



At Fear's Altar

Richard Gavin

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“Richard Gavin's new collection has some of the finest weird fiction I have ever read, tales that are unique and effective. His sequel to H. P. Lovecraft's 'The Hound' is especially delicious. This is a wonderful book, highly recommended!” —W. H. Pugmire “Richard Gavin is one of the bright new stars in contemporary weird fiction. His richly textured style, deft character portrayal, and powerful horrific conceptions make every one of his tales a pleasure to read.” —S. T. Joshi “If you hear some in Kadath saying, ‘Numinous,’ ‘Terrifying,’ or ‘Beautiful,’ they are either talking about the Northern Lights or the work of Richard Gavin. Canada? They’re calling it Canada now? Whatever.” —Don Webb Canadian author Richard Gavin has established himself as a leading contemporary writer of weird fiction. His richly nuanced prose style, his imaginative range, and his shrewdness in the portrayal of character and domestic conflict make his tales far more than mere shudder-coining. In this fourth collection of short stories and novelettes, Gavin again casts a wide imaginative net, from haunted Canadian woodlands to the carnivorous mesas of the American frontier, from Lovecraft’s New England to the spirit traditions of Japan. Of the dozen stories included in this book, eight are previously unpublished—a rich new feast of terror for devotees of a writer who works in the tradition of Poe, Machen, Blackwood, and Ligotti. Richard Gavin is the author of three previous short story collections, Charnel Wine (2004), Omens (2007), and The Darkly Splendid Realm (2009). Gavin lives in Ontario, Canada, with his beloved wife and their brood.

At Fear's Altar Details

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From Reader Review At Fear's Altar for online ebook

C.M. Muller says

If I were limited to one word in which to describe Richard Gavin's new collection of tales, that word would quite simply be: rich. Rich in symbol, rich in characterization, rich in imagination, rich in utter uniqueness of plot, and last but not least, rich in its use of language, which is very fine indeed. From its first tale, "Chapel in the Reeds", to its concluding novella, "The Eldritch Faith", we are immersed in some of the finest weird tales the field has to offer, which run the gamut from traditional to Lovecraftian, but always told in Mr. Gavin's inimitable voice.

The book is dedicated to Clive Barker and to the memory of Algernon Blackwood. While the latter is not so surprising (since Mr. Gavin's tales are as carefully-wrought as any of that past master's), the former struck me as odd, but in the most pleasing and nostalgic way. Barker was a scribe who I near worshipped back in the beginning, back when I was starting to understand the power of good writing. And in Mr. Gavin we find this in spades. It's not often that a collection this consistently good comes along. Don't hesitate to obtain a copy, what with its lovely Harry O. Morris cover, and its overwhelming richness....

"At Fear's Altar" is available through Hippocampus Press.

Simon says

Reading Richard Gavin's "At Fear's Altar", I'm struck with how his voice has matured over the course of four books. The young dreamer has gone, replaced with a master of the weird. Gavin's ability to evoke dread, both ancient and cosmic, is as assured as any voice in the genre today, and reaches those lofty heights reserved only for its forefathers. Lovecraft, Machen, Poe, and Blackwood: these writers are no longer Richard Gavin's influences. They are his peers.

Ross Helford says

This book was initially brought to my attention by one of my fave writers, Stephen Graham Jones, as it features two stories that pick up on HP Lovecraft. These two stories are really cool, not fan fiction (more like sequels; GOOD sequels), telling around the HPL originals ("Faint Baying from Afar" tells of the aftermath of "The Hound"; "The Unbound" expands upon what exactly Lovecraft's "The Unnamable" WAS), filling in narrative gaps, and expanding on the mythology. But this collection is well worth the read beyond those well-executed HPL stunts. Beyond just a bunch of spine-tickling, eminently readable tales of the occult, I started to see (or, perhaps, interpret) a somewhat delicious political bent in Gavin's stories: that the pagan gods and goddesses that were killed off by monotheism and declared evil and satanic, not only are they still with us, lurking in the shadows and in adjacent dimensions, but they're also not necessarily evil...that they even, dare I say, have feelings? And they have much to offer the land of the living...if only we give them half a chance.

Paul Roberts says

Canadian Richard Gavin is a true original. His stories are simply magical and contain a strange psychedelic otherness that is hard to pinpoint. "The Abject" would make a beautiful short film; its eclipse vista is one of the prevailing images painted on my mind after a healthy year of reading. "The Eldritch Faith" is a monumental work. I immediately bought Gavin's other collections: "Omens" and "Charnel Wine". "The Darkly Splendid Realm" remains on my hunting list; out-of-print, one can only hope 2014 provides a scent trail.

