

BAD NEWS

BAD NEWS

EDITED BY

RICHARD LAYMON



CEMETERY DANCE PUBLICATIONS

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FIRST EDITION

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED
TO

STEPHEN KING

the man whose artistry
and success have inspired
a generation of writers

the true chronicler of our age.

“The King’ ain’t always Elvis.”

—R. Laymon

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Matt Johnson and John Skipp, whose antics inspired me to take a shot at putting together this anthology.

Thanks to Richard Chizmar for immediately agreeing to publish it... even before he knew I would ask him for a story.

Thanks to all the fine authors who contributed stories and biographical sketches that'll make this a memorable book to everyone who reads it, and to the talented artists who have made it great to look at.

Also thanks to Ann and Kelly for the many ways they assisted me during the process of putting this anthology together. Not only did they help with computer and clerical matters, but they kept me from goofing up on certain matters...and their suggestions influenced several of my decisions about who to ask for stories.

—R. Laymon

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INTRODUCTION

I was asked to be a Special Guest at the 1998 World Fantasy Convention in Monterey, California. As a result, I attended it. There, I had a fine time being interviewed in a huge and nearly vacant auditorium by John Pelan. I was not invited to participate on the panel about vampire novels, but did get to be on a panel about the value of maps in fantasy novels. Also, I attended some fine parties.

At one such party, my wife (Ann) and I accompanied Matt Johnson (publisher of Obsidian Books) on his errand to track down John Skipp. It had to do with an anthology Matt would be publishing, *Mondo Zombie*.

In the lobby of the hotel, we encountered John Skipp. Matt and John discussed the business matter. The details escape me, and aren't relevant anyway. What I vividly do recall is much bouncing, hopping and deep-bowing on the part of John along with wild laughter, shouts and giggles by all of us. I also recall being worried that the hotel staff might kick us out.

Somewhere during that rowdy hour or so in the lobby, an anthology called *Haunted Pants* reared its head. I'm not sure who originated the title, but we all considered it a GRAND one. (Did I mention we were

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sorta blasted at the time?) We joked about John Skipp editing *Haunted Pants*. I vowed to contribute a story. When we returned to the party later that night, I brought up the anthology to several other writers. They all laughed and said, "Sure, I'll write a story for it."

Of course, it was all a big joke.

Sort of.

Upon returning home from the convention, I started to take it seriously. I know a lot of people who are wonderful writers. I could ask some of them for stories....

And so I decided to volunteer to edit *Haunted Pants* if John Skipp didn't want to do it.

Seemed like it might be a lot of fun.

But also a lot of work.

At just about the time I decided to go ahead with it, the thought struck me: *If I'm going to do an anthology, why one that's a send-up? Why not put together a serious bunch of scary stories?*

So I threw out the idea of doing *Haunted Pants*.

After giving the matter some thought, I came up with the title, *Bad News*.

I once wrote a short story called "Bad News" about a guy who brings his morning newspaper into the house only to find that it has a nasty, bite-happy critter lurking inside. The critter burrows through the family cat, goes after the people...

I wanted only the title. It seemed just right for a collection of nasty tales by a gang of the nastiest-tale-tellers of our times.

Of course, no title is perfect.

Bad News might mislead some folks into thinking it's a book about journalism. Tales of terror about television news anchors...perhaps running amok when the TelePromTer goes on the fritz...or splitting open

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the head of the beautiful but ditsy co-anchor who reads a news item out of turn.

But it's not about anything like that.

I never intended for *Bad News* to have any "theme" at all.

That's because I take a certain perverse pleasure in going against popular trends.

I've been told that anthologies sell much better if they have a unifying "theme."

That is, all the stories should represent different takes on the same subject, such as zombie love, vampire detectives, stalkers, slashers, lesbian cannibals, or what have you. I've had stories in many such books, myself. I have nothing against themed anthologies. Except for the fact that everyone now *expects* anthologies to have themes.

When first I contacted the writers for *Bad News*, I explained, "My anthology has no real theme. It's to consist of original short, scary fiction by people whose writing I like...Anything frightening or awful should do the trick." Upon hearing that, several of the writers came back at me with, "Are you *sure* there isn't a theme?" They couldn't seem to believe it.

