

Gay of the Dead: "LET ME DIE A WOMAN" author Alan Kelly, Part One

Written by Sean Abley

Wednesday, 01 December 2010 15:11



A creepy little book slithered into my mailbox recently. The tome shares a title with the classic Doris Wishman quasi-documentary, LET ME DIE A WOMAN, and yes, like the film, the book's plot does involve a transgender character. But whereas Wishman's film examines the transgender experience through documentary footage and straightforward fictional vignettes, author Alan Kelly's gruesome meditation mixes sci-fi and horror with a dash of noir revenge drama into a squirming, half-dead stew.

Kelly, (not to be confused with previously-interviewed horror filmmaker Alan Rowe Kelly) is a novelist, short fiction writer, essayist and reviewer living in Ireland. In this first of two parts, Kelly and I talk about growing up different in Ireland, and examine the effects on some of his short fiction.

SEAN ABLEY: Be forewarned - I'm going to pepper my questions with faux-British expressions hoping they'll make you feel more comfortable chatting with me. Which is silly because you're Irish, as am I. Here in Los Angeles I need to take great care keeping my Irish complexion on the pale, royal side. But Ireland - not so sunny there, yes? Do they even sell sunscreen?

ALAN KELLY: That is an understatement - today the sun is out but the temperature has plummeted in the last few weeks so leaving the house is something of a chore. Visiting the local shop for a packet of cigarettes is akin to dancing around the Arctic Circle in your Speedos! I've always avoided the sun, preferring the pale and disinterested look but I have heard rumors that sunscreen is sold in some of the cities and apparently they even have tanning salons! I always assumed they were just another Urban Legend! Feel free to be as Faux-British as you like! Be as royally pale as you see fit!

ABLEY: You're a wee one, aren't you? I have no idea how old you are, but I get the impression you're young, but have crammed a lot a livin' in those scant years. We'll talk about your writing in a bit, but I'd love to know every single thing about you. Do tell!

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KELLY: Well, where to start? I was born April 23rd 1983 in Dublin, Ireland. I grew up in a small village on The East Coast called Rathnew, which is two miles outside Wicklow Town. From an early age I fell madly in love with the horror genre and fiendishly stayed up to the small hours watching everything from DRILLER KILLER to THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE.

My father left when I was quite young so my mother raised my sister, my older brothers and me, and having no real stability, I was left free to do as I pleased. I had an extremely mischievous nature and would spend hours writing short stories, well what you would call fan-fiction now! Even if I was assigned an essay on some historical Irish figure, I would somehow make sure Freddy Krueger and Jason Voorhees made a cameo appearance and killed one of my teachers! I attended Abbey Community College – a secondary school (like high school) in Wicklow Town. My brother had a motorcycle accident at around this time and had one of his legs amputated.

I came out when I was 17 and for me that was ok. My friends already knew and being outspoken and boisterous stood me in good stead whenever I encountered bullying. When I had finished my schooling I studied for a city and guilds in Media but hated the course and dropped out, instead deciding to work in an adult call-centre and move to Dublin where I sort of lost myself in drugs and alcohol and men. After a year I was in a bad relationship, leading an unhealthy life and fed up so I moved home right before Christmas. It wasn't long before I found the place unbearable so I moved to London— a time in my life I equate with the soundtrack to David Lynch's LOST HIGHWAY. I would listen to that album for hours sitting on the roof, which overlooked Chalk Farm. I stayed in London for about six months and felt a dislocation so overwhelming it nearly drove me insane.

I came back and worked in menial jobs, mostly bar-work and would work as many hours as possible to stave off one of the worst depressions I ever remember enduring. Not long after this I enrolled at BCFE (Ballyfermot College of Further Education) to do a Higher National Diploma in journalism. The course was excellent and we won at the student media awards for Best small-print publication. Doing assignments and writing essays really helped me structure and formulate my writing and ideas. While doing the course I auditioned and won a role in Paul Ward's FURCOAT AND NO KNICKERS, which premiered at GAZE film festival last year. After a year in IADT (that's a university, not a prison) I dropped out and started writing what would become LET ME DIE A WOMAN. I contributed or am contributing to a number of magazines now: 3:AM, GCN, Butcher Queers, Penny Blood, Film Ireland, Den of Geek, FanGirlTastic et al.

ABLEY: I've read a handful of your short fiction, and I'd like to talk about them before we get to your novel. [SKINS OF THE SEA](#) is an interesting quickie that starts off as a story about a very depressed young man attempting suicide, and ends with a revelation about

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"selkies" (seals that shed their skins to reveal human features underneath.) This is a classic young gay kid fantasy - being someone else, emerging as the beautiful creature you are inside from the person no one understands on the outside. Were you consciously writing gay allegory?

KELLY: I don't know if I was consciously writing gay allegory but when I wrote that story I was really thinking of the prevalence of depression and the statistics on suicide among young men in Ireland, which is really rather shocking and something which I don't feel has been properly addressed. I remember having a conversation with a musician and we got talking about what supernatural creature we most identified with and I wasn't overly familiar with the Selkie, the creature the musician felt was most like himself. After doing a bit of research on Faerie Lore and liking what I read, I decided to write a short piece and just let the narrator lead me.