Seregil of Rhiminee says

Originally published at Risingshadow.

Richard Gavin's *At Fear's Altar* is an excellent collection of horror and dark fantasy stories. It's a brilliantly wonderful and disturbing collection for horror readers who want to read quality.

At Fear's Altar contains the following masterfully written stories:

- Prologue: A Gate of Nerves
- Chapel in the Reeds
- The Abject
- Faint Baying from Afar
- The Unbound
- A Pallid Devil, Bearing Cypress
- King Him
- The Plain
- Only Enuma Elish
- The Word-Made Flesh
- Annexation
- Darksome Leaves
- The Eldritch Faith

Classic horror, modern horror, weird fiction and cosmic horror are the key words which define the stories in this collection. I haven't read anything this good since I read Laird Barron's *The Croning* and Donald Michael Platt's *A Gathering of Vultures*. I have to mention that I was very impressed by this collection, because in my opinion this collection is slightly better than the previous collection, *The Darkly Splendid Realm*, which was an amazing achievement. I enjoyed each story (to be honest, I would've liked to read more stories).

At Fear's Altar is a delightful and shocking collection of dark and disturbing wonders to readers who love dark stories and weird fiction. Richard Gavin's writing combines classic and traditional horror with modern themes in a fascinating way. Richard Gavin's stories feel fresh, but they're loyal to the traditional stories, which form the basis of the everlasting popularity of weird fiction.

The prologue (*A Gate of Nerves*) creates a chilling atmosphere, because the protagonists have a weird gathering. The purpose of this gathering is to invoke an entity. I loved the way the author wrote about the gathering and what happened at the end of the story.

Faint Baying from Afar and The Unbound are stunningly good tributes to H. P. Lovecraft (Faint Baying from Afar is subtitled 'An Epistolary Trail after H. P. Lovecraft's "The Hound"' and The Unbound is subtitled 'A Meditation upon H. P. Lovecraft's "The Unnamable"'). I was surprised by how well and lovingly the author has written these stories. Both stories are fascinating in their weirdness. I think that if H. P. Lovecraft were alive, he'd like to call these stories his own stories.

It's a bit difficult for me to choose my favourite story, but if I had to choose only one story it would without a doubt be The Abject. It's a brilliantly written horror story, which is in equal parts cosmic horror and modern horror. In this story a group of people gather to watch a lunar eclipse and one of them tells a story about a mountain, which can be seen in the ocean (the story of the mountain will appeal to everybody who loves cosmic stories). The author writes fantastically about the characters and their lives. He even writes about things related to sexuality.

I think I'll have to mention that I loved Chapel in the Reeds, because it isn't often that authors write this fluently about old men, their lives and fears. Chapel in the Reeds is a splendid and well written story about an old man who slowly loses his sanity due to his age. The loss of his sanity is described in vivid and disturbing details, which make the story psychologically challenging and terrifying. I think that everybody who reads this story will agree with me when I say that it's one of the most terrifying stories in this collection.

Richard Gavin's stories remind me quite a lot of the stories written by the old masters of horror (H. P. Lovecraft, Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Machen and Algernon Blackwood). His writing is nuanced and he writes terrifyingly about the fates of his characters. He has an ability to add slowly building feelings of dread - these feelings of dread build towards a climax which is shocking and ingenious. In other words, he spices his stories carefully with hints of dark happenings and then masterfully builds tension towards the end.

It's actually amazing how good a writer Richard Gavin is. I've noticed that several authors, who are fans of classic weird fiction and old horror stories, tend to write much better and more psychologically challenging horror stories than authors who aren't familiar with classic horror. This, in my opinion, is a mark of a good and talented horror author - this mark distinguishes a quality horror author from other authors (there are, of course, a few exceptions to this "rule").

By the way, if somebody thinks that I'm a spokesperson for weird fiction and quality horror, I can say that I love good and well written weird fiction and quality horror very much and I always will love both, so that's one of the reasons why I praise them. Stories, which can be categorized as weird fiction, are often genuinely fascinating and beautifully written stories, so it's difficult not to praise them.

The author explores human feelings, loneliness, aging, love and pain in this collection in a remarkable way. I think that this collection is a testament to the fact that speculative fiction can address several difficult themes much better and sometimes more thoroughly and touchingly than mainstream books. When difficult themes, psychological fear and fear of supernatural things meet each other, the result is truly stunning and it has an everlasting effect on the reader.

I already mentioned cosmic horror a couple of paragraphs ago, so now I'll write more about it. One of the trademarks of cosmic horror is that the cosmos is indifferent towards humanity. Richard Gavin uses this trademark to his advantage, because he combines human feelings and the indifference of the cosmos in a fresh way.

