

# THE ARCHITECTURE OF CHARNEL HOUSE

*Charnel House publisher Joe Stefko figured he couldn't do a worse job than other presses publishing limited editions of contemporary horror and weird fiction authors, and he hasn't yet. By Rollin Milroy*

THE 1980S AND '90S saw an explosion of small publishers issuing limited edition books in the science fiction, horror and related fields. Few of the books offered much in the realm of design or the book arts; the business model seemed to focus simply around issuing a book with the author's signature in it. Perhaps the laziest examples of this kind of publishing (and collecting) were publishers who bought a couple hundred copies in sheets of a new book from some established author, stuck in a signed limitation page at the front, put them in a marginally better case, maybe threw in a slipcase, and charged a few hundred bucks. Like any speculative bubble (which is how most of the collectors approached their buying), the market tanked in the early '90s and many of the publishers disappeared. But there was one that always stood apart from the others, and continues to publish award-winning—and frequently audacious—books today.

From its start in 1989, Charnel House has worked to differentiate its limited editions by making them truly unique from any trade issues, and reflect an appreciation for the traditions of design and bookmaking. Publisher Joe Stefko refers to his imprint as “architects of fine limited edition books.” In its approach to selecting stories and designing books, Charnel reflects the rock 'n' roll ethos Stefko brought from his first career as a drummer with, among many others, The Turtles and Meatloaf.

“I got into publishing because my appreciation for the art of book design and production was so great that I wasn't appreciating the books I was collecting. They were just trade editions with a signature sheet bound in. But it got worse because some of the publishers who were glutting the market with these things were making inferior books to the trade editions in the stores! It was terrible. And it was lowering the standard of the art to a grade-school textbook level. At best they were selling autographs. Most still are today. I felt that if I was going to collect certain authors, then I should design and publish them myself. Knowing nothing, I couldn't do a worse job. I did a lot of research and surrounded myself with good people. After 18 years I do most things myself, but whoever I do use are really good people.”

Charnel House has focused on publishing what might be called literary horror and weird fiction. Dean Koontz accounts for more than half of the Charnel books, and three of Tim Powers' books were issued in the '90s. Early books featured original artwork by artists popular in the genres, such as Phil Parks, J.K. Potter and Stephen Gervais, but in recent years the books have focused purely on typography (all of the Charnel books have been printed offset; Stefko laments that letterpress would be too expensive for the longer fiction he favours).

“I publish the books I like if the authors will let me and if the project is feasible. I do what I do to please myself and hopefully the author. I have a great relationship with Dean Koontz and I find it to be great fun working with him throughout the whole process, so I can't see why we would stop. Besides, I love his books.”

Stefko's introduction to the potential of typography, design and binding started with some of the better genre publishers in the '80s—he mentions the Phantasia Press lettered edition of Stephen King's *Firestarter* as the book “that got the designing thing going”—but quickly eclipsed their comparatively tame productions. Most Charnel House books are issued in editions of 300–500 copies, which includes an issue of 26 lettered deluxe copies that are completely re-conceived from the numbered issue, and presented in true design bind-