Loosely speaking, of course, the anthology does have a theme.

The theme is expressed by its title.

Bad News.

"Oooo, bad news, dude."

"I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

"Watch out for that bastard—he's real bad news."

"Which do you want first, the good news or the bad news?"

In this anthology, every story deals with characters who are bad news...or they're good people who encounter someone or something that is very bad news indeed.

And the bad news in these stories is just about as bad as it can get,

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because I chose authors who can deal it out mercilessly. They are hand-chosen by me. My own SWAT team of writers who aren't afraid to spill some blood...and other bodily fluids.

Don't get me wrong. This book is not a gore-fest. Certainly, it contains some grisly stories and some sexually explicit material. Primarily, however, the stories are full of memorable characters, unforgettable incidents, weirdness, suspense, fright and terror, humor, and even some heart. They've got a bit of everything. As I knew they would, because I know the people who wrote them.

This was an "invitation only" anthology, and I invited only authors whose work I know and respect. I've met all but two of the writers. The two I haven't yet met in person (Ed Gorman and Richard Chizmar) are people I've gotten to know through many long telephone conversations over the years. I consider all the contributors to be not only fine writers, but my friends.

They have written their own "biographical sketches" which can be found just before their stories. (Please remember: *I didn't write any of it!*—just my own and part of Ed Gorman's.) I asked the contributors to say whatever they wanted. So that's what they did. In some cases, the bios are as much fun as the stories.

But I always planned to say a few words at the expense of each writer, myself. So here goes. In alphabetical order:

Gary Brandner. One of my oldest friends. I've known Gary since the days of the Pink Tea writer's group. His second story appeared in the same issue of *Ellery Queen* that ran my first story. He wrote *The Howling*, in case anyone doesn't already know that. He's a funny, tough ("Everybody gets dead, kid"), swaggering, hard-drinking, straight-shooting macho guy who rightly despises political correctness and phoniness in all their forms and believes "Ya gotta write true." I call him Gare. He calls me Dickie.

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Richard Chizmar. As the founder and publisher of *Cemetery Dance* magazine, Rich's name was familiar to me before I actually got to know him very well. He published a few of my stories in anthologies, reprinted one in his magazine, and rejected an early version of my novella, *The Wilds*, which he later published.

Gradually, I got to know Rich better and found out what a terrific guy he is. He's open, honest, down-to-earth, funny, and obviously has wonderful taste in literature. In the past few years, he has become the primary publisher of my hardbound books in the United States.

Until recently, I was only vaguely aware that Rich was not only a publisher, but a fiction writer. When I read his short story collection, *Midnight Promises*, I discovered that he is an outstanding writer. His stories are clear and tough...but he isn't afraid to let some tenderness show through. A horror writer with real heart (in addition to the one he keeps in the jar...to paraphrase Robert Bloch and Bloch-quoter King).

Simon Clark. Simon is a South Yorkshireman. He and I have the same literary agent, the great Bob Tanner. I first heard of Simon when Bob sent me a copy of *Nailed by the Heart*, wanting a blurb. I started reading the novel out of duty to Bob...and suddenly I was hooked. I've been hooked on Simon's writing ever since. Not only does he create wonderful, true-to-life characters and put them into horrid situations, but he has a very singular gift of bestowing chills.

I had the pleasure of meeting Simon at the 1999 World Horror Convention in Atlanta. He's not only a wonderful writer, but a great guy. Very cheerful and friendly and modest and fun. We asked him to help judge the infamous "Gross Out Contest" and I think I caught him blushing now and then. Mostly laughing, though. You can't help but like Simon. And you can't help but think *Yikes!* (frequently) when you read his stuff.

Geoff Cooper. The wild man. "Break out the duct tape, we're takin' hostages!" We first met Geoff at the 1998 World Fantasy Convention in

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Monterey. Then, at the 1999 World Horror Convention in Atlanta, while waiting near the hotel lobby doors (a lot of lobby hanging out at these conventions), we spent about an hour talking with him. As he leaped around like Tigger, we talked of many things. Turns out we share similar attitudes about certain social/political matters, among other things.