It's great that Richard Gavin writes about different locations in his stories. He writes as fluently about

Canadian wilderness as about Lovecraft's New England. His stories are versatile and range all the way from weird fiction to modern horror and from dark fantasy to classic horror, so it's good that he has chosen to write about different locations, because the use of these locations demonstrates that weird and terrifying things can happen anywhere and at any time.

Although Richard Gavin uses plenty of traditional weird fiction and horror elements in his stories, his stories are original. He has a unique voice of his own and his stories feel fresh and visceral.

Just like Laird Barron, Richard Gavin is an author who deserves all the praise he gets. I'm sure that everybody, who is familiar with weird fiction and classic horror, will agree with me on this. Newcomers, who aren't familiar with weird fiction, will also love these stories, because they're quality stories with plenty of dark fantasy elements and visceral happenings. I'll also mention that I think that readers who have read stories by classic horror authors and modern masters (Laird Barron, Clive Barker, Livia Llewellyn, W. H. Pugmire etc) will be impressed by these stories.

I loved *At Fear's Altar* and I'm sure other readers will love it too, because Richard Gavin is one of the new masters of weird fiction and his stories are perfect entertainment for horror readers. *At Fear's Altar* is one of the best new horror short story collections, so make sure that you'll read it as soon as possible.

Highly recommended to fans of dark fantasy and quality horror!

Orrin Grey says

I met Richard Gavin before I'd ever read any of his stories, but since then I've become something of a devotee, and each collection has been better than the one before, with *At Fear's Altar* standing out as his most assured to date. While the book contains homages to and interrogations of two of H.P. Lovecraft's stories, it also boasts Gavin's most confident myth-building to date, and the lengthy end story "The Eldrith Faith," serves as much as a primer for Gavin's obsessions as a storyteller as it does a classic weird story in its own right.

Gavin is an expert storyteller in the finest supernatural tradition, but perhaps his greatest strength is his total and unswerving dedication to the weird tale and exploring his own dark vision. In a field where it's all too easy to get distracted, Gavin is mining a territory that is his alone.

M Griffin says

I kept reflecting, as I read Richard Gavin's fourth collection *At Fear's Altar*, about what horror fiction ought to be. Horror stories should be dark, disquieting. Too often what passes for "horror" is mundane or predictable. Whereas familiarity can be a virtue in some genres, where readers seek the recurring comfort of touchstones, horror by its very nature should unsettle.

Richard Gavin's work stands out as chillingly dark, wickedly strange and otherworldly. These stories have the heart-pounding feel of nightmare, and carry a strong suggestion of the numinous. Where other writers offer familiar monsters in comfortable territory, always stopping short of threatening the reader, Gavin explores the weird and surreal just as much as the horrific. His strength is conveying an otherness, something

looming out there, threatening. There's a commonality with the cosmic horror of Lovecraft, but I find a greater kinship to the spooky occultism of Machen and Blackwood, whose best stories have at their heart a sense of something unknowable happening just out of view, completely out of proportion with human experience, and vibrating on an entirely different wavelength.

Highlights include "Chapel in the Reeds," in which an elderly man moves back home with his daughter, who doesn't want him there. The man wanders the countryside, seeming to shift into different realms, seeking a strange, mystic chapel, and speaking with his late wife. His young granddaughters are frightened when they witness his strange behavior, standing in the middle of a field, talking to no one. His daughter thinks he's disintegrating, while he remains focused on finding the chapel again. Whether his reality or his daughter's is most true, either possibility is disturbing.

In "The Abject," Petra watches an eclipse, along with her husband and two male friends. Out across the water is a jagged island known as The Abject, about which Petra's friend recounts a legend. Petra has a vision of proto-humans on the spire, and feels dangerously drawn to go there herself.

The main character in "A Pallid Devil, Bearing Cypress" walks the streets among falling bombs in a time of war in Europe. He's trying to see the devil, feeling sensitively attuned to the city's shadow side, and thinks he sees something. He finds a broken Cypress flower, red and star shaped, then spots a devilish, horned creature. Excited and inspired, thinking he's found the devil he seeks, he then hears the cries of a girl trapped under rubble, and leaves her, trying to chase the devil. After he loses track, he finds Helma and helps her out from under the rock. They connect, end up marrying, though not too happily. He's still preoccupied with seeking darkness. They move out to the country, and at night he roams near their new house, looking for the devil's traces. At times he finds these scattered Cypress flowers, but never quite what he seeks. Finally he learns Helma too is seeking something.

"King Him" is a shocking story of domestic unease, an adult brother and sister living together. She thinks he's the crazy one, insisting on talking about an entity called "King Him." Maybe he's insane, maybe they both are, or maybe King Him is the real cause of the dysfunction creeping into their relationship.