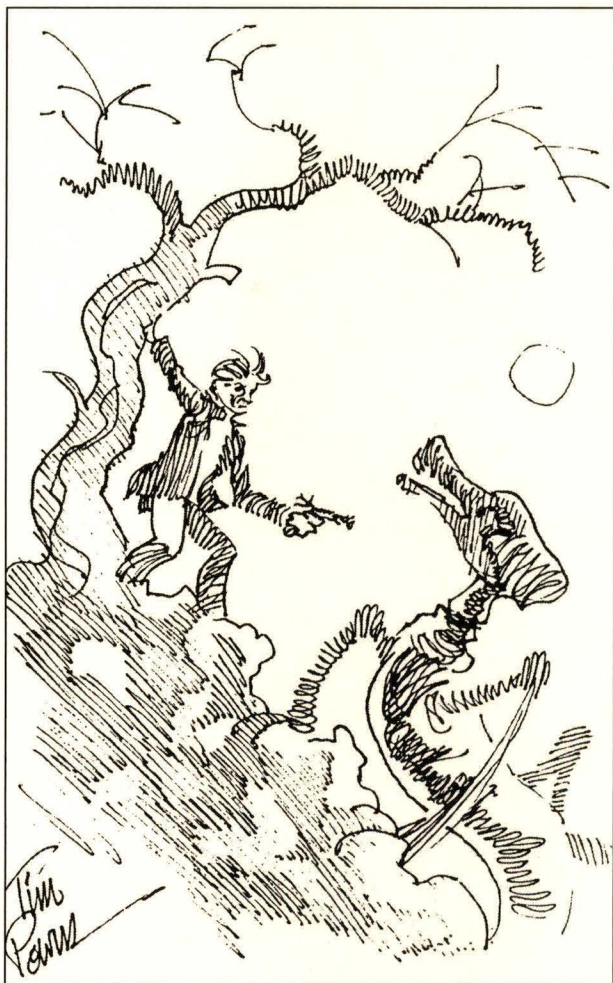
ings. *The Regulators* (1996, by Stephen King writing under the pseudonym Richard Bachman) was bound in full leather by Claudia Cohen and featured bullets protruding from the front board. Stefko's favourite deluxe binding was for Powers' *Last Call* (1992), which featured endpapers made from untrimmed sheets of American dollar bills and a colophon printed on untrimmed sheets of two dollar bills.

"I wasn't introduced to the art of book design, it came naturally. I would read a manuscript and the obvious elements would stick out. You would think, wouldn't it be great to have bullets! Bullets sticking out through the front board! Bullets sticking out through the front board by way of the back! And you just keep going with it. Some are obvious and some are subtle but everything that is done comes directly from the writing. I think about what I want to do, then figure it out. Every book has had a particular arduous period but, unless I am romanticizing the past, none was the bane of my life. When trying to use odd materials for the lettered editions they have to be figured out as you go. How do I cut up money and paste it in a book without getting busted by the FBI? How do I get heavy brass gears to adhere to the front board and not come off in three months [for Koontz's *Velocity*, 2005]? How do you know which way lizard skin is going to pull the board after it is bound [Koontz's *Beastchild*]? Do I really have to bleach all this denim in my bathtub [for Powers' *The Stress of Her Regard*]? All part of the fun. In a perverse way."

In addition to the creative elements, Charnel House has also stood out from the less ambitious publishers in the price of its books, which reflect the additional work invested. The numbered editions retail for around US\$200, while the lettered issues can be 10 times that amount. All but the most recent titles are out of print, usually within a year of publication.

"I knew that there would always be an audience for the deluxe editions, especially if they were limited to just 26 copies. Let's face it, nobody wants to spend good money and wind up with copy GG, what the hell is that! Good high-end art in very limited runs will usually do well. I had to be very careful and I sold the first few titles too cheaply, but I think the right people saw them. You don't need many of the right people before you are out of print."

But the *luxe* aspects of Charnel's books beg the question of whether they are raising the expectations



*The Charnel House edition of Tim Powers' The Stress of Her Regard featured illustrations by the artist, not included in the trade edition, and a colophon printed on African maple veneer.*

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among collectors in the field. These collectors have traditionally seemed to focus simply on whether the author has signed the book and what the edition size is (and they'll often pay a premium for a low number). An appreciation or understanding of the production issues that can make a limited edition truly special has not been apparent. Despite Stefko's dedication to creative and sound book design, he isn't convinced his efforts are succeeding in educating the traditional collectors about things like typography and binding.

"I get a few pieces of mail from people who really get it. I think a decent amount of people

appreciate the binding designs—it's packaging—but not as many appreciate (or even see) the interior. For example, I place my signature sheet at the back of the book because although the limitation and signature are important, that is not the art. And if you are using a nice paper stock for the limitation page and you put it up front, it takes the title page with it when you turn it. But you wouldn't believe how many letters I get from people who complain that their copy isn't signed! I sit there and think about all the work and the time spent to get things as right as I can, and these people don't even open the book and look at it.

