

Book Review: Machine of Death's "Vegetables"

By Bobby Forand

Nearly everyone spends hours wondering how they are going to die. The collaborators of *Machine of Death* took this conundrum to the next level by putting together a compilation of short stories all based around a machine that tells people the method of their future demise via blood sample. There are 34 tales of the aftermath of this discovery, each written through the imagination of a different author. "Vegetables," a story by Rhode Island resident Chris Cox, was chosen out of 675 stories submitted by 626 different writers.

A first person account that is very Palahniukian, Cox takes us into the world of a seeming corporate guy who passive aggressively hates his friends, coworkers and neighbors. It seems like he has benevolence in his heart when he tries to help Frank overcome his fear of vegetables (his method of death), but his approach is just spiteful, leading to a snap and a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Like a lot of the stories in this collection, Cox's piece is thought-provoking. He is currently in the process of turning his story into a script, hoping to see his words brought to life on the big screen. Cox was kind enough to put his fiction writing away long enough to answer some questions.

How did you come to contribute to *Machine of Death*? Did you have a hand in the publishing process?

I didn't have a hand in the publishing process, but I used to keep an eye on fiction market listings, showing what anthologies, magazines and publications were out there seeking writers or stories. Through Ralan.com, I happened upon the submission call for the *Machine of Death* anthology, and found the premise intriguing. The title of each submission had to denote the way someone in the tale was going to die. I like working from prompts, and wanted to challenge myself with something ridiculously healthy, like vegetables. A short while later I had to have some impacted wisdom teeth removed, and they knocked me out for the surgery. I took the rest of the day off, and was still doopey from the morphine, (not to mention facially deconstructed because the surgeon had hands like coal-shovels). So when I got home and reattached my jaw, I grabbed the laptop, flopped back on the sofa and wrote "Vegetables" while in this strange, cranky and surreal mindset. I gave it a quick edit a day or so later, and then sent it in. They received over 600 submissions all in, so I was quite surprised and happy when they accepted it.

How has getting "Vegetables" published in *Machine of Death* helped your career?

Since *Machine of Death* came out, I have been working on several other longer projects - novels and film scripts - and so the effect of having *Machine of Death* on my list of credits remains to be seen. But being part of *Machine* in and of itself has been a huge boon - especially as nobody involved with this anthology had any anticipation of how huge it was about to get. Watching this publication from its inception through to release and the global attention has been a trip, to say the least. Fingers crossed this will continue to grow and evolve, for many years to come.

Talk about the process of turning "Vegetables" into a script. What was/has been different from writing the initial story? Are you currently in talks with any production companies?

Converting this into a script is interesting because the original story is very, very short and leaves a lot

to the reader's imagination. So firstly, I laid out the story chronologically, listing scenes and key / pivotal events, which would form an approximate map of the plot. Then I needed to spend some time with the characters in their own environments because they would all need much more definition and personality to fill out this much airtime. Scripts are very visual too, and when a story has a lot of internal dialogue, you have to be mindful not to stuff all that introspection into a dull stream of narrative. This time around, I really got to know the characters much better than they needed to be known in the original short story. I also got to flesh out their world, see outside and beyond the limits of the scenes the story presented, and build an entire poignantly darkly bizarre world around the events already laid out and established. It's fun actually - kind of like paint by numbers sci-fi - although, this iteration of the story is going to be darker and more unsettling, by far.

I'm not currently in talks with any production companies, but will most likely look for agent representation soon.

How has living in Rhode Island contributed to your writing?

Great question! Rhode Island is by far the coolest place I have ever lived. I'm a thrill seeker by nature, but be careful what you wish for. Since I moved here from England nine years ago, my first job was at a corporation selling consumer electronics, whose owners subsequently went to jail for stealing about \$15 million from internet victims. I worked at a human services place on Mineral Spring Ave, which was a very fulfilling job until we got called in one day and told that the previous night, one of the clients had raped and murdered another one of the clients. Then I worked for a guy assembling grills and wheelbarrows, driving around various Lowes and Home Depots. But this guy was a shady bastard who wore an ankle bracelet for some prior undisclosed offense, and had to dial into a parole line every time we ventured anywhere near the state line. Only experiences and perspective can contribute to your writing, and RI has given me massive quantities of both.

Has do-it-yourself publishing changed the literary landscape at all? If so, how?

Yes! Traditional publishing has always been a tough gig to break into, and tended to have pretty high standards because of the competitive environment. But since software and ebooks made DIY publishing available to the masses, we now suddenly have this overwhelming proliferation of self-proclaimed authors, very often whose work really isn't ready for publication yet, and in the worse cases, isn't even fit to wipe your arse on. When you look at the two ways of getting your book out, self-publishing is very tempting, because you have full control, it gets released much faster and you get the majority of the profit from sales. But on the flip side, you also lack objectivity, may want to skip over the editing process - big mistake, never do this - and you may not know the first thing about marketing. You're also going into it with a lot of prejudicial attitudes and self-proclaimed experts out there stating that all self-published work is crap, which is absolutely not the case. I know at least one fabulous writer who took the self-published route for his last two novels, but he has found all kinds of obstacles through doing this - one being that some review sites won't even consider reading self-published material.

Would you pay to know how you will die?

I would most likely pay several times, and then spend the rest of my life trying to prove it wrong. If the stub said old age, I'd go jump off a bridge.

What's one book people should read this summer?

C'mon, you can fit at least five books in over the summer! But if we get only one, I highly, highly recommend *Backbite*, by Adrienne Jones.

Any final thoughts?

Oh yeah, lots of them, but I'll spare you the bulk. When *Machine of Death* beat out Glenn Beck on the Amazon radar, he commented on his radio show that we have a "death obsessed culture," and I am somewhat inclined to agree. Death is very cool until somebody you love dies, and then it is the worst thing by far, and makes you want to die yourself. So focus on life, party hard, laugh lots, love love and enjoy yourself as if you were going to die yourself at some point in the future. Because you are. And so am I. And hopefully these events are a long, long way off.