

Books

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Stars in hell

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Best-selling author Clive Barker is used to giving readers sleepless nights, having penned horror classics like "The Books of Blood" and creating fright movies like "Hellraiser" and "Candyman."

But with his new book — "Coldheart Canyon: A Hollywood Ghost Story" (HarperCollins, 688 pages, \$27.95) — Barker is giving his lawyers some sleepless nights, too.

A delicious black valentine to cinema, it features handsome action star Todd Pickett (modeled on ... take your pick) who, needing a refuge to heal from botched plastic surgery, finds himself in a secluded L.A. mansion where Hollywood stars of the 1920s once partied like mad.

The book is a twisted, visionary fantasy that exposes the Canyon's dark secret: The stars of yore are alive and well in the bowels of this palace, having sold their souls in exchange for appearing eternally beautiful.

Amid a parade of bizarre

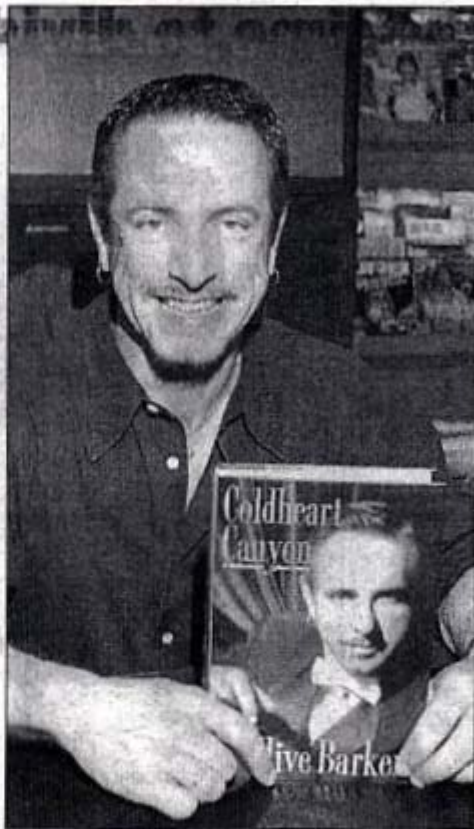
Along for a ride on Barker's demonic tour of Tinseltown

sex and sinners, Barker provides a demonic tour of Tinseltown excess — a cross between "Hollywood Babylon" and Dante's "Inferno."

Barker has Lana Turner mating with a panther, while the ghosts of silent-film legends indulge in Caligula-like orgies. And Randolph Scott does things with Cary Grant that will surprise anyone who hasn't read the gossipy classic "Babylon" by Kenneth Anger.

"The lawyers weren't too happy with me," laughs Barker from his home in the heart of darkness, also known as Los Angeles.

"You're familiar with Kenneth Anger's book. I don't think I'm saying anything — putting aside Lana Turner, of course — that hasn't been said elsewhere. The fun was putting in people who are still alive, which is a lot trickier."



"The lawyers weren't too happy with me," says Clive Barker, whose new novel, "Coldheart Canyon," explores Hollywood stars' sexual exploits. Nina Prommer/Globe Photos

Barker's inspiration sprang from attending dinner parties of Roddy McDowall, the actor who became a legendary repository of old Hollywood history. The writer's own research proved that McDowall's stories didn't need any embellishing.

"Those were pretty high times in Hollywood," says Barker, who has a love/hate relationship with the town he vowed to leave

when I interviewed him six years ago. "It wasn't sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, but it was sex, drugs and jazz."

"In one sense, the characters are far more extreme than the people I know in this town. But in another sense, there are things that go on in this town that, if you wrote them down, people would say, 'Forget it; it's not true.' This is a town of extreme behavior."

The 49-year-old Barker has great fun teasing out references to current stars in what is surely one of his most accessible books, particularly for an author who seemed to lose his way during the last few years.

Always a juggler of multiple projects, Barker, who is also a painter, worked on movies (producing the Oscar-winning film "Gods and Monsters"), and wrote children's books like "The Thief of Always," among other offerings.

"I think I frustrate my publishers once in a while," admits Barker. "I think they would love it if I just did one thing."

Still, things have gone well for him. Barker just signed a reported \$8 million deal with Disney pegged to his next project, a quartet of fantasy stories called "Abarat."

And he's already finished some 400 oil paintings for the book, which came before he even started writing.

"I've never conceived of doing something this way," says Barker, who calls "Abarat" a great adventure. "Painting the pictures and then writing the books? It's a very strange way of doing it, but it's been great."

"Here I am saying it's a quartet. I think it's a quartet. It seemed to break down quite neatly into four parts."

"But I think L. Frank Baum thought he'd finished with 'Oz' every now and then, you know?"

"I think it's four books, but it may turn out to be many more."