



## The Red Empire and Other Stories

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## **The Red Empire and Other Stories** Joe McKinney

Joe McKinney's debut collection, The Red Empire & Other Stories, brings together eight tales of haunted policemen and cosmic horrors...

A chance encounter with a homeless man one hot summer night opens the doors of perception for a Houston beat cop...

Genetically engineered fire ants threaten to devour a small Texas border town, and the only thing in their way is a grief-stricken county man...

## **The Red Empire and Other Stories Details**

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## From Reader Review The Red Empire and Other Stories for online ebook

### Ray Wallace says

(Originally published at chizine.com)

A violent thunderstorm, a cop killer on the loose, and an army of genetically modified, giant fire ants; put them all together and what do you have? The Red Empire, the titular tale of Joe McKinney's short story collection, *The Red Empire and Other Stories*. Here we follow a number of different characters including a recently widowed young mother and her daughter, the latter temporarily blinded after undergoing a cornea transplant. There's the aforementioned cop killer who, while being transported to prison, is set free due to a set of very fortunate circumstances. And there's also the local doctor who, after experiencing a recent tragedy of his own, becomes obsessed with the idea of rescuing the blind girl from the marauding army of killer ants. All in all, *The Red Empire* is an entertaining tale with plenty of action and enough horror elements to fill a number of smaller tales.

Next up is *Blemish*, a dark and emotional story that centers around an ex-cop who is haunted by the ghost of a young woman he failed to protect years earlier, leaving him incapable of having any sort of real relationship with the woman he loves. *Cold Case* is the true story of a police officer killed in the line of duty during his second day on the job back in 1900, an interesting piece of investigative reporting by Mr. McKinney although it does feel a little out of place here. *The Old Man Under the Sea* is a fun foray into historical fiction involving Ernest Hemingway, who falls in love with the beautiful daughter of a powerful Cuban businessman and helps in the search for her missing cousin. A search that takes him beneath the waters surrounding the island and far beyond to a place he could have never imagined.

*The Millstone* relates the tale of a woman whose life spins out of control when she comes home from work one day to find that her boyfriend has been brutally murdered. In *Empty Room* we encounter the collection's weakest and most predictable offering, as a man is continuously haunted by the sound of a crying baby. And then we come to *Burning Finger Man*, probably the strongest story presented here; the day to day tedium of a beat cop patrolling an apartment complex is disrupted by a series of bizarre sex crimes perpetrated by a man with the ability to seemingly vanish into thin air. The final story, *Eyes Open*, has more than a touch of the Lovecraftian, and centers around a cop who gets involved with a cult that worships an all-seeing deity.

One of the things that jumped out at me as I made my way through *The Red Empire and Other Stories* is that the author, Joe McKinney, sure knows his police work. So it didn't come as much of a surprise to discover, while reading his biography at the end of the book, that he is a sergeant with the San Antonio Police Department. His experience certainly pays off as far as instilling his characters (many of whom are police officers) and their actions with an air of believability, particularly noticeable with *Burning Finger Man*, the entirety of which takes place while the main character is on duty. Overall this is a solid collection, if a bit uneven in places, which is somewhat inevitable with books of this nature. Not every story can be the greatest story ever written, but there are three or four here that definitely make *The Red Empire and Other Stories* worth checking out.

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### William M. says

Author Joe McKinney, best known for his zombie fiction, takes a detour with "The Red Empire", showing us that a very small enemy can be just as deadly. This pulse-pounding novella reminded me of Jack Ketchum's

Off Season and Offspring, where the suspense builds slowly, until eventually, the intersecting characters are tossed together into a pressure cooker that is ready to explode.

McKinney is relatively new to writing, having started professionally in 2006, but you would never know that reading "The Red Empire". He writes with confidence and clarity and never shies away from the painful scenes he has to write when his characters are put in harm's way. He has a great talent for developing characters, building tension, and then throwing those characters into a bowl of liquid hellfire. His strategic economy of words allows the reader to cover a lot of ground very fast, creating a whirlwind pace that makes it difficult to stop reading.

