are guys like D. Harlan Wilson. In his short story collection They Had Goat Heads, he gets experimental in style and subject. “The Movie That Wasn’t There,” opens with the line “I go to a movie and notice I’m starring in it.” The narrator’s story and the film on screen blur together almost immediately, creating a delirious effect.

A book has to be weird to be bizarro. However, weirdness alone does not make a book bizarro. Many people have tried to pinpoint the ingredient that makes a book a bizarro book. To me, it’s the element of surprise. A book may have weird elements that are established at the outset and create an internal logic that makes the events that follow not particularly surprising. Bizarro books are surprising from start to finish. There’s zero chance of predictability.
SPACEWALRUS

is about a chronically masturbating, intelligent walrus who dreams of becoming an astronaut.

It's one of the few books that has made me cry.
Where Did Bizarro Fiction Come From?

Getting into the roots of anything is murky business. Weird fiction has a long history. It reaches back before the pulp era of the early 1900s and *Weird Tales* magazine. It runs through William S. Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* and Georges Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*, up to modern guys like Bentley Little and Joe R. Lansdale.

But bizarro fiction is a distinct entity within the realm of weird fiction, set apart by its style, its subject matter, and its complete unwillingness to take itself seriously, as well as by the common ground and teamwork of its practitioners. It has been called a movement, and behind any movement is a group of people working together. From the start, that has been one of the hallmarks of the bizarro genre.

THE DIY MENTALITY HAS LED TO THE BIRTH OF A BUNCH OF NEW BIZARRO PUBLISHERS.

A zine called *Earwig Flesh Factory* debuted in the late ‘90s, created by Mellick and William Simmons and published by Eraserhead Press. The Dream People followed in the early 2000s, along with other webzines and print zines dedicated to publishing stuff that didn’t fit anywhere else. They ran work by people like Mellick, Wilson, Kevin L. Donihe, and Vincent Sakowski.

Eraserhead published its first books in 2001 with this same group of writers. Wilson’s *The Kafka Effect*, Sakowski’s *Some Things Are Better Left Unplugged*, Donihe’s *Shall We Gather at the Garden*, and Mellick’s notorious *Satan Burger* were all unleashed upon the world. Other publishers sprang up, following suit, including Raw Dog Screaming Press and Afterbirth Books.

In the mid-2000s, people noticed that this was all happening at once. Labels were thrown around: “New absurdism” and “Irreal.”
Nothing stuck. Then author Kevin Dole 2 wrote a piece somewhere in internet land about what this shit should be called, and in the ensuing discussion, the term “bizarro fiction” was coined.

Many of the people involved at the very start are still involved, still making weird books and still working together. Some have branched off and formed their own publishing companies. Eraserhead, originally based in Arizona, has since moved to Portland, which has become the epicenter of the bizarro universe. Many bizarro authors live there. Bizarro books can be found on the shelves of Powell’s downtown. There are bizarro events routinely held in local bars and bookstores.

**Carlton Mellick III**

Detractors of bizarro have gone so far as to say it’s a one-man genre, and Carlton Mellick III is the one man. While it’s true that he typically releases four books a year, all of surprisingly high quality and originality (recent titles include *Hungry Bug* and *The Tick People*), and he has established perhaps the biggest fan base in the genre, he isn’t the be-all, end-all. Still, he and Eraserhead Press are likely the glue that keeps it all together, so it’s important to discuss what he’s doing.

It’s clear that he comes at writing with a different attitude than most. He certainly doesn’t look like a writer, with his shaved head and unruly mutton chops, often wearing a priest’s collar and posing like a lunatic in publicity photos. He’s admitted to using the old B-movie technique of coming up with a wild title first (often by drawing random words out of a hat) and then building a story around it.

Somehow this results in books that are effortless to read. That’s not to say there’s no thinking involved. There always is. But it’s not unusual to blow through a Mellick book in one sitting. They’re fast-paced with an endless number of surprises, making it tough not to keep turning pages. When the end comes, I’m left with that done-too-soon feeling that I always love experiencing.