"Only Enuma Elish" is a good example of Gavin's treatment of characters with supernatural or occult beliefs. This story's narrator meets an older woman across the street, and she introduces him to the book "Enuma Elish," a tale of the universe's creation, from ancient Babylon.

In "Darksome Leaves," an isolated, socially awkward man becomes attracted to a young woman in his apartment building. His hopes of getting closer to her shift when they discover an ominous mask.

By far the book's longest and most ambitious story, "The Eldritch Faith," is both philosophical and metaphysical in its focus. It follows a boy who grows up seeking to understand reality's true nature, to find a way out of the depressingly mundane ordinary existence. He comes up with a game called Curtains which he believes allows a ghost or spirit to communicate with him, and possibly enter our world. This exploration unfolds gradually, and feels chillingly real. His interactions with the entity he comes to know as Capricorn are among the more creepy and unnerving things I've ever read. "The Eldritch Faith," which concludes the collection, exemplifies what Gavin is capable of.

At Fear's Altar achieves heights -- or perhaps depths -- of darkness and disquiet almost unrivaled in recent horror fiction. It's among the few most notable and impressive story collections I've read in the past five years. With this book, Gavin rises in my estimation to rank among the strongest practitioners of horror and weird fiction currently active. At Fear's Altar is my first exposure to Gavin's fiction, but now I gladly

anticipate the pleasure of going back to investigate Charnel Wine (2004), Omens (2007), and The Darkly Splendid Realm (2009). Even more, I eagerly anticipate Gavin's future works.

Justin Steele says

Canadian author Richard Gavin's first story collection Charnel Wine came off the press in 2004, and since then Gavin has had a steady stream of collections published. Omens was put out by Mythos Books in 2007, and two years later came The Darkly Splendid Realm. Halloween of 2012 saw the release of his most recent collection, At Fear's Altar, and boy is it a good one.

Gavin writes some of the best weird fiction I've had the pleasure of reading. The influence of all the masters is readily apparent: Lovecraft, Machen, Blackwood, and Ligotti. A keen reader can easily discern that this author lives for the weird, and he writes it oh so beautifully.

In his fourth collection Gavin offers a wonderful variety of tales, showcasing his different influences and making a strong case as to why Gavin's name should be on any shortlist of modern masters of the weird. At Fear's Altar contains thirteen (such an appropriate number) of stories, seven of which are original to this collection. And it must be said, that every single story is great. Gavin's style is sharp, and cuts neat.

Gavin kicks the collection off with a Prologue titled A Gate of Nerves. This short piece is the perfect way to open his collection, and serves to set the mood for what follows. The story follows a college student and her experience with a horrifying Asian parlor game. The imagery is excellent, the suspense builds, and after reading this prologue I knew I was in for something special.

Following the prologue is one of the best stories in the collection. Chapel in The Reeds is a greatly disturbing tale of an old man, his experience with an abandoned church, and his diminishing grip on reality. Gavin writes an extremely convincing example of an old man slipping into dementia, and the story leaves just enough questions open to really keep the reader guessing.

The Abject originally appeared in S.T. Joshi's Lovecraft-inspired collection, Black Wings II. This dark story focuses on a woman in a troubled relationship, as she and her boyfriend join friends on a trip to a cursed place. Adding the deep-seated relationship problems to the primal desolation of the setting makes for quite a chilling experience.

In Faint Baying From Afar, Gavin works in the epistolary format. The story, which is a direct sequel to Lovecraft's The Hound, follows a series of letters from a son to his mother. It's beautifully written, and really captures the feel of classic Lovecraft.

The next story, The Unbound, is also a direct response to a Lovecraft story, this time being The Unnameable. The Unbound acts as a sort of re-telling of the original tale, from the point of view of the Unnameable itself. It's a very interesting tale, and really captures the image of a man shutting himself out from the world, and becoming a Gollum-like grotesque.

A Pallid Devil, Bearing Cypress deals with faith, albeit a dark one. The main character is an outsider, who takes up a strange and dangerous habit of taking jaunts during nighttime air raids on his city. He has a fascination with all things dark which turns into more of an obsession over the Devil in particular. This eerie

craving seems to have been inspired by the character's mother, and the story follows the man as he lives out a life of chasing something that most people would run away from.

In *King Him*, Gavin writes a truly disturbing tale about siblings and "imaginary" beings. The story has some truly disquieting elements (which I won't detail for spoiler purposes) and really toys with the idea of whether or not the characters are truly dealing with a supernatural element or are just very deeply disturbed mentally. In my opinion I think it's a bit of both.

