



Beneath the Surface (Revised & Expanded)

Simon Strantzas, Matt Cardin (foreword)

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Revised and expanded, the startling debut of Simon Strantzas resurfaces with tales of dark gods and monsters of the flesh, emissaries from a world beneath our own, a world from where nightmares are born. Here, a man searches for truth in a universe that has forsaken him and pays the price for that knowledge, and a woman with out hope travels northward to find the place where her life fell to pieces and discovers of what she truly is made. They say no man is an island, no matter how much he wishes to be, but what then is that ship that sails toward him, and what pray tell is that lashed to its bow. These are tales that infect our dreams, tales of things that live beyond our understanding and watch us with malignant indifference. They are tales of grief, of loneliness, of guilt. Tales of the liminal places that separate our world from that other world, the world to which our souls are merely a gateway. Come inside and witness what resides in us all, deep down beneath the surface.

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"One of the most important debut short story collection in the genre."

-- Stephen Jones

Beneath the Surface (Revised & Expanded) Details

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From Reader Review Beneath the Surface (Revised & Expanded) for online ebook

John Hepple says

My first foray into the world of Strantzas. Echoes of Ligotti and Mark Samuels emanate throughout. Themes include isolation, urban decay and a little bit of cosmic horror, all lovingly wrapped in a big ol' blanket of despair.

Highly recommended.

Ian Casey says

Notwithstanding the deluge of five-star reviews from his esteemed peers, Simon Strantzas' debut collection *Beneath the Surface* is an uneven one to me. The high points are solid cosmic horror and weird fiction. I'd say they're in the major leagues, though missing the playoffs. Others misfired for me, though.

'The Constant Encroaching of a Tumultuous Sea' for instance feels like an assault of darkly surreal imagery more than a story, and utterly lacking the subtlety and gradual development of his principal influences. Retelling a nightmare (real or imagined) isn't enough in itself for a successful story, in the absence of some other driving purpose. Perhaps more qualified opinions will disagree but that is my impression.

Whereas say, Matthew Bartlett or Nathan Ballingrud's debuts immediately struck me with their ability to confidently find their own voice and twist on the genre, I'm struggling to find anything of the sort for Strantzas. The influences of Aickman and Ligotti loom large, and to some extent Cronenberg, Lovecraft and the usual masters.

The problem I have with this material is that the more derivative it became (especially of Ligotti), the stronger and more assured the writing felt, as with the mannequin horror of 'You Are Here'. It rose above pastiche but not enough to convince me this is a masterful collection by an original new voice in its own right. Nor would I expect such a masterpiece from a debut, but it's receiving ratings and reviews commensurate with one.

The author's Afterword (subtitled 'Excerpts from a Writer's Journal') added to the reissue is a genuine oddity. Whilst it discusses something of the history of the stories, it does so in a voice deliberately set to resemble a Lovecraftian protagonist, complete with purple prose and rantings about inconceivable cosmic powers. Hence it's a story of sorts (at least a vignette) in its own right, which is a neat curiosity.

A minor quibble is the number of typos or missing words which a decent line edit could have picked up. For example, 'Hawksley panicked as his attacker flailing (sic) wildly'. Understandable for the original version of the debut, but for this reissue (which went to the trouble of including a new Matt Cardin introduction) some polish would have been nice.

Much as I admire Simon Strantzas' contributions to the weird horror community, I feel I'm missing something which others are seeing in *Beneath the Surface*. Laird Barron gave it three stars so I'd like to know

more of his thoughts on it. Nonetheless I'm curious to see how his later material panned out.

Jeffrey Thomas says

Simon Strantzas reinforces the opinion that the horror tale is best told in the short story form. The stories that make up his collection **BENEATH THE SURFACE** are rich with atmosphere -- bleak, gloomy, hopeless, depressing atmosphere, in a wintry or rainy environment that will make you feel its chill in your bones, and deeper. You will be reminded, in a good way, of two of horror's greatest masters: Thomas Ligotti and Ramsey Campbell. But in this oppressive landscape Strantzas hasn't forgotten to give us a human element, his characters struggling with dread, guilt, sorrow. Characters holding on tenuously to who they are -- if they even know who they are. Lost souls, soon to lose themselves entirely. Not that every story ends with the character's annihilation; a couple end on a somewhat more hopeful note, and I feel it's always a good idea to mix things up like that. Too many horror short stories end too automatically on a fully downbeat note. If the reader thinks the protagonist might just make it out with body and/or sanity intact, there's more at stake in the story. But the overall theme here is deliciously unsettling -- mysterious and paranoid. Every story is excellent, and my favorite here is the most disturbing of the bunch, "Drowned Deep Inside of Me," about an enigmatic blackout that swallows more than just the city in darkness. This story features the most chilling and awe-inspiring image in a book rife with uncanny mental images, though I won't spoil the nature of it here.