What I find most interesting about Mellick’s writing is that there’s always something substantial beneath the surface weirdness.
The Haunted Vagina is not just about creatures living in a vagina world. It’s an exploration of relationships and how far someone is willing to go for a loved one. The Menstruating Mall is another favorite from Mellick. On the surface it’s about a shopping mall that is menstruating while a murderer stalks the shoppers trapped within the bloody walls. It’s also a thoughtful examination of identities—those chosen, those created, and those earned.

Mellick’s commitment to putting this sort of heart in his weird fiction has been a big influence on the bizarro genre as a whole and can be seen in the works of many other authors. In fact, it’s one of the genre’s greatest strengths.

More Than Shock Value

Space Walrus by Kevin L. Donihe is about a chronically masturbating, intelligent walrus who dreams of becoming an astronaut. It’s fucked up like nobody’s business. It’s also one of the few books that has made me cry.

On the surface, bizarro fiction is all about shock value. Gross outs abound. There are a lot of elements designed to make people uncomfortable. I won’t tell you that Ass Goblins of Auschwitz by Cameron Pierce is not going to make you feel kind of off inside, because that would be a lie. And I’m not going to tell you that you won’t feel a little awkward reading about all of the walrus spooge in Space Walrus.

The thing is, there’s a lot more to bizarro fiction than shock value. If there wasn’t, people wouldn’t keep reading the stuff. Carlton Mellick III and Eraserhead Press wouldn’t have a small legion of followers waiting for each quarter’s releases. There wouldn’t be new writers and new publishers popping up all the time.

The bottom line is that this is good writing. When you scratch the surface of Space Walrus, when you get past the descriptions detailing how this walrus jerks off, there’s a fully realized character at the heart of the story: a walrus who just wants to be loved and just wants to go out into space where no walrus has gone before. All of this is woven together so gracefully by Donihe that the heartbreak at the end is as surprising as any of the gags along the way.
Another one of my favorites, and easily one of the funniest books I have ever read, is HELP! A Bear Is Eating Me! by Mykle Hansen. The entirety of the book takes place underneath a fancy SUV, where an insufferable asshole is trapped and is slowly being eaten by bears. What kept me reading—other than the constant hilariousness that Hansen manages to pull from what would seem to be a one-joke shtick—is that this asshole continues to edge his way toward some sort of redeeming quality, only to fall back into total asshole mode. I found myself as curious about whether he’d get over himself as I was about which part of him the bears would eat next.

The bar seems to be raised constantly: How can these books continue to baffle and surprise, while still providing a good story with compelling characters? I’m not going to say there isn’t the occasional letdown, but even in the weaker bizarro books, there is such an abundance of weird ideas that it never seems like time wasted (especially since most of the books only take a couple hours to read).

Bizarro Controversies

No good underground movement is complete without a few solid controversies and the bizarro fiction movement is no exception, thanks in part to that surface level shock value. The most notorious controversy surrounds Mellick’s debut novel, Satan Burger, the story of a fast food restaurant owned by the devil. In 2005, a thirty-something guy named Jared Armstrong was
BIZARRO BOOKS ARE SURPRISING FROM START TO FINISH.

THERE’S ZERO CHANCE OF PREDICTABILITY.
arrested on obscenity charges because he gave the book to a couple of teenagers and their parents freaked out. Mom and dad weren’t too psyched about the cover, which shows a naked butt about to drop dookie on a clean white plate.

The description of the case as published by Findlaw is like a bizarro short story itself. It describes how Armstrong also gave the teenagers a blow-up alien and some knives, and later called one of the kid’s dads a pedophile. According to Findlaw, “the part claimed to be pornographic appears to describe a nightmarish sexual encounter between a man and some sort of female alien creature who injures and kills people, or perhaps kills some other sort of man-like creature.” This makes me wonder what kind of porn the kid’s parents have been watching.

Thankfully, this is one of those rare instances when the artist hasn’t gotten caught up in the charges. Mellick is still free to create more pornography… err, bizarro fiction. Unfortunately, Mr. Armstrong is still embroiled in legal proceedings, even though nearly ten years have passed.

A more recent controversy occurred when a forward-thinking professor at California State University Long Beach assigned his students *Baby Jesus Butt Plug*, another Mellick classic. Needless to say, Christian fundamentalist groups were outraged, crying, “Look what’s being taught in college! This must stop!” Their cries went unheeded. Of course, like all controversies, the primary outcome of this and the pornography case was to draw more attention to the books.

