

## NEAL BARRET, JR.

Last spring, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America named Neal Barrett, Jr., the 2010 Author Emeritus. I was honored to be asked to introduce him at SFWA's Nebula Awards Banquet in Cocoa Beach, Florida. The following editorial is a slightly revised version of my remarks. Neal's latest story can be found on page 26.

Possum Dark watched the van disappear into the shop. He felt uneasy at once. His place was on top. Keeping Ginny from harm. . . . Dog locked the gate and turned around. Didn't come closer, just turned.

"I'm Dog Quick, he said folding hairy arms. "I don't care much for Possums."

"I don't care for Dogs," said Possum Dark.

Dog seemed to understand. "What did you do before the War?"

"Worked in a theme park. Our Wildlife Heritage. That kind of shit. What about you?"

"Security, what else? Dog made a face. "Learned a little electrics. . . . He nodded toward the shop. "You like to shoot people with that thing?"

"Anytime I get the chance."

"You ever play any cards?"

"Some." Possum Dark showed his teeth. "I guess I could handle myself with a Dog.

"For real goods?" Dog returned the grin.

"New deck, unbroken seal, table stakes," Possum said.

Long before there was the "new weird," there was Neal Barrett, Jr. The New York Review of Science Fiction called Neal's 1988 story, "Stairs," "possibly the most all out weird story of the year." Being weird didn't stop "Stairs" from winning that year's Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. The aforementioned Dog Quick and Possum Dark are characters in

Neal's wondrous and strange, "Ginny Sweethips' Flyin' Circus." The wry tale of life after a nuclear war was a finalist for both the Nebula and the Hugo award. Critics have said that Neal's stories defy any category or convention, but he has also been called a poet of post-apocalyptic fiction. Neal is not afraid to explore the dark side, but Neal's versions of what follows Armageddon differ considerably from Cormac McCarthy or Neville Shute's visions of the aftermath. In an interview with Nick Gevers, Neal says, "I write deep and dark, and I write light and funny. And, they're both the same, in my mind. Tragedy contains funny; funny contains tragedy. Serious things happen to my people, and funny things as well. Like life, okay? The way I write is simply my perspective on whatever the hell this living stuff is all about."

Neal has always had a keen eye for what this "living stuff" is all about. His 1991 novel, *The Hereafter Gang*, about Doug Hoover's transition from life to death, has been called "One of the Great American Novels," by John Clute. I own the gorgeous Ziezing hardcover with the evocative triptych, and I was calling it one of the greatest novels, ever, long before I became aware of John's review.

Neal's career began over fifty years ago, when his first two SF stories appeared in the August 1960 issues of *Amazing* and *Galaxy*. Since then, he's published more than fifty books. In addition to the post-apocalyptic theme that can be found in novels like *Through Darkest America* and *Dawn's Uncertain Light*, and the personal Armageddon of *The Hereafter Gang*, these works include the "Aldair" quartet and other types of science fiction, Westerns, YA books, very strange mainstream novels like *Interstate Dreams*, *Perpetuity Blues* and other short story collections, and wildly funny novels of mystery and suspense like the unforgettable *Pink Vodka Blues*. Indeed, I often wish I inhabited the alter-