We saw a lot more of Geoff at the convention and have stayed in touch via the internet. When I decided to ask a couple of newcomers into *Bad News*, we (me, at the urging of Ann and Kelly) decided to give Geoff a try. Turns out, he's not only a really terrific and funny guy, but he's a wonderful writer. After accepting his contribution to *Bad News*, I got to read a manuscript of his unpublished novel, *Belialian*. He's real good. We'll all be hearing a lot more from Geoff Cooper.

Ed Gorman. Having just described Geoff as Tigger, it seems mandatory to mention Eeyore in connection with Ed Gorman. Ever since I've known Ed, he has reminded me of Eeyore...He's not only modest about his achievements, but self-deprecatory. *Well, it's not that good. But it's mine.* In fact, Ed is so much better than he seems to think he is that it's almost funny. (I hope he's starting to catch on to how good he is...the rest of us figured it out a long time ago...and he's won all these *awards!* The awards should be clues, Ed!)

As the founder and publisher of *Mystery Scene* magazine, Ed has helped many writers (including me) become better known. He has also edited numerous anthologies, and he has made a name for himself as a writer of crime/suspense/mystery/noir fiction, western fiction, horror fiction, and mainstream fiction.

Ed taught me the concept of "grace notes." And he has shown by example how to do them well. When he writes about a rain storm, for instance, you can smell the rain.

His writing can be very dark...sometimes too dark for publishers to deal with. But he writes lovely rainbows.

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Rain Graves. When I decided to invite a couple of “newcomers” to submit stories to *Bad News*, Rain came to mind mostly because of a selection she read at the 1998 Phoenix World Horror Convention’s Gross Out Contest. I’d been asked to be a judge of the contest along with the renowned trio of Edward Lee, John Pelan and Jack Ketchum. Rain had earlier distinguished herself with a “stupid human trick” in which she grabs the front of her neck with one hand and wiggles her trachea back and forth...considered gross in its own right. When she read a few pages of her fiction to the audience, I found that she could write, too. Though she hasn’t had much published yet, she came through with a fine, memorable tale for *Bad News*.

Rick Hautala. Rick was the star of Zebra Books back in the eighties. As I recall, he was their best-selling author and making very good money. At a Stoker weekend in Redondo Beach back in 1991, during the HWA’s business meeting, Harlan Ellison ranted against Zebra and everyone who sold books to Zebra. In response to the rampage, Rick behaved like a true gentleman. Which he is and remains. I met him at that Stoker weekend, and found him to be a terrific, friendly guy. He’s been away from the field for a while, and I’m delighted to find him now making a strong come-back. CD recently published a powerful new novel by Rick, *The Mountain King*...a shocker that felt *way* too real.

Nancy Holder. I don’t recall the circumstances of my first meeting with Nancy, but it was probably about ten years ago at a signing or a convention. She was (and is) intelligent, friendly and funny. Nancy is also one of the best writers around. I think so, and my opinion is apparently shared by most of the members of the Horror Writers Association. Nancy probably knows how many Stokers she has won, but I lost track some time ago. In recent years, she has been devoting much of her time to Buffy...the one who slays vampires.

Jack Ketchum. Jack Ketchum and I knew each other before we knew

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each other. How is that possible? I worked briefly as an editor for *Don Pendleton's Mystery Magazine* and the *Ed McBain Mystery Magazine* back in about 1974-75. The magazines were apparently backed by the Scott Meredith literary agency. When going through my old stuff recently, I found my "time sheet." It showed that I had written a letter to Jack Ketchum...or to the person who uses that pseudonym. Recently, I discussed this with Jack. Turns out, he was a literary agent back in those days—and my contact with Scott Meredith.

Our paths crossed more significantly when I read his novel, *Off Season*, which bore a remarkable similarity in subject matter and tone to my own novel, *The Woods Are Dark*. The two books were written on opposite sides of the country, by writers who didn't know they knew each other, and were published in the same year.

Ever since then, I've been a big fan of Jack Ketchum's work. When he made references to me in *Open Season*, I wrote to him. I also made references to his name in my novel, *In the Dark*. Slowly, we got better acquainted and we finally met for the first time at the World Horror Convention in Phoenix in 1998. Now, I feel as if we've been friends for years.