I have always been a fan of weird Westerns, especially ones that tend towards the horror side of the spectrum. *The Plains* is a tale about a creepy, blasted piece of land (reminiscent of the Blasted Heath from Lovecraft's *The Colour Out of Space*). When some men travel to this place searching for salvation for their drought-plagued town, they are in for a bit of a surprise.

Only *Enuma Elish* is another story dealing with a shut-in, outsider type character, who makes a connection with his elderly neighbor. What seems like a good thing quickly deteriorates into something surreal when he finds out about her strange beliefs.

In *The Word-Made Flesh*, a man attempts to help his troubled friend, who believes he has heard the "Word of God". What is truly going on is something much darker.

Annexation is a heartbreaking story that follows a woman on a quest to find her estranged son at the behest of her dying husband. As she tracks him to a remote island in South America, she ruminates on how her son has always been different, and finds out about the dark path he has chosen.

Darksome Leaves echoes Thomas Ligotti, and is about another outsider character who finally meets someone that he feels a connection with. The only problem comes in the form of a transformative mask that mysteriously appears. The man's attitude and ideas reflect Ligotti's typical outsider protagonist, and the masks themselves bring to mind Ligotti's well-known story, *The Greater Festival of Masks*.

Finally, the collection finishes with one of its strongest tales, *The Eldritch Faith*. The longest story in the collection manages to hit on so many ideas, and was quite a chilling read. The story follows a young boy who doesn't seem to fit in, and his attempts at contacting a spirit. When he finally manages to make contact with an entity which calls itself *Capricorn*, his life is forever changed. The buildup is grand, and touches on several aspects of horror that many youths experience, such as sexual angst and facing local urban legends. There is some spectacular imagery in the story, and the ending is brilliant.

With this collection Gavin has managed to bring together thirteen stories without a single bad one amongst them. The stories range from dark to downright terrifying, and every single one will linger in the reader's head for days. I couldn't recommend this collection more, so finish up what you're reading, buy this collection, pour yourself a rye-and-ginger, and settle down to read one of the best books published in 2012 and one of the best weird horror collections published ever. Absolutely essential.

Originally appeared on my blog, *The Arkham Digest*.

Gozaimasu says

This collection sent me places I never knew possible. The final story is fucking fantastic.

T.E. Grau says

Everyone wants to stake a claim in both the Big “H” and small “h” Horror game these days. I’m not just talking about writers, but producers, development executives, toy manufacturers, cartoonists, bands, and any other enterprising individuals that utilize (and often exploit) creativity to sell a product.

Horror is hip. Horror is hot. Horror of a sort, that is... Yet REAL Horror - that which usually graces a sheaf of parchment rather than a played out digital screen - still toils in mainstream obscurity. Quality never sells. Cheeseburgers do. Readers become writers, and writers lower standards to accommodate a wider net cast wide to snare an ever-shrinking pool of actual readers. The wonderful and varied realms of genre fiction – those quasi pigeonholes where Horror is Weird and Weird is Horror - remain cloistered from the outside, yet are increasingly crowded by an influx of burgeoning insiders setting up tents to hock wares and carnival bark. This creates one hell of a party, but it also ultimately sucks the oxygen out of the room. A dry keg, with a line out into the yard of thirsty people gripping tightly their red plastic cups.

Basically, what I’m saying in this clumsy metaphor is that while Horror Fiction once again seems to be growing in popularity (granted, in very small increments), it also is becoming increasingly diluted and marginalized in an attempt to stretch the liquor in the punch as far as it will go. Sooner or later, you can’t taste the bite anymore, and what remains is 15 cans of room temp Hawaiian Punch left to gather fruit flies in the bowl.

Okay, I’ll spare you any more fermented metaphors and proclaim this instead: In the realms of Horror, Richard Gavin is the absolute Real Deal, an Occulted acolyte of the numinous and practitioner of the Dark Arts, who is writing some of the best supernatural short stories of our time - hell, of any time. This is the quality stuff that rises above the din, authentic and expansive and true to the fundamental roots of Horror that keeps the genre from teetering into pastiche and fan fic infamy. This is the ethanol in the punch bowl (sorry, last one).

Indeed, I foresee a time in the not to distant future when Gavin joins the Bigs in the annals of supernatural fiction. Not just the living Bigs and those who dreamed and bled to expand the scene throughout the 20th century (Lovecraft, Bradbury, Aickman, Campbell, Klein, Ligotti, etc.), but the venerable Dark Fraternity that traces its history to Poe and Stoker, Mary Shelley, Matthew Lewis, and M.R. James. In the past decade, Gavin has written much, and has much to write, but with this his fourth collection, he deserves a place at the scarred and slowly expanding Table of the Greats, where I can visualize Gavin sitting with the old and moldering Weirdists, sharing a glass of port by candlelight and not seeming out of place in the slightest. He lives for this pursuit, this searching The Dark, and it shows in every finely craft line and new vista he documents.

