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FEATURE INTERVIEW

Talking *Knifepoint Horror* with Soren Narnia

Jeffery Klaehn

Upon first discovering Soren Narnia's elegantly minimalist podcast, *Knifepoint Horror*, I was struck by its creator's talent for economical and fast-moving storytelling.

Narnia (cited in Cutter, 2016) explains: "I envisioned this type of fiction to be as direct and efficient as possible, aiming only for the scare and nothing else. The term just came to me and seemed as descriptive as any. Blade goes in, blade comes out, piercing only the proper nerves, and you move on to the next story."

Knife in, knife out, quickly.

The stories and characters come across as existing in places that are simultaneously real and otherworldly.

Knifepoint Horror is a podcast waiting to be discovered. In this interview I discuss horror, writing and storytelling with Soren Narnia, and explore *Knifepoint Horror* as a transmedia horror project.

Jeffery Klaehn: Please tell me about your goals with *Knifepoint Horror*.

Soren Narnia: I'm more and more seeing podcasting as an act of one-way friendship with the world; it's satisfying to play the role of the familiar voice for people, keeping them company on a regular schedule and in times when they just want to feel a little less alone or want an escape. The solo podcaster in this case can become a trusted ally in life, one who doesn't demand any reciprocation. I think it's part of why people far prefer it when I deliver a very traditional first-person story with minimal effects as opposed to anything more elaborate.

In terms of horror, it's become a mission to give people a sense of surprise, of something they haven't quite heard before. Success for me now is having someone say, "That story went somewhere I wasn't quite expecting" more than "That was scary." I think what I owe the listener is originality.

It makes me feel good sometimes to think that I have no workable ideas left, because that means a new direction, even a subtle one, must be coming for me. I do often crave that horror would sort of just leave me alone, that no new ideas for that type of story will come and I'll be seized with a permanent sense of "That's it, it's over." I think there'll be an exciting freedom then to do other things. But horror keeps holding onto me, still just satisfying enough a pursuit to indulge the ideas that do come.

JK: What does *Knifepoint Horror* mean, for you?

Soren Narnia: Originally, when I was just trying to test the waters of podcasting as a way of getting the stories out there, *Knifepoint Horror* meant a very direct and spare approach to storytelling, with the goal being to tell the scariest tale in the fewest words I could, stripping them of adornment almost entirely. But the concept has changed a bit over the years. These days there's an exhausting number of first-person audio horror stories to choose from, so I slowly began to look around for other concepts to play with, to keep myself interested in writing in the genre. In the last few years, it's been more about seeing what *else* horror can do—adding that second layer of theme, focusing more on the characters and how they see the world, experimenting with different formats.

JK: 'digs' is one of my favorite *Knifepoint Horror* stories. In it, a man who has just leased an apartment finds his world unsettled by a string of creepy events. The story subsequently leads us through a maze of dark hallways and strange entanglements. Please share your thoughts and reflections about this story.

Soren Narnia: 'digs' is kind of an unusual story compared to the others. There's a bit of an element of dark comedy to it, which I'm trying to embrace just a little more, as I'm a big believer in varying tones within a single piece of fiction. Getting weird and wild and then pulling things back to straight terror can work beautifully and create something more memorable; I'm thinking here of some favorite movies, such as the original versions of *The Wicker Man*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *Suspiria*. All of these have somewhat absurd moments of frenetic

wonkiness, then go dark at just the right times. I want to push that envelope a bit more.

JK: The entire story is grounded in a sense of the familiar but leaves so much to the imagination with the ending – which brings the knife.

Soren Narnia: I usually don't go much for truly weird "breakaways" in fiction, where we're thrown for such a loop that time and space get muddled. But something about 'digs' needed more of a push than I was giving it; it was crying out for more of an existential threat. That ending, to me, tells us that the narrator—one of the very few in these stories who is not under direct threat of death—may have stumbled into something far weirder than he thought, and I like the dark humor of that, the sense that he thought he was out of it all, safe and sound, but nope! God only knows who's knocking at that door. But no matter who it is, it *can't* be good.

JK: Your *Knifepoint Horror* stories feature a lone speaker telling the stories. What was the initial idea behind this in relation to the making of the audioplays?

Soren Narnia: The "solitary voice" effect on the listener was never anything planned; it was just the most efficient and logical way to convey these stories without getting too heavy into the realm of radio drama. Only after the podcast had been going for a few years, and I myself had become a fan of a certain style of podcast as a listener, that I really became aware of the power of a single voice in the dark. The best comparison I can make is the experience of listening to a baseball game on the radio. I like it when there's only one person in the booth because it feels like they're relating the story of the game directly to me, and we're sharing something. When a color commentator is added, that dynamic is broken, and I'm essentially listening to a talk show.

JK: Is *Knifepoint Horror* popular?

Soren Narnia: *Knifepoint Horror* may be popular within the very small genre of horror fiction podcasting, but that doesn't mean it's remotely recognizable in the broader horror realm, or that there aren't many podcasts like it that people listen to more. These stories certainly aren't something you're going to stumble across unless you're hunting specifically for horror fiction.