It sounds trite but it's entirely sincere: I can't wait to see more of Strantzas' fiction in the future. With my first exposure to his work, through this collection, he is already one of my favorite horror writers.

Ctgt says

The problem with anthologies or short story collections is you tend to like only some of the stories. This collection had a very good hit rate for me, there were only one or two that didn't grab me. Some psychological horror, some physical horror. Most of the characters are from the fringes of society, homeless, geek, outcast at work or already walking the edge of sanity. If you read this collection make sure you read the afterword.....really, don't skip it. I'll be checking out more of his work.

Jonny Kelley says

Simply incredible! Simon Strantzas' right up there on my bookshelf with Thomas Ligotti, T.E.D. Klein, Laird Barron...

Monster says

Beneath the Surface is a collection of short stories that are all firmly set in the weird fiction sub-genre of horror: darkness and despair abound, supernatural creatures arise from the depths to terrorize the innocent and the guilty alike, and somebody always, always dies in the end, leaving the living to wish that they would, too.

Some of Strantzas' stories are better than others. The first submission, "A Shadow in God's Eye," is the story of a man who attends a religious meeting in an abandoned church to see truth in the world. Of course, he gets much more than he bargained for. This is perhaps the strongest tale, and reminds me the most of H. P. Lovecraft's works. Other short stories, such as "You Are Here" and "Behind Glass", could have been teleplays for episodes of *The Twilight Zone* or *Tales from the Darkside*. Unfortunately, several of the other stories are not of good caliber and some, like "Off the Hook" and "In the Air," tend to drag the rest of the stories down. Plus, unless the reader just can't get enough of Weird Fiction, trying to read all of the stories at once will potentially make them seem formulaic.

Overall, I can recommend *Beneath the Surface* for weird fiction and Lovecraft mythos fans. Readers that are new to the genre should probably read a story or two at a time to avoid supernatural parasite burnout.

Contains: Gore, otherworldly possession, violence, despair.

Reviewed by: W.E. Zazo-Phillips

Justin Steele says

Simon Strantzas has become one of the leading writers of weird horror, and along with Richard Gavin, Ian Rogers, and a few others he is proof that Canada has much to offer in this genre.

Beneath The Surface is Simon's first collection, and the fourteen stories found within each stand strong as an example of his dark talent. Several of Simon's influences can be seen throughout the stories, and include such famous names as Lovecraft, Ligotti, Aickman, and Cronenberg. His love for the numinous is also quite plain to see, and it is no surprise that the author of this book went on to edit an anthology about thin places.

Many of the stories feature loners and outsiders as protagonists, often caught in a bleak world. *A Shadow In God's Eye* opens the collection. The protagonist feels empty, and in searching for spiritual satisfaction comes in contact with a shady religious group. There's many good things to say about this one, and Simon paints a picture of a bitter man who experiences a few horrific moments. *It Runs Beneath the Surface* also features a withdrawn main character. The man has a career in social work, which has drained him and left him a cynical husk of a man. His anxieties about the city's filth start to manifest when a new client comes to the office. Both of these tales were instant favorites.

The Constant Encroaching of a Tumultuous Sea is a surreal story that is reminiscent of a nightmare, which is what it was based on according to the author's afterword. *A Thing of Love* features a reclusive writer who is still grieving over his dead mother. Hints dropped about an incestuous relationship gives the story an uncomfortable feel from early on. When the writer receives a mysterious package, things only get creepier.

Off the Hook, another instant favorite, revisits the theme of a filthy city. The city is plagued by constant rain and foul odor due to a garbage strike. A grumpy librarian finds a strange notebook, and starts to hear a ringing in his ears that just won't go away. Combined with a few other surreal scenes, the story has a terrifying climax. *More to Learn* is a short tale concerned with a man rebelling against the creature within him.