In this latest book, McKinney describes some fascinating concepts about the killer ants. The "rafting behavior" was a frightening but realistic trait that was perfectly used to demonstrate their intelligence. And while I have no complaints with the story, I would have loved to see this as a full length novel, or even an ongoing series. However, that's just me being greedy because I had so much fun reading it. "The Red Empire" was everything I expected and more and is one of my highest recommendations so far of 2011.

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### **Ryan Daley says**

Sergeant McKinney supplements his excellent title novella with an impressively diverse collection of shorter pieces; ghost stories, crime tales, and even a non-fiction piece. But The Red Empire--which combines a devastating rain storm, an escaped convict, and mutant red ants--is easily the highlight of this anthology.

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### **James says**

A different side of Joe McKinney...

I purchased this one expecting to get some great zombie short stories from Joe McKinney.

I was honestly surprised after reading the first story, The Red Empire. No zombies to be found and I couldn't put the book down.

Joe definitely showed his writing flexibility with these stories. Each one kept me drawn in and turning the pages, reluctant to put the book down.

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### **Rebecca Besser says**

Joe McKinney grabs ahold of his readers and pulls them inside his stories. He makes sure he carries you along in his worlds so that the one around you fades away.

The Red Empire and Other Stories is made up of eight stories. I'll comment briefly on each:

Story One - The Red Empire: The first story of the collection is the longest. It's based on a military experiment that gets unleashed on the public. At the same time, a convict escapes. A young woman and her

daughter (who just had surgery on her eyes) have to deal with both. Luckily for them, one of their new neighbors cares enough to make sure they're okay.

Story Two - Blemish: A man is haunted by a choice from his past. He didn't step in when he knew that one of his old girlfriends was being abused by her new boyfriend. She ended up dead. He sees the dead girl's ghost...from time to time, and this costs him his sanity and his job. The regret and guilt over knowing he could have done something about it eats up his entire life. He meets back up with his main girlfriend from college who always seems to be taking care of him, but her dad dies, and for once he has to step up and take care of her. They decide in the end, that it's best if they take care of each other.

Story Three – Cold Case: A man who is joining the police force is awed by the pictures and stories of past servicemen who grace the wall. He becomes fixated on a certain one and vows to himself to find out what happened to him. He searches and searches, only to find out through old records what caused the man's death, but he was never able to find the man's grave... Still he searches.

Story Four – The Old Man Under the Sea: A man by the name of Ernest Hemmingway wins a boxing match and saves a rich man's daughter. He and the daughter stumble upon strange wreckage while strolling on the beach. The father appears and tells Hemmingway to stay away from his daughter, but he doesn't listen. In the morning, he is ordered by the father to assist them in finding out about the wreck, as it was his nephew's boat. Reluctant, but curious, Hemmingway goes. What he finds is completely beyond what he could have ever dreamed up.

Story Five – The Millstone: A woman comes home from work to find the police surrounding her house. Her boyfriend has been murdered. Her younger sister, who is beautiful and home all day, tells her that her boyfriend came in jealous and killed him. The woman tries to deal with her loss, but soon finds out that her sister had been having sex with her boyfriend. She ends up killing the neighbor lady when she shows her the murder weapon as proof. She kills her neighbor and her sister, and gets away with it.

Story Six – Empty Room: A man and his friend are outside a party, having drinks. The man starts talking about his failed divorce...and about ghosts. His friend listens and tries to comfort and reason with him. But, the man claims to be haunted and blows his brains out with a gun he has with him.

Story Seven – Burning Finger Man: A cop is assigned the slums, and he has to deal with everything that's going on, from drug dealers to crazy women with mentally retarded daughters who live in the complex. A rash of sexual assaults happen in the area and they can't find the man responsible. The cop finds the man's hiding place and blocks it off, but doesn't tell anyone. This leads to the people of the slums capturing the man and taking him down to the furnace room while he's on another call. He gets there in time to see what they do, and even though he pleads for them not to punish the man, he doesn't stand up to stop them either.