**DIY Mentality**

Now is an exciting time to be a reader. Small press publishers have successfully harnessed print-on-demand (POD) technology to create books that look fantastic and fill niches that haven’t been covered elsewhere in the literary scene. These presses are not only willing to take risks, they build their brands on it. The bizarro fiction movement is at the center of this action.
Most of the bizarro publishing houses are DIY efforts, spawned by writers who want to publish their own stuff and also champion other writers who are breaking new ground. The founders are typically people who got a lot of rejection letters from horror and sci-fi publishers telling them they didn’t fit in, so they built their own place to fit in and invited others to join.

These are not major publishing houses. There are no publicity departments. There are no marketing plans. These are just groups of awesome people thinking of guerilla tactics to get their books into the hands of readers who never would have guessed that such books existed. That means tabling at conventions. It means creating wild events and getting the word out, not only to avid readers, but to those people who gave up on reading because they couldn’t find anything they were into. It’s tough for even the staunchest non-reader to walk past a copy of *The Haunted Vagina* without at least considering it.

And out of this, a network of readers has arisen and it’s constantly growing, the same way that punk grew back in the day: word of mouth. People trading books, giving copies of titles like *Shatnerquake*, Jeff Burk’s insane William Shatner-centric bizarro hit, to friends and saying, “You’re not going to believe this even exists!”

**Eraserhead Press and Beyond**

Eraserhead Press in Portland is inarguably the spearhead of the bizarro movement. Eraserhead, founded in 1999 and run by Rose O’Keefe, has set the bar high for the genre. The press puts out three or four books every quarter, one of which is usually a Mellick book. But that’s only the main line. Eraserhead has expanded into various imprints, including Lazy Fascist Press, which bridges the gap between bizarro and alt lit, and Deadite, which is focused on extreme horror, but occasionally dips into splatter-heavy bizarro.

Eraserhead has earned the trust of readers who will check out a book just because it has the Eraserhead name on it by putting out consistently high-quality books. There’s a rabid group of readers ready and waiting each season’s new releases. Few publishers can make such a claim.
Over the last couple of years, the pool of readers interested in bizarro has increased, as has the pool of writers who label themselves as bizarro. The DIY mentality has led to the birth of a bunch of new bizarro publishers. The result is more healthy competition in the field, and, of course, more crazy books to choose from. There are many publishers beyond Eraserhead worth exploring.

One of the newest is StrangeHouse Books, run by Kevin Strange, creator of gory low-budget films turned writer. StrangeHouse is noteworthy because of the effort made to create a very specific voice
within the bizarro genre. The goal is not to mimic Eraserhead, but to complement what that press is doing. StrangeHouse is where you’re most likely to find the ultra-gross bizarro, the bizarro that leans a bit closer to the horror and splatterpunk genres. Strange himself is the author of a good chunk of the StrangeHouse bibliography, with books like Robamapocalypse, about a giant robot Barrack Obama who smashes other robots in the arena of battle.

Another new publisher, Bizarro Pulp Press, takes a more scattered approach, putting out titles that range from Fecal Terror by David Bernstein, which features an angry turd on the cover, to Rob Harris’s more high-minded All Art Is Junk.

Other bizarro publishers include Rooster Republic Press, Legumeman Books, ATLATL Press, Grindhouse Press, Dynatox Ministries, and Civil Coping Mechanisms. Raw Dog Screaming Press, one of the originators, is still putting out great books, too.
No Readings!

Author readings are often groan-worthy events. There is this peculiar whisper-like monotone voice that has been fostered on college campuses by writers when they read their stories live, as if the objective is to put the audience to sleep. The end result is that most people do not attend author readings for fear of being bored to death. For that reason, when bizarro authors do events, they tend to label them parties, performances, shows... anything but readings.

The first time I attended a bizarro reading, I got spaghetti thrown at me. I’m not saying that I like having spaghetti thrown at me, but I do like surprises. And when I expect an author to flip open his book and he instead starts a spaghetti fight with the crowd, I’m pretty fucking surprised. That was Shane McKenzie, and it was less a reading and more a performance in promotion of his book, *All You Can Eat*.