Another favorite, *Behind Glass*, combines Lovecraftiana with Ligotti corporate workplace horror, making for an unsettling story set in a creepy office building in a creepy part of town. Following is *In The Air*, a beautifully dark tale of a grieving widow looking for closure.

You Are Here takes place in a fictional, abandoned version of Toronto's PATH. This version of the

underground "shopping mall" is very atmospheric. It reminded me of the story of Orpheus, in that the main character enters the underworld on a quest. This man's quest to fix himself only leads to terror in what amounts to be a highly effective horror story. The Autumnal City is about a man in a city where everything continues in the same manner. The man seeks freedom, and has glimpses of a mysterious woman that he thinks can lead him to being free.

The Wound So Deep is a revenge story featuring much body horror. Another favorite, this one follows a man who is picked on by coworkers, and at their insistence embarrasses himself by asking out the female member of the group. He is hurt so deep that his hurt begins to manifest itself in a physical, vicious way. Thoughtless continues with the body horror. A girl who finds herself incapable of feeling agrees to try a radical, mostly untested new drug. After her injection her arm begins to change and she enters a state of delirium. I loved the ambiguity of the story. Was the woman really experiencing true events and seeing past the veil into the true world or was she just having a delusional episode?

Leather, Dark and Cold involves a book that opens the door to so much more. An impressionable student helps a man he admires steal the book, but is horrified by the events that occur. Years later, the man comes back into his life. Drowned Deep Inside of Me is an interesting weird tale and a good choice to close the book. The city is gripped by an unnatural darkness, and a troubled man waits through it with his neighbor and her daughter. Not everything is explained explicitly, but from hints and events it becomes clear by the end that the narrator has a deep darkness within him as well.

Strantzas is one of the modern masters of the weird horror tale. His first collection explores urban horrors, and the horrors within us all with just the right amount of Ligotti bleakness and cosmicism to satisfy any horror reader. Like the best horror, everything is not always explained and ambiguity is sometimes used quite often. An essential volume to any weird horror collection.

Originally appeared on my blog, The Arkham Digest.

John Muñoz says

I wrote a longer review but got tired of writing it 5 minutes in so here's my quick thoughts.

This my first experience with Strantzas. I bought the deluxe edition of his fourth collection *Burnt Black Suns* from Dark Region Press, but, since it was delayed I decided to start from the beginning.

Even with all the hype surrounding Strantzas his first collection definitely lived up to what I've heard about even his more, assumingly, mature collections. The writing itself is pretty good for a first collection, though has some obvious flaws - at least in my eyes. Mainly, I felt there was some superfluous usage of atmosphere building, words, and sometimes his influences were just a little too apparent. He does have some absolutely chilling imagery throughout almost every story. I love the frequent dream like quality to his stories. I can tell that this is his first collection though.

That said, he already seems to have developed a fairly distinct authorial voice and view. Every story was entertaining at the very least, and sometimes amazing. There's? a sampling of different genres here from Corporate Horror, Ligottian and Lovecraftian Cosmicism, Body Horror among several others. My favorites were the on point opener *A Shadow in God's Eye*, *Thoughtless*, *Drowned Deep Inside of Me*, and the jaw-dropping *In The Air*. Though the prose was rough as times it's honestly one of the best stories I have ever

read, chilling and superlatively beautiful. With how long that deluxe edition seems to be taking I'm gonna have to run through his two other collections in the mean time, both of which I luckily have sitting on my shelf. Side note to myself: Sadly, I bought a digital copy of this book so I won't have matching Deluxe Editions, if not in numbering, from Dark Region Press.

Donald says

Before I finally cracked open Simon Strantzas' first collection of short stories, **Beneath the Surface**, I was worried it wouldn't live up to what had almost certainly become unrealistic expectations heavily influenced by the sheer difficulty encountered in acquiring this book (which should no longer be a problem starting later this year as Dark Regions Press will be releasing an updated version). Thankfully, my worries turned out to be without merit; Strantzas' freshman collection reads more like the work of an established voice of the genre rather than that of a relative newcomer.

"Behind Glass" is a tale of corporate horror in the vein of Thomas Ligotti. It is the story of Hawksley, a corporate drone starting work for the company that bought out his previous employer. He is the sort that wants nothing more than to disappear into his job for eight hours a day and not be bothered by anyone. His new office building and fellow employees, however, present a mystery that ignites even Hawksley's atrophied sense of curiosity, and what he discovers is chilling.