As a colleague of mine (his name rhymes with “Simon Strantzias”) recently stated in a conversation, At Fear’s Altar is “an important collection,” and I heartily agree. This book has a solidness to it, a largeness and import that is undeniable. Upon first reading - and I imagine upon second and third - his stories quickened my pulse, shook the cobwebs from my psyche and made me sit up a little straighter as my eyes shot across the page. When forced to set the book aside by the vagaries of daily schedule, scenes stayed with me like a slow burn, which I find to be rare phenomenon these days, as it is not often that the written word produces such a lasting, internal reaction. His stories are alchemical, creating something new inside you born out of unrelated parts, leaving fresh elements in their wake that hadn’t previously existed in this reality.

Stylistically, he is clean and confident, imbuing the thirteen tales that make up *At Fear's Altar* with a music that is comfortingly classic in language and theme, yet totally fresh in execution. And his work is often legitimately scary, which is another rarity. I think this stems from the fact that Gavin seems like an authentic article when it comes to Horror. I don't pretend to know him well, but of what I do know of the man, his writing (both fiction and non), his scholarship, and general intellectual pursuits, paint the portrait of an individual who doesn't wear the trappings of horror as a pose. Instead, the *True Dark* seems to emanate from his DNA. He is Occulted in a consummate way that isn't some religious (or lack thereof) commentary or rebellion against the Light, but that of an enthusiastic Seeker truly inspired by and deferential to matters of esoterica, from earthy black magic to the unknowable secrets of cold cosmicism.

And you can taste it in *At Fear's Altar*. It all sounds close by, and in some cases improbably true, which makes it all the more frightening. Gavin is not just trying to set trite stories in "spooky" places. He explores the full palette of dimensional reality and possibility, weaving in nods to the Outer Abyss, Hell, and unnamed places in between, including those just down the street, or perhaps just over the hill. Everywhere is his playground, everything his swing set, which makes his stories so widely appealing. Lovecraftians, Supernaturalists, Hellhounds, and fans of the Uncanny will all find something to enjoy in *At Fear's Altar*, if not celebrate.

The collection begins with a Prologue titled "A Gate of Nerves," which sets the table for what is to come, evoking an atmosphere of the supernatural and the unfolding encomium to fear in all of its forms and guises, and ultimately effects. The tales that follow range from very good to extraordinary, but I'd like to focus on several that I found to be particularly splendid.

"The Abject" recalls a Laird Barron tale, or maybe Simon Strantzas. Or perhaps Laird Strantzas. A healthy dose of cosmic horror and wilderness terror, interwoven with relationship decay, that leads to a tragic end without easy explanation. There are topographical similarities between "The Abject" and "Annexation" (strange outcroppings of land just off shore), although the latter deals with a mother searching for her son lost to dark teachings, leading her to a conclusion of which she was better served to remain ignorant.

"A Pallid Devil, Bearing Cypress" seems as early 20's century and European as its setting. Just a fantastic tale emerging from a bombed-out city suffering under a constant Nazi Blitzkrieg that shows Gavin's deftness with matters more demonic than straight up cosmic. "Darksome Leaves" is a fully modern, Ligottian tale, and plays with item horror and masks as keys to something far deeper and infinitely powerful. "The Plain" is a Weird Western combined with a morality tale as old as the desert, that recalls Robert E. Howard, with a more elegant touch.

"Faint Baying from Afar," which is "An Epistolary Trail after H.P. Lovecraft's 'The Hound'" is a nod to one of Gavin's influences, and the noted epistolary style brings out Gavin's classic chops. This is an elegant tale, told through letters from a son to his mother, which only makes the growing horror all that more unsettling. Another bow to Lovecraft is "The Unbound," which to me, honors writers even further back, including Bierce, Blackwood, and Machen.

Personally, I found "Chapel in the Reeds" and "The Eldritch Faith" - the stories that bookend the collection - to be not only the strongest pieces in *At Fear's Altar*, but truly some of the best Weird fiction stories I've ever read. The way Gavin handles the fears and uncertainty of old age in "Chapel in the Reeds" is so impressive that I would have sworn it was written by an octogenarian. From the POV of a man struggling to hold on to his sanity, memory, and what is left of his family eroded by natural causes, Gavin folds in the additional threat of a strange, tiny church secreted away in the woods, which is the perfect device to terrify and mystify both reader and protagonist. Unsettling and though provoking, to be sure, and an excellent rumination on the

ravages of old age.

