

Bill Rea ? Clowning around

Clowns have been in the news a lot lately, and not in a terribly positive light.

Clowns are supposed to represent happiness and joviality. They have been around for centuries. There have been countless stories of Court Jesters who served monarchs. Their jobs were to offer amusement and a good laugh for their masters. I have read of Will Sommers, the fool who enjoyed an almost fraternal relationship with Henry VIII.

The stories we have been hearing of late involve people dressing up in clown costumes and lurking around schools in order to frighten children. There are others.

For a couple of years in the 1990s, there was a clown named Doink, who performed in the World Wrestling Federation. He was a bad guy.

I once (and only once) watched a movie called Killer Clowns, and the name of this picture tells you pretty much what the plot involved. The reason I only watched it only once is I generally have little time for horror movies, unless the acting is good or the plot is halfway intelligent. This film failed on both levels. The 1933 version of King Kong this most certainly was not.

There have been other stories of clowns being evil. I guess they can be considered the results of someone's creativity.

It is a fact that there are some people who are afraid of clowns. That condition even has a name, coloruphobia.

It shouldn't be too surprising. I have encountered it.

Many years ago, when I was covering my first occasion when the circus came to town, I was chatting with one of the clowns. I noticed he had been very tentative when it came to approaching children, and he explained that he had to be very careful when getting close to young kids, making sure not to frighten them.

I can understand that.

Clowns are supposed to be jolly people, but the way they're made up can make them look considerably different. Sometimes things that appear just a little different can be frightening for a child who simply doesn't know better. And just because there's nothing to be afraid of doesn't mean we should not appreciate the fear.

When I was very little, like I mean before I even went to school, I lived near what today is known as Bloor West Village in Toronto (if you're into trivia, that in time became the first BIA in Ontario). My mother used to do a lot of shopping along Bloor Street, dragging me along because, well that's what mothers did in those days. I remember there was one store along the route that had a mannequin in the window depicting a boy in a cowboy suit. I will go to my grave wondering why, but that mannequin scared the hell out of me. When we walked by that store, I would either look down, or across the street. My mother was aware of my fears, and one day, in what I recall as being one of her parental boners, she picked me up as we were passing the store, and carried me to the front window, where the mannequin stood. I guess her plan was to try and show me there was nothing to be afraid of. But if the fear is irrational, why should rational behaviour be expected to work? All I remember of that incident is I freaked, screaming as loud as my little lungs would let me.

To my mother's credit, she never tried that procedure again.

And so it doesn't come as a big surprise to me that some people are afraid of clowns.

There has been an oil painting of a clown that has been part of my life since I was a kid. It was one of my father's most prized possessions.

He used to travel a lot to Europe on business in the 1960s, and spent much of his time in Paris. Being interested in art, he hung around Montmartre (in the shadow of the Sacré-Cœur) a lot, where artists congregated.

One evening, on his way to dinner, he spotted a painting of a clown. The face depicted a sad clown, and it was one of those portraits in which the eyes follow you, no matter from what angle you view it.

A picture of the clown appears here (no, not the bearded guy with the glasses ? that's me).

My father approached the artist, and soon got into a haggling match. The artist was not about to back down, and my dad was not a man who caved easily. They parted, and my father went off to eat. The problem was he couldn't eat because, as he explained with great gusto later in his life, some SOB was out there buying his painting (I used the acronym SOB because this is a community newspaper ? be well assured my old man used the full monty). He paid for his half eaten meal, rushed back to Montmartre, found the painting was still there and bought it with no argument. In the years that followed, he often said it was a move he never regretted.

I think I was seven when that sad clown's face was first displayed in the living room of the house I occupied and it was a little disconcerting to walk into the room and know I was being watched. I wasn't frightened (this was a painting, not a mannequin), but I was mindful. And thus, when it was explained to me by a clown, I had no trouble understanding why some kids might be afraid.

My mother took charge of the clown when my father died 24 years ago this month, and 12 years later, when she passed away, it

became part of the estate. My brother is somewhat more artistic than I, and I was fully expecting he would put in dibs for the clown. I was also ready to go along with it. Thus I was a little surprised when he insisted that I take it. I'm finishing this column on my laptop, sitting at my kitchen table this Sunday morning. The clown is in the living room and looking at me as I type. I'm no longer apprehensive. It's just a clown.