Story Eight – Eyes Open: A police officer and his partner try to help a homeless man. They succeed in getting him to a hospital right before he rips his own eyes out. He warns the officer that he's now marked and he'll be seen; soon his eyes will be open. The officer doesn't know what the homeless man means, but the next day his life begins to change. He ends up following homeless people into a barn...and something tries to attach him. After that, his eyes are open, and he becomes the crazy homeless man on the street that his old partner tries to take care of.

The Red Empire and Other Stories is an eclectic mix of heart felt and twisted stories. Each one has their own draw and pull. Of all of them...Blemish, Burning Finger Man, and Eyes Open are my favorites.

As far as technical errors, there was some missing punctuation and a couple missing words here and there.

## Geoff says

This book I rated as a four stars because it is just pure fun, but the work also seems to be researched well as it all seems plausible to a point. It tells of two disasters that occur in a huge rainstorm in Texas, one is about a convict that gets loose when the police car is overturned in the storm, and the other disaster occurs when a government project that was genetically altering red ants also crashes in the same storm and lets loose The Red Empire. The ants and the convict along with a unsuspecting mother and child are on a collision course that ends in chaos. I just thought it was fun, interesting, and horrific action packed read. Good stuff.

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## Nick Cato says

McKinney, best known for his Dead World zombie novels, here delivers a collection featuring a novella and seven shorts, most with a police-theme.

In the novella THE RED EMPIRE, a secret military bio-weapon is accidentally unleashed on a small town where a woman and her young daughter (who is recovering from having cornea implants) are trying to get home during a heavy rain storm. Adding to the problem is an escaped cop killer, who seeks refuge in the woman's isolated home. While the story is action-packed and will give you the willies, it's almost as if the killer-ant thing takes a back seat to the psycho/hostage drama. Good, if a bit uneven.

'Blemish' is a love/ghost story dealing with a cop who ends up leaving the force, and while I didn't find it spooky, McKinney's take on ghosts and lost love is well done. 'Cold Case' deals with a rookie cop who becomes fascinated with the story of a cop who was slain during his second day on the force...back in 1900. Why this short tale (which originally appeared on a true crime blog) was included in a horror fiction collection is anyone's guess.

My favorite piece here is titled 'The Old Man Under the Sea,' an addictive tale featuring Ernest Hemmingway in Cuba--fresh off a boxing match with Louis Lamour--who becomes enticed by a young girl, only to have her father threaten his life if he doesn't help him with a dangerous diving expedition. The suspense and mystery here never lets up, and McKinney handles this classic literary figure in a slick way.

'The Millstone' is a pointless trailer-trash outing about two sisters, their wacky neighbor, a cheating boyfriend, and an axe. Likewise, 'Empty Room' is a sort-of ghost tale about a suicidal would-be father. And a pistol. Both tales are forgettable.

The very-well done 'Burning Finger Man' pits a cop assigned to a housing project against an impossible-to-grab freak who molests women in the hallways then seemingly vanishes. Its cast of crackheads and hood rats gives it a genuine hood-film feel. The collection concludes with 'Eyes Open,' an apocalyptic/Lovecraftian yarn about a cop who becomes "enlightened" by a schizophenic homeless man about a coming calamity. I'm a sucker for cult-themed stories and this one's quite satisfying.

THE RED EMPIRE AND OTHER STORIES is all over the place, which is fine; but coming from a new small press dedicated to horror fiction, I was surprised to see so many non-genre stories in the mix. The good tales heavily outweigh the bad (and thankfully, the longer stories are the more memorable), so it's still worth your time. This is the first I've read from McKinney and it's easy to see why he has so much material out there.