Though Jack Ketchum often writes of monstrous subjects, he is one of the most open, friendly people I've ever met. And one of the funniest. He drinks, smokes, cusses, seems to make friends with everyone he meets, and (without misbehaving very much) manages to make himself the life of the party everywhere he goes—party or not. My wife and daughter are crazy about him. So am I.

Edward Lee. This is another great guy who goes under a pseudonym and writes very nasty fiction. In fact, as far as I know, *nobody* has ever written material any more vile and disgusting than Edward Lee. He has written scenes that would nauseate a maggot. And he's proud of it, I'm sure. (With good reason.)

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But to pigeon-hole Edward Lee as a purveyor of such extremities (and enormities) would be a mistake. When he wants to, he can write powerful fiction that doesn't sicken. I recently read his short story collection, *The Ushers*, and wrote about it, "In *The Ushers*, Edward Lee writes with gusto, guts and brains. There's heart, too. While hearts and other assorted innards are being torn out by characters in his stories, his own heart obviously bleeds for the world's victims of injustice, stupidity, greed and cruelty. He is a clear-sighted social critic who doesn't flinch away from telling it like it truly is."

Edward Lee's new novella, *Operator "B"* (published by CD) is a brilliant piece of writing.

I had the pleasure of meeting Edward Lee at the World Horror Convention in Phoenix in 1998. Because of his reputation, I expected him to be an oddball. I should've known otherwise. In my experience, all the best writers of the nastiest fiction seem to be the nicest, most normal-appearing people when you meet them in real life. (The reverse is also true, but I won't get into that.) Edward Lee turned out to be a terrific guy. We had some drinks by the pool, talked about writing and other things (I really like his politics). I haven't seen him since Phoenix, but I've read most of his books since then and I'm eager for the next, and the next.

Bentley Little. If all Bentley ever wrote was *The Mailman*, he has earned his place in a Horror Writer's Hall of Fame—if there were such a thing. But *The Mailman* was only the first of many powerful, significant novels he has created.

I first met Bentley at Dean Koontz's house in 1988 when we got together to count ballots for the very first round of Stoker awards. Bentley was accompanied by his girlfriend, Wendy, whom he would later marry.

Bentley seems to be very soft spoken and shy. After he won a Stoker a few years ago, we tried to convince him to attend the post-banquet

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party. We almost dragged him. But he wouldn't go to it, no matter what. He just wanted to haul ass outa the joint.

While he *seems* like he might prefer to hide away like a hermit and have no attention drawn to himself, this is deceptive. Under that placid surface, Bentley is a really aggressive trouble-maker. Sort of like the guy in his book, *The Ignored*.

As with so many others in this anthology, Bentley has a social conscience that gets strongly outraged. If you want to see how he works it into his fiction, just read *The Store*.

John Pelan. I heard about John Pelan long before I met him...heard dark whispers about infamous horrors that he, in conspiracy with Edward Lee, were perpetrating between the covers of books such as *Splatterpunk* and *Goon* and *Shifters*. Eventually, I got around to giving his books a try. And I was hooked. They're full of odd characters, energy and fun...along with some occasionally stomach-turning descriptive passages.

John has also written some fine fiction on his own, but not nearly enough. That's because he's a busy guy. In addition to his fiction writing, he holds down a full-time job, is the one-man small publisher of Silver Salamander Press, and is busy editing several anthologies.

I met John at the Phoenix World Horror in 1998. Again, going against all my experiences in such things, I'd thought he might be a weirdo. Of course, he wasn't. Though he does look rather like a cross between a Hell's Angel and a Deep South Wrestling Conference champ, he is soft-spoken, cheerful, funny, extremely well-read, and one of the nicest guys I've ever known.

Ann and I got to know John and his wife, Kathy, much better in late 1998 when John and I did a reading at Alan Beatts's Borderlands Books in San Francisco...then drove together to Monterey for the World Fan-

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tasy Convention. Now we feel as if we're old friends, and we're looking forward to the next convention so we'll be able to see them again.