JK: Have you always been a fan of horror? What authors and works have influenced and shaped your perceptions of horror and the possibilities that storytelling affords?

Soren Narnia: For whatever reason, I was one of those kids that horror clicked for right away. It's funny how you can go into a bookstore and see Dracula or Frankenstein being depicted in books written for six-year-olds: our minds can grasp these concepts that early.

From the library I would check out oversized volumes of classic stories written between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and I liked the atmosphere and the creepy quiet those stories delivered: Poe, M.R. James, Algernon Blackwood, Ambrose Bierce, H.P. Lovecraft, and so many others who perhaps had one or two stories survive them. Later of course came Stephen King, who may have been responsible for first putting it into my head that the *people* behind the horror were so important, a truth that hit me ever deeper with writers like Joyce Carol Oates and Shirley Jackson.

JK: Please discuss your approach to writing and storytelling.

Soren Narnia: I usually don't feel much like a questing artist—that is, when I'm trying to create something, I'm not in it for the journey and there are no demons being exorcised here. I think of the writing as a product, not much different from an end table at Ikea, and the final result that the reader experiences is all that matters to me. I'm just trying to build you a solid end table, not tell you about myself or follow some road to personal enlightenment. Every story is a piece of craftwork to me, something to be shaped and sanded and painted and then presented. I like that aspect of it, the slow crafting, working through all the rough edges until one day comes the presentation. And then I just want to move on, to build something else that will both catch your eye and support a bowl of popcorn without collapsing – not just today, but for years to come.

JK: This reminds me of the mention of Ikea in your story “A Convergence in Wintertime” and also of Stephen King likening Ira Levin to a “Swiss watchmaker” (1981, p. 284) in *Danse Macabre*, that craftwork metaphor, likening fiction and writing to other products that represent creative vision, artistry, skill, care, and years of practice, hard work and investment. Furniture, architecture and watches can be mass produced products, created and manufactured to market, *or*, alternatively, they are sometimes created as art, to be singularly unique representations, of vision, creativity and intent. Your stories definitely fall into the latter category – in an era when many writers, especially younger writers who are hopeful about finding audiences, are seemingly obsessed with “writing to market.” Can you please speak to this, of your thoughts on how your

own writing and creative work fit (and really don't) within the broader contexts of markets and commercialization of creative work? Your work so wonderfully strikes as, as you say, being concerned only with the stories themselves, and with their presentation in your podcasts.

Soren Narnia: I bet I'd be a very different writer if I'd had some sort of commercial success early. Better or worse, I can't say, but by *not* making money, I think I was given the freedom to write whatever I felt like writing, in whatever format most intrigued me at the moment, and to grow.

I do think money corrupts pretty much everything, but as they say, it's useful if you want to buy things. I only begin to resent commercialization when it creates friction with my actual experience of someone's work. It's possible for a creator to become so concerned with success that a tacky veneer is added to that experience. I far prefer it when I sense that someone is letting a desire for excellence guide their work, not a desire to make it popular.

Occasionally people will ask me for advice, and I usually say the same thing: that there's a big difference between having a life in the arts and making a living in the arts. You can absolutely have the first thing, as much of it as you want. You're free to revel in being an artist 24/7, starting today and lasting the rest of your life. That daily existence, that way of being, is right there for the taking. It's trying like hell to make a financial score off your creations that comes with a very high cost. Some people, like me, are probably better off not paying it.

JK: Isolation, vulnerability, regret, decay and sense of place are thematically central to many of your stories, contextualizing the anxiety and fear, the nightmares.

Soren Narnia: There's no horror without isolation. The places I set the stories in are all chosen to bring it out as intensely as possible. It's not just geography; it's meteorology, the effect of the seasons, the nature of the air and the light, the sounds of the wind and the rain. So many things go into making a listener feel that dread of being cut off from familiar things. I don't know if I have the skill to write something scary that takes place in a big city. I always need to clear as many people as possible out of the equation.

As for regret and decay—well, those themes emerge just from being in the world, seeing and sensing emotional pain, making mistakes, feeling the passage of time, watching the people we know get older. It all has to go into the stories, if they're going to feel real.

JK: How did your podcast initially come about? What inspired your approach and the set up? Do you recall your early thinking about it?

Soren Narnia: I was intrigued by this new format that would let me send stories directly to the public with no gatekeeping, no permissions. My first thinking was that I would put out a collection of whatever type of story I had the most of, which happened to be horror. I wasn't aware of what else might be out there on the market already; it was purely an experiment. When I was finished with that first round of podcasting and had no more stories to share, I thought, "Well, that's interesting, maybe this is something for the future," and let it die. But the listenership kept seeming to increase long after I had stopped posting stories. I credit the listeners almost entirely with pulling me back in. They asked for more, and would not stop. I was surprised to find out how much I liked diving back in and continuing to write in this genre.

JK: Do you see your work as falling within the "new weird" genre, and what do you see as the most important parts of what you're doing, as a writer and creator?