"As for lower numbers being worth more than any other number in the edition—don't get me started. In the art world, as a print reaches its higher numbers it goes up in price because the edition is getting smaller. It's the same with the Taschen limited edition books. Can you imagine if I tried to do that?"



Stefko's dedication to quality production threatened to end his publishing in the mid '90s, when he experienced a four-year break between projects. "I was put out of business by a binder who trashed an edition on me and wouldn't cop to it. More than half of the edition had to be pulped and I sued the company. It took four years but I was made well, and I started again with a long run of Dean Koontz novels which continues to this day."

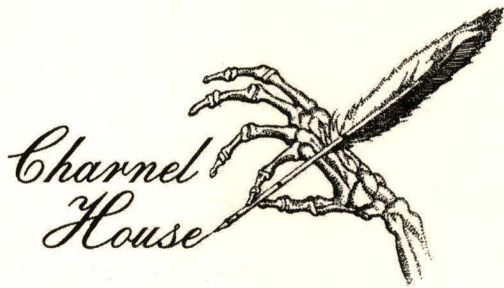
Stefko expects this relationship with Koontz to continue as the author writes new books. This year Charnel House published two titles, including a limited edition of Koontz's latest novel, *The Husband*. In years past Stefko tried to have his editions of new novels published before the trade edition, but he's given up. "The race to be first will make you cut corners in production, and I just can't compete with the machines of Bantam and the like.

My copyright page now states 'This Is A Charnel House Limited Edition,' and my work is better not rushed and I sleep at night. Luckily that whole 'what was printed first' thing doesn't seem to be an issue these days."

The economics of the endeavour, and the reluctance of collectors to buy books by an unknown author (that whole selling autographs problem again), has meant Stéfko has had to balance his own reading and collecting interests with what he knows will sell. But he has still found the opportunity to indulge personal interests. "I did publish one book strictly because I wanted to. *My Own Choice* by Keith Reid was a labour of love. It was the book I always wanted and I couldn't figure out why it didn't exist. Keith Reid wrote the most intelligent lyrics in the history of rock music. His band, Procol Harum, was one of the most sophisticated musically. I thought of him as my generation's Lord Byron and I had to do this book. Who hasn't heard the song 'A Whiter Shade of Pale'? But who really knows the lyrics?" Tellingly, it is the one Charnel House title still in print. Stéfko has no regrets and talks of possible similar projects.

"Being a musician all my life I would like to do more rock lyric books like Keith's. There may one day be an Iggy Pop book, an Ian Hunter book and possibly a Donovan book. But I have to say that I have already done the one book that I would most want to do. That's good, isn't it? Or is it all down hill from here?"

*Charnel House is currently working on a special annotated edition of Harlan Ellison's essay collections The Glass Teat and The Other Glass Teat; a new vampire novel by Christopher Moore titled You Suck; and Dean Koontz's Brother Odd. See [www.charnelhouse.com](http://www.charnelhouse.com) for details.*



LINKED

*Bembo's Zoo*

BEMBO IS THE name of a type designed by Stanley Morison in 1929, based on the first roman face created by Francesco Griffo for the press of Aldus Manutius. Morison named it after the author of the first book to use the model face, *De Aetna*. It went on to become an extremely successful and popular book face in the first half of the 20th century.

In 2000 Henry Holt published *Bembo's Zoo*, an ABC bestiary created by Roberto de Vicq de Cumplich using the face's letterforms. Cumplich is a Brazilian now living in New York City, and his creations are a tour de force of typographic creativity that literally come alive on the [www.bemboszoo.com](http://www.bemboszoo.com) site. Using Flash animation, the user clicks on a letter and watches it spin and fly to create an animal's image. Great site for typophiles, including those just discovering the alphabet.