Tom Piccirilli. Though I'd been aware of Tom earlier because of his activities as a small press publisher, I didn't meet him until the mass autographing that took place at the Phoenix World Horror Convention in 1998. Later that weekend, we went on an "adventure." I drove myself, Ann, Kelly, Tom, Matt Johnson, and Jack Ketchum on a long voyage through the streets of Phoenix to Ruth's Chris Steak House. Where we had a "civilized" dinner—as much as a dinner *can* be civilized with three nasty horror writers and a "Crazy Matt" Johnson at the same table. Much talk of mayhem ensued. Jack Ketchum suggested we ought to kill the waitress... "She's too f***** perky."

Tom made quiet, hilarious remarks throughout the dinner. It was later that night at a party in Jack Ketchum's room, however, when Tom really showed his colors. Sitting with Ann, Kelly, Matt and I, he quietly provided color commentary on the various nearby writers and their shenanigans. Proving that he not only had a great sense of humor—and sarcasm like a Bowie knife—but that he shared many of our own views on the antics we were observing.

Since that night, we've been friends.

Many months later, Tom came to my defense against some ugly-ass bastard who attacked me on the Masters of Terror message board. He did a spirited job on the "fan," and took a lot of heat for it, himself.

Tom's the sort of guy it's nice to have in your corner. Not only does he have the sharp mind and tongue and the will to fight, but he looks strong enough rip off heads.

He seems, however, to be a very peaceful fellow who relegates the ripping off of heads to his fiction. I've read most of his novels since meeting him, and I wrote the introduction for his massive collection of short fiction, *Deep Into That Darkness Peering*. While I enjoy his colorful char-

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acters and the occasional bits of humor (mostly very dark), much of his fiction is strange and disturbing and often has a nightmarish quality that makes me think, “Oh, dear God!”

Bill Pronzini. Bill is more famous as a mystery writer than as a writer of horror, but he has done outstanding work in both areas. *Night Screams* (written with Barry N. Malzberg) and *Masques* are a couple of real chillers.

In the early eighties, Bill edited a series of horror anthologies for Arbor House that should be close to the hearts of all horror readers. It included such titles as *Creature!*, *Mummy!*, *Voodoo!*, and *Werewolf!*

Back in those days, I was a member of the Mystery Writers of America. At the Edgar Awards in New York City in 1980, we did some partying with Bill Pronzini, Bill and Marie Chambers, and some others. At some point, Bill asked if I would like to write a Sasquatch story for his *Creature!* anthology. So I wrote “Barney’s Bigfoot Museum.” Bill not only accepted my story, but gave me some excellent and welcome editorial advice about how to improve it (one of the few times *that* has ever happened).

At the time, I’d only sold a handful of short stories and *The Cellar* had just been published. Bill was the first person to ever *invite* me to write a story. So when it came time to do *Bad News*, I decided not only to ask Bill for a story—but to invite a couple of newcomers in, just as Bill had invited me into *Creatures!*

Because of doing this anthology, we have gotten back in touch after about twenty years. I’ve just read Bill’s new suspense thriller, *Nothing But the Night*, and it’s wonderful: moving and dark, with grim goings-on, surprising twists of plot and a feel of impending doom of the sort you get with only the best writers of noir fiction.

Roman A Ranieri. When I first joined up with the Horror Writers of America, many of the more established horror writers were either ignor-

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ing or shunning me (hard to tell the difference). That's when I first got to know Roman. Back in those days, he was one of the few friendly faces. We ended up hanging out together quite a lot. I remember having lunch at Lindy's with Roman and Allen Rogers and a couple of others. Though we never really got to know each other very well, I always liked Roman and enjoyed his company. He's a good, solid, down-to-earth guy, what Gary Brandner would probably call a "straight arrow."

I wasn't very familiar with Roman's writing, however, until recently. (I actually don't read great amounts of short fiction, preferring novels—and Roman hasn't had a novel published yet.) But while reading an anthology last year, I stumbled upon a story by Roman. It was a simple, straight-forward story with great power. Impressed the heck out of me. So I figured a story from Roman would be a major asset to *Bad News*. It is.