Soren Narnia: This is the first time I've heard the term, although I'm certainly familiar with the old-school term "weird fiction," which I've always liked. I don't know that I'd classify this work as "new weird" as I understand it to mean after my three-minute deep dive on Wikipedia—it's more throwback than anything else. There's never a conscious attempt to world-build, or blend elements of sci-fi or fantasy into the mix. I'm a bit outdated even, a tad creaky in my approach, as if you picked up a horror anthology in 1963.

What makes it tough for me to put *Knifepoint Horror* into any particular bucket is that I have so little knowledge of today's buckets—I'm pathetically uneducated in what's going on in the world of horror fiction. I'm mostly aware of the trends of horror cinema instead. My reading habits are woeful. Woeful!

I would say the only important thing going on with *Knifepoint Horror* is that it might give a few more writers hope that an audience can be won from scratch, on an absolute shoestring, with no conscious promotion, no advertising or courting of the public on social media, no taking the focus off anything but the stories themselves. But we'll see if even that remains true in the years ahead as podcasting becomes ever more monetized and our listening choices are influenced more and more by marketing money. It could be that a podcast like this one, if started in 2022, would simply drown unnoticed in a sea of others.

JK: Is writing horror enjoyable for you? Is it sometimes challenging?

Soren Narnia: It just gets more and more challenging. I feel the need to not repeat myself. I respect the listeners' time too much to go back over tired ground. I know that when I sit down to a movie or a book or a podcast, I don't want my time wasted by half-hearted effort. It's just not fair to ask someone to trust you with their time and attention if you haven't busted your butt to craft something sturdy.

I love the parts of creating that come before sitting down to the laptop—the dreaming, the imagining, the neighborhood strolls as I work out the kinks and play and experiment. The writing itself can be, to me, a dry, lonely, and fairly boring business, and not even in my top five things to do on a Saturday.

JK: What do you mean by “play and experiment” here? What type of thinking do you do at this stage?

Soren Narnia: It's great fun to bend a story this way and that when it's still harmless to do so. Changing the setting, changing the characters, doing a little gender switching maybe, plugging one element in and dropping others, trying out different themes to see if I can get a story to work on two tracks simultaneously. This is how some of the stories start out one way and slowly become something entirely different: mentally swatting everything against a wall to see what survives. Particularly entertaining and useful is playing the story as a movie in my mind---movies have ruined me, I can't stop thinking cinematically. Scenes get cut, a soundtrack is even added here and there. I even love the problems that pop up—story holes, logic gaps, problems with the suspension of disbelief. Each one is a challenge to turn the story left and right to get it back on course.

When I finally start typing, I feel far more locked in. Play time is over. Then it's just slowly chiseling the language and writing to create the tiny effects I need, sort of like putting various filters on a camera to see what gets the right tint or exposure.

JK: Do you have a favorite story from among those you've written to date?

Soren Narnia: I tend to like the ones where the elements come into play—I really feel the cold and the snow and the wind and the rain, see them and hear them in my mind so clearly when I write. I'm very partial to a story like “Twelve Tiny Cabins,” but not entirely because of its wintry atmosphere. It's an example

of adding layers to a story, adding mystery and dimensions of character, so that the listener can't quite know exactly what sort of tale they're experiencing until it's all wrapped up.

JK: I also wanted to ask you about your story "The Tears of Sisyphus" – what inspired that story?

Soren Narnia: I'm fond of the idea of late second chances. So many of us don't get many opportunities to rewrite the story of our lives. I like human dramas that depict the hard reality of misspent years, but then give the characters an unexpected light at the end of the tunnel. These dramas are kind of rare. The message of "The Tears of Sisyphus" is the same as in the *Knifepoint Horror* story "I Was Called Anwen": You can break free. You must never stop hoping that you can.

As much as I like a good horror story, I really treasure a well-done inspirational tale. Those are harder to make plausible, but when they're pulled off, it's such a beautiful thing, and something that can be revisited for a lifetime. I've often considered leaving the horror genre and devoting myself fully to the more hopeful stories. But I've actually found little ways here and there to sneak that positive feeling into the dark stuff. Let's call it "humanist horror."

JK: *Knifepoint Horror: Book One* (2007) and *The Complete Knifepoint Horror* (2012) are print collections of your stories. Please share your thoughts and reflections on these.

Soren Narnia: This was another kind of experimentation: self-publishing as opposed to podcasting. The stories in those two volumes are generally experienced just as effectively in print as they are to the ear, so I thought I'd set them down. The books were eventually retired, but the stories reappeared in the newer *Knifepoint Horror* transcript collections.

In the end, I'd rather people have the experience than audio than in prose form, especially since the radio dramas are stripped of almost all their power on the page, but the written word in a paperback in one's hand always has a pull on certain corners of our imagination, so why not have every single story available in book form as well? It also helps those who want to do their own narrations or adaptations of the stories.

*Interviewer's Note: You can listen to Knifepoint Horror at:
<https://knifepointhorror.libsyn.com/>.*

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