"You Are Here" is a harrowing story of a man that's lost everything: his love, his home, and, finally, his mind. He has become convinced that if he can return to the spot where he first met his lost love, he can begin to unravel the confusing events that led to his current situation. This meeting took place in an underground shopping district that has since been abandoned and sealed off. Instead of answers, however, all the protagonist finds in these forsaken byways is horror, though whether this horror is supernatural in nature or merely the final vestiges of a man's sanity slipping away is left up to the reader.

"A Thing of Love" is something of the odd man out in this collection. If I had to choose one word to describe all the other stories in **Beneath the Surface**, I would go with "desolate" (or, if I could use a phrase, "The descent into desolation"). This story, however, is, at worst (best?), simply melancholy. It is the tale of a writer who has lost his mother, and with her both his creative drive and, seemingly, his very will to live (this immediately brought to mind the sad story of Robert E. Howard). His editor, who has staked her reputation and livelihood on his next book, has grown increasingly frustrated by the lack of communication and, more importantly, progress on the book. She finally decides to be proactive and visit the writer, whereupon she discovers that he's found something of a new muse and has resumed writing. This nature of this new muse is...well, it's weird. I don't mean weird in a sinister way, which would have fit much more coherently in this collection, but weird in an odd way. Don't misunderstand me, this isn't a bad story, it just doesn't fit thematically with everything else.

I've never had to work quite so hard to obtain a book as I did with **Beneath the Surface**, but I can safely say that the time (and money) was well worth it - though it did sting just a bit when, two days after purchasing this, I read on Strantzas' blog that DRP was doing a reprint; ah well, it's only money. It is rare that a new author comes along with a debut this strong, and it was a tragedy that Humdrumming was only able to get ~100 copies out the door before going under. But, again, this won't be a problem in a few months and I strongly encourage every horror fan to order this collection as soon as Dark Regions makes it available.

Andy says

This the third Strantzas collection I've read, he has quickly become one of my favorite modern weird fiction authors. This being his first collection I was, consciously or unconsciously, expecting these stories not to be as developed as later ones, but I wouldn't say that's the case at all.

These stories are *different* from some of his later work, and there's less variety. Generally the characters aren't people we get to know like in his later work, so in that sense the story feels more at arms length and distant emotionally. The influence of Ligotti is more deeply felt here than later, not just in philosophy but in mood and often setting. Almost all of these stories take place in delightfully blighted urban hellholes. It's always raining, cold, foggy and miserable. The mood is full of paranoia, dread and fear. These are grim stories too, and often there's a bit more gruesome body horror involved than I expected.

Overall another excellent collection I thought, just different from his others. I look forward to reading the only other collection by him I haven't tackled thus far -- *Nightingale Songs*. But I think I'll put it off for a while, I hate the thought of having nothing else by this author to explore!

A Shadow In God's Eye - A very dark, Ligottian tale, very well-told in how it describes sensations once the main characters' sight is lost. A man desperate for answers in a seemingly meaningless world seeks out a strange cult for answers and has the dark truth revealed.

It Runs Beneath The Surface - Another grim, grimy, even gross story. It definitely reminded me of Leiber's "Smoke Ghost," in it's theme and great urban setting. Great, horrific ending. A bitter, cynical psychiatrist dealing with the daily drudgery of the city life starts to suspect something far worse is afoot when he sees figures in the darkness and the city becomes seemingly unpopulated.

The Constant Encroaching Of A Tumultuous Sea - I thought this was an excellent story, it's a more allegorical tale, very dream-like. A man feels drawn to the cold, gray city which sucks the life out of people, but discovers something far worse just on it's outskirts.

A Thing Of Love - One of the sadder stories in the book, they're all pretty dark but this one is emotionally affecting. This is also one of the more queasy ones too! A writer's agent grows concerned about his increasing isolation, and then a very strange change in demeanor.

Off The Hook - This one is very much like "It Runs Beneath The Surface" in it's theme and setting. This was one of the more frightening stories I thought, but I'd like to have had a bit more clarity and explanation at the end. A librarian is plagued by a ringing that gets stuck in his head, connected with a strange manuscript left in the library.

More To Learn - The briefest story in the book, also with the parasitic theme, also quite gruesome! I loved the hinting at the parasite driving him toward sex, very Ligotti. A man finds himself inhabited by an alien being like those around him, but tries to find a way to expel it.