Lucy Taylor. I'd been hearing about Lucy Taylor for quite a while before I ever got around to reading any of her fiction. Sometimes, it takes me a while to get "up to speed." Though Lucy and I had gone to some of the same conventions, I never met her until the Phoenix World Horror Convention in 1998. There, by the outdoor pool, I was introduced to Lucy by Jack Ketchum. Never at a loss for the right thing to say, I blurted, "We've never met, but I've sure heard a lot about you." Duh.

By now, I've read enough of Lucy Taylor's fiction to see what all the fuss was about.

Her collection of short stories, *Painted in Blood*, is full of stories so good that some of them almost seem to fulfill the oxymoron "instant classic." You read them, you know they're masterpieces.

Then there's her novel, *The Safety of Unknown Cities*, which won a Stoker for first novel in 1996. It is beautifully written, nightmarish, exotic and erotic. A few months ago, I told some friends "you'd think it was written by Albert Camus."

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Edo Van Belkom. Edo lives in Canada, but I first became a fan of his writing when I read his vivid, accurate descriptions of the San Francisco Bay Area in his novel, *Wyrms Wolf*. I went on to read Edo's short story collection, *Death Drives a Semi*, about which I wrote, "Edo packs a punch. Terrifying, gruesome, darkly amusing and often shocking, his stories come alive with vivid writing and a ring of truth. I'm eager for more."

We'd corresponded a bit. I didn't really know Edo, but...in January, 1999, Edo and his wife, Roberta, informed me that a move was afoot to remove my short story collection, *Fiends*, from the shelves of the public library in Brampton, Ontario, where Roberta works. Apparently, a patron had read the book, found it objectionable, and filed a written complaint. On the advice of Edo and Roberta, I wrote up a "defense." It was later presented to the library board, and the librarians decided to allow my book to remain on the shelves. According to Roberta and communicated to me by Edo, they were favorably impressed "that you were a librarian and that you responded personally to the situation. Also, they were impressed that you have a masters in English since the complainant also had a masters in English." (The guy who wanted my book torn from the shelves of a public library had a Masters Degree in English? What are they teaching? Hmmm.)

Anyway, I thought it was great that Edo and Roberta took the trouble to get involved in the situation on my behalf. A couple of stand-up people. We had the pleasure of meeting them at the Stokers weekend in 1999, and sat at the same table during the banquet in which Edo and I, both nominated for Stokers, both went down in the flames of ignominious defeat. And laughed about it together.

F. Paul Wilson. Last in my little write-ups due to alphabetical order. But in my estimation, one of the best writers in the business. *The Keep* made my personal list of 10 Favorite Vampire Novels in my memoir, *A Writer's Tale*. His medical thrillers are first-rate...But when he writes

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horror, Katie bar the door! Paul has written some of the most frightening, horrifying, creepy scenes ever put on paper. There were times when reading his novels and short stories that I really didn't want to know what would happen next...but had to keep reading, anyway.

F. Paul Wilson and his wife, Mary, sat at the same table as me and my wife at the Horror Writer's of America banquet in 1989. It was the Tor table. Paul and I had both been nominated for Stoker awards. Children weren't allowed to attend the HWA banquet, so our daughter Kelly had stayed in Gary and Martine Brandner's room until the meal was pretty much finished. Then she came down to watch the awards ceremony. She was nine years old at the time. When she joined us at the table, Paul offered Kelly his dessert. It was such a nice thing to do....

But Paul is most definitely a nice guy and a real gentleman. I would say that he is a "class act," but I don't want to use the word "act."

I'm especially pleased and honored that Paul wrote a story for *Bad News*. I don't want to say that he's in a different league from the rest of us...but he is.

That concludes my "go" at the writers who are represented here. They're all fine people and superior writers or I wouldn't have asked them to be in this book.

I am tempted to conclude this rather lengthy introduction by proclaiming that *Bad News* is like a box of chocolates. I might indeed make the statement, with appropriate nods of appreciation to the great Winston Groom, but I've stumbled upon a more apt analogy.

Bad News is like a jar of mixed nuts.

Salty, crunchy, tasty...many different flavors but all of them somewhat nutty. Some of them might make you feel a little nuts yourself.

So get yourself a beverage, go to a secluded place, open up the jar and dig in.