## **Pete731 says**

The first story was the best. Awesome combination of trapped-by-killer and monster threat. The others were good, his experience as a police officer definitely informs his writing. Most of the time that's good, but occasionally he reads like a written report.

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## **Elizabeth A. says**

Though Joe McKinney has made quite a name for himself as a novelist, he was a 2009 Bram Stoker Award nominee, his collection *The Red Empire and Other Stories* was my first experience with his writing. I'm happy it happened this way, as the eight stories in the collection have given me a nice cross-section of what McKinney's capable of considering they run the gamut from horror to sci-fi to police procedural and even a non-fiction entry. A solid collection from top to bottom, three in particular jumped out at me.

"The Red Empire," the collection's namesake, is actually a novella, and a damn entertaining one at that. In the tradition of sci-fi films of the 1950's, "The Red Empire" finds a colony of fire ants the military has genetically engineered to be both over-sized and super intelligent accidentally set loose in a remote Texas border town during a torrential storm. Local Amy Bloom and her daughter find themselves cut off by a flash flood and at the mercy of nature, both natural and unnatural. Further complicating things, a convicted bank robber/cop killer who's being transported through the area uses the chaos of the storm to escape and makes his way to the Bloom residence. The events that unfold leave one wondering just which 'creature' poses the biggest threat.

"Cold Case" is a fascinating non-fiction entry which explores the circumstances surrounding the death of San Antonio Patrolman William Madison Lacey, who was killed in 1900 after only one day on the job. McKinney, himself a Sergeant with the San Antonio Police Department, digs deep to uncover a story that shows fact is often more fantastic than fiction... complete with a missing grave.

"Burning Finger Man" was hands down my favorite of the collection. San Antonio Housing Authority Officer Ben Cortman spends his days patrolling the Nelson Courts Projects, a collection of apartment buildings with more than their share of dealers and addicts, pimps and prostitutes. There's also the occasional crazy like old Margie Kerns who's convinced, among other things, that little men who live in her wall sockets sneak into her refrigerator at night and drink her orange juice. The majority of the people in Nelson Courts are decent, hard-working people though, a fact which gets slammed home for Cortman when a serial molester begins targeting women in the projects. One of his victims is Ashely, the deaf and retarded adult daughter of Margie Kerns. As Cortman watches the toll the unsolved attacks begins to have on the community, he resolves to do anything necessary to put an end to it. Things take a turn for the drastic, however, when the Neighborhood Watch also decides to take matters into their own hands. "Burning Finger Man" is a very well-written and developed exploration of what makes a community, the true meaning of justice, and just how far people are willing to go to achieve both.

Joe McKinney is an extremely versatile and talented author, and I look forward to exploring his other work. And if you're new to the McKinney party like me, *The Red Empire and Other Stories* is certainly a great place to start.

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## David Bernstein says

I love Mr. McKinney's zombie books and I was excited to read The Red Empire, a non-zombie tale. And like his other books, The Red Empire is just as great. The writing is superb, the characters fantastic and the story is something different. A throwback to the great horror tales of the 70's and 80's, but with a current feel, if you will. Yes, there are military ants--nasty buggers--that cause quite a havoc, but its still the people that make the difference in this story. This is a great read and if you like Mr. McKinney's other books then grab a copy of this. I couldn't put it down.

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## Deanne says

I received this book for free through Goodreads First Reads. As usual, I find myself wishing Goodreads had 1/2 stars. I would definitely up this rating to 3 1/2.

I had not read any of McKinney's other works nor did I know anything about them. I'm glad that I didn't because I probably wouldn't have given these short stories a chance.

These stories were all very different however the details and descriptions in each were consistently well done. The main story kept me up late to finish and could only have been more disturbing if there had been spiders instead of ants.

My favourite was the non-fiction piece, the tragic first day on the beat for a police officer in November of 1900. I wonder if McKinney will ever be able to get more details (I don't know how he could) so that the story can be concluded.

Not sure if I am up for any zombies but I would love to see more crime stories!!

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