Behind Glass - This is one of the best stories in the collection, very effective and exciting, beginning to end. It has a similar feel of Ligotti's corporate horror stories, with it's absurd humor at times. A man starts work at a new company which hides a dark secret in a factory deep within the bowels of it's labyrinthine corridors.

In The Air - This story is quite good, a bit different, both in setting and in it's sad tone. I didn't like it at first,

but by the end, which is quite good I changed my mind. A girl travels with a friend to confront a tragedy in her past in a very weird town.

You Are Here - One of the weirdest in the book, downright surreal. It's a bit confusing, not among my favorites for that reason but it still generates some genuine creepiness. A homeless man finds entrance into a long-abandoned mall, but gets lost in its corridors trying to find something from his past.

The Autumnal City - The shortest story in the book, this is another piece focused on atmosphere, primarily that of a hopeless, grim city and one man's search for escape in the vision of a woman he sees in the street.

The Wound So Deep - This story is the longest in the collection, it's very weird with a good dose of body horror included. A man who feels powerless discovers a strange growth on his side which horrifies him at first, then becomes a means of vengeance upon the world.

Thoughtless - This one is very Ligottian, it's strange but on its face is making an allegorical statement. I thought it could have gone a bit deeper than it did myself. A girl dealing with a deep depression agrees to subject herself to an experimental treatment which reveals some dark truths to her.

Leather, Dark And Cold - Another one of my favorites here, good setting and mood, a bit more "traditional" than some others here perhaps. Two young men steal a cursed book from a professor, and unleash a horror upon themselves.

Drowned Deep Inside Of Me 5 - This is one of the more emotional stories with more relateable characters, but it was among my least favorite. Too many unanswered questions for me. A man haunted by his past finds some solace during a strange disaster where he makes a connection with a single mother nextdoor.

Jeffrey Thomas says

Simon Strantzas reinforces the opinion that the horror tale is best told in the short story form. The stories that make up his collection **BENEATH THE SURFACE** are rich with atmosphere -- bleak, gloomy, hopeless, depressing atmosphere, in a wintry or rainy environment that will make you feel its chill in your bones, and deeper. You will be reminded, in a good way, of two of horror's greatest masters: Thomas Ligotti and Ramsey Campbell. But in this oppressive landscape Strantzas hasn't forgotten to give us a human element, his characters struggling with dread, guilt, sorrow. Characters holding on tenuously to who they are -- if they even know who they are. Lost souls, soon to lose themselves entirely. Not that every story ends with the character's annihilation; a couple end on a somewhat more hopeful note, and I feel it's always a good idea to mix things up like that. Too many horror short stories end too automatically on a fully downbeat note. If the reader thinks the protagonist might just make it out with body and/or sanity intact, there's more at stake in the story. But the overall theme here is deliciously unsettling -- mysterious and paranoid. Every story is excellent, and there's a metafictional, subtly tongue-in-cheek afterword to put a cap on things. Probably my favorite here is the most disturbing of the bunch, "Drowned Deep Inside of Me," about an enigmatic blackout that swallows more than just the city in darkness. This story features the most chilling and awe-inspiring image in a book rife with uncanny mental images, though I won't spoil the nature of it here.

It sounds trite but it's entirely sincere: I can't wait to see more of Strantzas' fiction in the future. With my first

exposure to his work, through this collection, he is already one of my favorite horror writers.

Nicholas Kaufmann says

Strantzas's debut collection marks the arrival of a refreshingly different voice in the horror field. But make no mistake, these are tone pieces, more concerned with atmosphere than plot cohesion. You won't find any Twilight Zone twists or monster mashes here. Instead, you'll find stories of encroaching darkness, physical and emotional corruption, and cosmic futility. However, the tone remains too consistent throughout the collection, resulting in an unfortunate sameness to the stories and too much repetition of certain themes. Strantzas's overly formal prose style can also put too much distance between the story and the reader to achieve the desired emotional effect. But as a debut, this collection of horror tales is quite accomplished and far more creative in its imagined terrors than most. I'm eager to read Strantzas's follow-up collections to see how his themes and style have expanded, and where his impressive imagination will take me next.

Gary says

A very good collection from an author whose prose continues to shine...but darkly.

This book is best read as a single piece of work, giving a glimpse into the philosophy behind the author's entire body of fiction.
