

## An Interview with Todd Keisling by Jared Rose

1. What was it like to be a creative person growing up in Southeastern Kentucky?

TK: You might say my relationship with Southeastern Kentucky is “complicated.” In some ways, I’d say it was character-defining. Southeastern Kentucky isn’t known for being an intellectual mecca, so I had to find my creative outlets where I could. Comics, novels, video games, film, and drawing. Sports weren’t my thing, I wasn’t popular in school, I didn’t hang with the cool kids or wear the trendy clothes. I was a goth kid, wearing T-shirts for bands like Nine Inch Nails and Tool. I was the artsy kid, the English nerd, and in that respect, I’d say that it was also hazardous to my health. I was bullied a lot for being different, thinking differently than the herd. I won’t say those were good experiences, but they had a hand in shaping who I am, how I think, and how I view the region.

2. When did you know that you wanted to be a writer?

TK: Everyone knew I was a writer before me. I’ve been writing stories my whole life, as far back as Kindergarten, but until my senior year of high school, I thought I was going to go to college for graphic design. I flirted with the possibility of studying film, even dabbling in screenwriting, but it wasn’t until I adapted a script I’d written into a full-length novel that I realized writing was my true calling. Even when I started college and declared an English major, I wasn’t really sure about the writing gig. Then my first novel took second place in a writing contest during my freshman year, and...well, the rest is history. I’ve been writing nonstop ever since.

3. Who would you say has influenced your writing? How have your influences changed over the years?

TK: Stephen King, without a doubt. I’ve fallen in and out of love with his work over the years, but out of all the authors I’ve read, his work has been a consistent inspiration. That said, earlier in my writing career, I drew a lot of inspiration from the work of Dean Koontz, Chuck Palahniuk, and Albert Camus. Later, in college, I drew a lot from the work of Clive Barker, Neil Gaiman, and Haruki Murakami. And for the last several years, I’ve found inspiration in the work of Laird Barron, Thomas Ligotti, Jon Padgett, John Langan, Stephen Graham Jones, and Paul Tremblay.

4. Where did you go to college? How did your time there inform the writer you’ve become?

TK: I went to college at the University of Kentucky, graduating with honors in English. Class of ’05. I was fortunate enough to be mentored by a number of instructors who recognized my love of writing, allowing me to approach their writing assignments from a more creative angle. Looking back, I think that freedom enabled me to explore my style and voice, merging cinematic visuals with internal monologue and a harsh sort of honesty that’s kind of become my thing. I might’ve found those characteristics on my

own, but the encouragement of my instructors certainly pushed me to find them much sooner.

5. When did you first encounter success with your writing? What about failure? How did you handle each?

TK: My first success didn't involve money. It involved acceptance from my peers. When I was a freshman in high school, my English teacher handed out a short story assignment. I wrote it that night, and the next day, word got out that I was already done with it. And, to my horror, my teacher asked me to read it to the class. Which I did with much trepidation and stumbling. When I was done, my teacher said, "That's how it's done," and later, in the hallway, one of those cool kids told his friends, "Todd Keisling wrote, like, one of the best stories I've ever heard." I felt vindicated by that. Encouraged, too. For a nobody like me, that endorsement meant the world.

Failure is a different beast. I've had far too many failures to name, but at the same time, failure is also a matter of perspective. Has my work been rejected? Oh yes. We could call those failures, but I still wrote something and submitted it somewhere. My first two novels didn't sell very well. Those could be (and should be) considered failures—but I also learned a lot about storytelling while writing them. I used that experience to write my first collection, which has been modestly successful so far. Like I said, it's a matter of perspective. That's how I choose to handle failure.

6. How would you describe your writing process?

TK: Organized chaos! Okay, I'm sort of joking, sort of not. My process doesn't begin unless I have a title, a beginning, and an ending. All of those factors can change during the writing, but I need them before I begin. Everything that happens in between is the organic part of the process, where characters grow, live and breathe, and sometimes die. I follow them and see where they end up. Sometimes they end up where I think they will; other times, they surprise the hell out of me. That's part of the fun, the magic.

7. You have currently published two novels that make up your *Monochrome Trilogy*. When can readers expect to see the third entry in the series and can you give us a teaser for the upcoming novel?

TK: Readers will be waiting a while for that third Monochrome novel. To be honest, I'm not sure if it will happen at all, but my mood on that changes from day to day. Right now my heart isn't in that series anymore, but tomorrow, I might long for the dull haze of the Monochrome.

My upcoming novel is titled DEVIL'S CREEK, and it's a small-town cosmic horror story involving a backwoods cult that summons a buried god within the wilds of Daniel Boone National Forest. I recently completed the first draft, which clocks in at 178k words, or approximately 600 pages.

8. Your most recent publication, *Ugly Little Things: Collected Horrors*, felt like a departure from what you've written since you began the *Monochrome Trilogy* and a return to your roots in short story writing. Was this an intentional return to form? What aspects of the short story do you prefer over the novel and vice versa? Do you favor writing one over the other?

TK: Working on the Monochrome series was draining and extremely time-consuming, and I longed for a break. I had so many other more compact ideas that I wanted to explore. UGLY LITTLE THINGS is the result of those explorations. Short fiction is far more difficult to pull off effectively, but it's also way more satisfying, in my opinion. There's the gratification of finishing something in a far shorter time span than, say, a novel—which can take months to complete, if not years. That said, some of those stories in ULT took years of multiple drafts before finding the right approach. I enjoy both forms, and like to alternate between them as a break from the other.

9. Since *Aurora* is a university publication, what advice would you give to aspiring writers? What would you tell yourself as a young writer if you could travel back in time to your college days?

TK: Writing is a labor of love. Writing isn't easy. It's not glamorous. It's a lot of hard work, often for very little money, and there are predators in the industry trying to take your rights from you at every turn. If you're offered a contract, get a second opinion. Befriend other writers. They will be your support group, because no one else will understand your passion. Keep your ego in check and protect your modesty. Learn to take all criticism—because people will give it whether you want it or not—but also learn how to recognize good criticism from the bad. Above all else, keep going. Even when people tell you it's a waste of time, that you aren't cut out for it, or that you'll never make it in the business, just keep going. Keep your wits and remember your passion. Above all else, *just keep going*.

10. What is next for Mr. Todd Keisling?

TK: I've got a couple of short stories in the works, a non-fiction essay about developing ideas into horror stories due in April, a couple of signing events, and a rough concept for my next novel, tentatively titled SPIDERS IN THE LATTICE. And I suspect I'll be spending my summer editing DEVIL'S CREEK before turning it in to my agent. No rest for the wicked, am I right?