It is definitely a gay kid's fantasy (or even a gay adult's fantasy) to want to slip off your skin and become a fantastical creature; to make that discovery of being a part of something wonderful. I think there is something almost tribal in wanting to seek out your own kind and find a deep mental connection with other human beings. Like I said, depression is something I have struggled with and coming from somewhere quite remote can identify with that loneliness, where sometimes it is a struggle to get through the day. But I think the important thing to remember is that no matter what, you can and you will find a way through even the bleakest hour.

ABLEY: [THE BANSHEE AND ME](#) is the story of a young man who not only meets the local titular character, but discovers that he is of her loins. Not necessarily a thrilling ending for the main character, considering the life he lives already. The textures you create with your works are so...grimy. Fleas, grease-covered walls, people scratching. What draws you to these explorations of the coarser elements of a scene?

KELLY: THE BANSHEE AND ME is partially inspired by local folk tales and the estate where I grew up and my friendship with a woman there. Of course she was a lovely woman and not a Banshee! I think the exploration of the seamier side of life is something that comes quite

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naturally to me. The supernatural elements are like Chinese Whispers I subconsciously collected over the years and are all other people's take on the Banshee. I discovered afterwards that actual theories on what the banshee was had somehow found the way into the narrative, which was a little odd because I don't remember reading much about her! The train tracks behind my house and the filthy lurcher really did exist though. To answer your question, I am drawn to the extreme in both film and literature. It sometimes is a little too easy to write scenes of disgust and violence and the double-lives other people lead. I think it comes back to that "secretive" part of ourselves, the hidden face of human nature. That is what interests me right now. However uncomfortable they may be. To go places I'm not sure about and writing offers you a million different avenues to explore. What you see is almost always never what you get. I recently read Matthew Stokoe's rage-fuelled COWS, which is being reprinted by Akashic Books in February and my writing has nothing on his.

ABLEY: [THAT BOY FROM SANTA MONICA](#) is a meditation on a dysfunctional relationship ending (or about to end) in a way I think many of us would like to finish off an ex or two. Again, in this story there is an underlying ugliness that I find in all three of these short stories. You're not just smelling the milk that's gone bad, you're shoving your head, and ours, into the carton. What is this fascination with the seamier side of life?

KELLY: I suppose we're all capable of cruelty - we harbor a dark shadow side. With this story I wanted to explore something changing with the world as one fundamentally damaged character experienced it. How chilling it can be that others present a rather different persona to the world, but inhabit an inner alienated universe. This boy is haunted by old cruelties and not necessarily to blame for the crimes perpetrated against him and through one brutal act, believes that he will be revived. I don't want to seem cynical or give the impression that I immerse myself in darkness, I don't. I think that underlying ugliness probably comes from where I was at the time of writing the story. There is always something revelatory about writing, however much we try to disguise it. You inevitably lead the reader to a part of yourself you'd prefer to remain hidden. Not that I have anything to hide, of course.

ABLEY: After reading these short stories, I read an interview with you where mention that you're a fan of [Kate Bornstein's](#) amazing book, HELLO, CRUEL WORLD (101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks and Other Outlaws), and when you're feeling suicidal you pick it up and do a project and the feeling passes. Are suicidal feelings an ongoing concern?

KELLY: I think Kate Bornstein's book should be mandatory reading for teenagers everywhere and although there are some tasks in 101 ALTERNATIVES TO SUICIDE I wouldn't advocate or encourage kids to try, there are a million other ways of keeping depression at bay contained

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within. I pick the book up whenever I have felt twinges of despair and so far that little book has worked for me. In my darkest moments, I have entertained the thoughts of giving up but never could in good conscience do that to people I care about. For no reason really, that hideous smothering blackness just surfaces and I don't really understand those thoughts. There is such a lack of understanding and a stigma still attached to depression and mental health in general. I've learned though, that if you ask, people will help you. I would say depression is an ongoing concern for me, but not suicide. Not anymore.

ABLEY: So I have to ask - what are your thoughts on the ["It Gets Better"](#) project?

KELLY: The "It Gets Better" project is an absolutely necessary resource for GLBT youths everywhere. In Ireland, we have an organization called [BeLonG To](#) and a few months ago some of the kids were involved in a documentary called GROWING UP GAY and the emphasis was on the first generation of GLBT kids after decriminalization here in Ireland (homosexuality was only decriminalized in 1993) and I was blown away by how brave, intelligent and candid some of the kids actually were. I could never have been that open about my own experiences at their age!

I think "It Gets Better" and all those who are involved have devised a fantastic way of communicating with kids all over the world who are struggling with their sexuality or have gender issues or are just stuck in their own forms of Hell. I would like to see more support in rural areas for gay youths though. However difficult it is in the city, at least those kids have a support network and can meet other people in a similar predicament to them. If you're living somewhere which is miles away from Dublin and have no way of getting there, it can prove to be a hellish experience. Hellish for a grown-up, so multiply that feeling of alienation by a hundred and you don't even come close to feeling the way a teenage boy or girl with no outlet must feel. Older GLBT people we have a responsibility to kids who are in the same place we once were. The "It Gets Better" project is a way of taking them out of harm's way.

Now that you've read the gruesome backstory, stay tuned for Part Two and LET ME DIE A WOMAN!

Get your copy of LET ME DIE A WOMAN, in paperback or Kindle, from [Amazon](#)

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