A lot of bizarro authors come from a punk rock background, and it shows in the energy they bring to readings. While the traditional reading is distant, the bizarro performance is engaging and hilarious. There is yelling. There are wild gestures. Visual aids are not uncommon. Things may get thrown. There might be fire. People are going to leave saying that they never thought a reading could ever be like that.

Bizarro Is a Community

BizarroCon, the official convention of bizarro fiction, takes place every fall just outside of Portland in what I suspect is one of the strangest hotels in the country: Edgefield. It’s mazelike and filled with paintings of fucked up leprechauns and such. I first attended the convention a couple years ago and it had a pretty major impact on my life. I know that sounds dramatic, but it’s true.

Writing is a solitary endeavor. Some of my earliest memories are of me sitting alone in my bedroom at my childhood home, sprawled out on the yellow carpet, writing stories about puking furballs
IT'S CONSTANTLY GROWING
THE SAME WAY PUNK GREW BACK IN THE DAY:

WORD OF MOUTH
zapping back and forth through interdimensional portals and fighting dinosaurs. I showed these stories to my parents and they smiled and nodded. Rejection. I shared them with my friends and they pretty much did the same. Rejection. I brought them to my creative writing classes at college and my classmates freaked out. Rejection. I sent them to publishers and they said, “It’s not right for us.” Rejection. Rejection. Rejection.

All of the rejection takes a toll when you’re a writer, because it’s targeted at you and you alone. I’ve got nobody else to blame and nobody to turn to for support. Sure, I’ve befriended a precious few other writers over the years. I’m in a writing group that I share my stories with and talk writing with. I consider that group sacred. But their stuff isn’t quite as weird as mine.

There’s no rejection at BizarroCon. Everyone there writes or reads weird shit. I discovered a shared passion not only for writing, but for furthering this absurd type of art. Yeah, like any convention, there’s a lot of partying and goofing around, but the undercurrent is this: How can we all make our writing better and how can we spread the word that this writing is fun and worth paying attention to? How can we get the message out to readers that Harry Potter and Twilight are not the only options, and that there’s stuff like Journey to Abortosphere by Kirk Jones and TV Snorted My Brain by Bradley Sands?

To me, this is what a legit scene is about. It’s what bizarro has been about since day one. The bizarro genre began with a bunch of gnarly writers who knew each other, inspired each other, and worked together. Over the years, the group has grown. Now there are more writers from all over the world, but there’s still a lot of working together, sharing of ideas, and essentially furthering the bizarro genre.

Every year, the bizarro regulars show up at BizarroCon. There’s a bunch of newcomers too, not just writers, but readers and supporters. They’re greeted with open arms: “Oh hey, you write weird shit? That’s awesome, I write weird shit too!” I never got that at any creative writing course or workshop I’ve attended.

BizarroCon refueled my lifelong passion for writing weird shit. I bought a big stack of books. I met rad people. I went home and read
and wrote with renewed fervor. I was psyched to become part of this community that is open to everyone.

**Suggested Reading**

Bizarro is a new genre. There’s not much agreement about what the defining books are (other than that at least one of them is by Carlton Mellick III). That’s not the list I’m putting together here. This is a list of some of the bizarro books, new and old, that I’ve enjoyed the most and that I think are good starting points.

*The Best Bizarro Fiction of the Decade*—Edited by Cameron Pierce (Eraserhead)

- **Punk Land**—Carlton Mellick III (Eraserhead)
- **HELP! A Bear Is Eating Me!**—Mykle Hansen (Eraserhead)
- **Space Walrus**—Kevin Donihe (Eraserhead)
- **Party Lords**—Justin Grimbol (Grindhouse)
- **You Are Sloth**—Steve Lowe (Eraserhead)
- **They Had Goat Heads**—D. Harlan Wilson (ATLATL)
- **Strange Fucking Stories**—Edited by Sean Ferrari (StrangeHouse)
- **Cripple Wolf**—Jeff Burk (Eraserhead)
- **We Live Inside You**—Jeremy Robert Johnson (Swallowdown)
- **I Am Genghis Cum**—Violet LeVoit (Fungasm Press)
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