"The Eldritch Faith" is quite simply an achievement, a symphony that includes all of the instruments that make up the settings and textures of the best modern supernatural/Weird fiction. I love this story the way I love "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," "The Great God Pan," "The Events at Poroth Farm," or "The House on the Borderland." It's intimate, yet huge; fantastical, yet somehow seems rooted in a reality that very few of us know to be true, but of which all of us have an inkling, as the story begins with a boy looking for the presence that he knows lives in his basement, and ends up in places he - nor I - ever dared dream existed. This is revelatory cosmic horror underpinned by the occult of our earthly traditions and limitations. If someone told me they were curious about modern Weird fiction, and asked for suggestions, "The Eldritch Faith" would be on a very short and distinguished list. As such, this novella ends the collection with a limitless bang, and sets up Gavin's next work as an absolute must-have.

At Fear's Altar - and Richard Gavin, as a fictionist, essayist, and general figure - is what Horror needs, if the forces of true creativity and innovation are going to battle back those armies amassed to exploit cheap parlor tricks, reconstituted dreck barely resembling the original article, and sparkly spook pap churned out to appeal to the widest and least interested portion of our population. This collection has the power and vision to recapture the numinous and keep the steam train on the iron track, to bring respectability back to the genre, to keep the "H" big and proud. If you're as goddamn hungry as I am, punt the cheeseburgers and pick up some Gavin. Straight, no chaser. Nothing watered down, boasting a full array of flavors resting on the tongue, waiting to be unlocked by the discriminating and tasteful. The burning fluid in the glass that warms the gullet and fires the synapses, turning the mind to thoughts of the infinite and beautifully dark.

Ronald says

I had given a 4 star rating to another book by Richard Gavin, *The Darkly Splendid Realm*, and ever since I've wondered if that rating is on the low side.

At Fear's Altar is a collection of short and medium length supernatural/weird fiction which really resonated with me. I enjoyed all of the stories. I think readers with tastes similar to mine would enjoy this book too.

Other reviews have given a good synopsis of the contents of the stories. Here are my comments on some of the stories:

"Chapel in the Reeds" An elderly man and some of his relatives take a trip in the country side. The elderly man experienced some disturbing things, but when they return home, the relatives' account of the trip differs from the elderly man. Now, is the elderly man coming down with the horror of dementia, or did the man experience something **real** and is something inexplicable going on? This tale reminded me of the "strange stories" of Robert Aickman.

"The Abject" This story reminded me of the fiction of Laird Barron, perhaps because in this story a major plot point is an occultation. :)

A married couple and some friends take a trip to a certain spot to view an occultation. It is here that the woman fulfills a desire which has been frustrated by her husband.

"Faint Braying From Afar" is sort of a sequel to H.P. Lovecraft's story "The Hound". I reread "The Hound"

before I read Gavin's story. But Gavin's story can be read on its own and I found it interesting and entertaining.

"The Unbound" is subtitled "'A Meditation upon H. P. Lovecraft's 'The Unnameable'"

"The Eldritch Faith" I estimate is at novella length. I find it like Algernon Blackwood's fiction, and also like the metaphysical horror of Ligotti's fiction. The story is about the narrator's interaction with a being from another realm, and the narrator's eventual visit to that being's realm. But then the narrative goes into a unexpected direction which made me wonder: is the narrator insane, or is he describing something real?

David Bridges says

At Fear's Alter is a top notch collection of weird horror stories. I enjoyed all 13 stories in the book to one degree or another. While I have to admit, the two stories directly related to Lovacraft were my least favorite. This is not because they weren't well written, they were, but my knowledge of Lovecraft's work is very minimal therefore some of it missed me. While I am a huge fan of many "Lovecraftian" authors, I honestly haven't spent much time reading the man himself. Also, since learning more about the man himself my desire to read more by him is weak. Some may see that as blaspheme but I don't really care. Yeah I enjoy weird fiction and I don't read Lovecraft. Whatever.

Anyways I want to say the rest of the book was some of the finest weird fiction I've read. Chapel in the Reeds is a sad and disturbing story about a mans descent into dementia that presents to him like a horrible nightmare. I really felt for Colin and not only were his hallucinations disturbing but the way he loses control of reality made me uncomfortable. The Object is about a group of friends going to watch an eclipse on some cursed mountains that eventually drives them a couple of them over the edge. A Pallid Devil, Bearing Cypress is probably my favorite tale in the whole collection. It's about a man searching for something evil during bomb raids on his town and when he locates it he discovers more evil and deception than he bargained for. The Plain is also a very very good one about a man who wakes up in a haunted desert after a search for gold with two other men. He assumes he has been double crossed and left for dead, which maybe true, but he learns no one really got away with anything. Loved Annexation too. At a dying Husband's request Mary sets out to locate their estranged son who left them many years ago seeking some dark spiritual refuge. She discovers a lot about herself and how disturbed her son truly was. Darksome Leaves is a Ligottish story about a haunted mask that consumes your soul but it's also about more than just a mask that consumes your soul.

Anyways as I said before this is quality weird horror fiction. Gavin is subtle but not too subtle. The writing from a literary perspective is on par with any of the other weird greats old and new. This is the first full collection I have read of Gavin's and I am sold. I will definitely be picking up any future releases from him. Another Canadian writing great weird horror.

Mika Lietzén says

Richard Gavin channels several classic weird authors in **At Fear's Altar**, a collection of 12 stories and a prologue.

The stories come in roughly three types: the homages, the monsters and the psychological. Of the stories in the first category, two are based on early **Lovecraft**, with *Faint Baying from Afar* serving as a sequel to Lovecraft's *The Hound* and *The Unbound* taking a go at the legend of *The Unnamable*. The best of the lot is *A Pallid Devil, Bearing Cypress*, a homage to **Hanns Heinz Ewers** that feels like a lost classic of the weird and not a modern story at all.

Next up are the monster stories; in *The Abject*, a woman disappears during a hiking trip (into the clutches of a monster). *The Plain* is a weird western, where a group of men hungry for gold fall prey to the titular plain. *The Word-Made Flesh* concerns strange, godlike powers gained at an abandoned farm. *Annexation* follows a woman in search for her grown-up son. And *Darksome Leaves* is a Halloween story of sorts, about a mask that opens up a whole new world.

With the exception of *The Plain*, the stories feature modern-day people who stumble into cosmic horrors. The emphasis is on atmosphere and suggestion, as it should, but strangely, the stories tend to end with the big bad being very big and bad. There's very little room for second opinions of the "what did I really see? if anything?" variety. Yes, it was real, and the monster ate you. End of story. On the other hand, such lack of subtlety is kind of refreshing, so there you go.

The third category goes for the psychological effect instead. Here characters are in denial of their own reality, perhaps because it's too sad, too horrific or too mundane. There's (again) a hint of Lovecraft here, with the *Celephaïs*-style quiet, desperate yearning for something *more*. *Chapel in the Reeds* depicts an old man imagining a remote chapel filled with pornography. *King Him* is the story of two siblings who hear a voice in their heads, spurring them to unspoken deeds. *Only Enuma Elish* reads like something out of **Tim Powers**, a fantasy concoction that connects a Babylonian creation mythos to hurricane Katrina. And last but not least, *The Eldritch Faith* tells the tale of a lonely boy, whose new spirit friend drives him to murder, insanity and a strange alternative reality.

It's a strong collection, with no bad or even mediocre offerings; the writing is sharp throughout and some characters even manage to transcend their role as monster fodder. One drawback is that it never really lets the reader forget the old masters; they're always there, lurking in the background. Still, it all somehow works like a shoggoth. But as always with story collections, *At Fear's Altar* may be too much to digest in one go; as one-offs the stories would probably shine a lot brighter. Serving suggestion: enjoy in small portions.

Read all my reviews at mikareadshorrorfiction.wordpress.com

Adam Nevill says

AT FEAR'S ALTAR by Richard Gavin is a gem of a single-author horror anthology. To my taste, there are at least five great modern horror stories in this volume. There's terrific writing here and a powerful imagination on full power to the last page, delivering a sense that something vast, though often unseen, is close to each story, which I love in weird tales. Outstanding.

Adriane says

I am embarrassed to say that Richard Gavin's work only came on my radar a couple of years ago. After

reading his most recent short story collection, *Sylvan Dread*, I realized I had found something very special and thus, decided to read all of his work available, fiction and nonfiction. Sadly, some of his earlier works are currently out of print, but I was able to get a copy of *At Fear's Altar*, which was published in 2012. This collection has only confirmed the impression that Sylvan Dread has left on me, that Richard Gavin is one of the most gifted writers working today. Gavin's ability to create a numinous atmosphere in his stories is striking, not to mention his uncanny writing skills. Even though the 13 stories in *At Fear's Altar* are very different from each other in style and tone, I enjoyed all of them immensely and took my time going through them to better appreciate every single detail offered. As I was going over the stories in my mind thinking of highlights to mention here, I realized that they all touch on one or another aspect of my sensibility, giving me a sense that Gavin's stories are tailor-made for me, and I couldn't appreciate it more
