



P.D. Cacek Interview



by
R. Michael Burns

*I first met “Trish” Cacek at World Horror Convention 2000 in Denver, Colorado. She wore a fashionable black dress and an ape mask. I stared like a geek and wondered if I should introduce myself. She was, after all, the first editor to accept one of my stories for inclusion in an anthology (the Horror Writers Association’s *Bell, Book & Beyond* from the Design Image Group) and was also a frequent and friendly e-correspondent. But she also had a creepy ape mask on. It’s surprisingly hard to introduce yourself to someone in an ape mask.*

Mask notwithstanding though, I introduced myself and have never regretted the decision. Trish took me under her wing and made a point of making me feel like a legitimate part of the rather heady WHC 2000 crowd, which included such icons as Dan Simmons, Dennis Etchison, Peter Straub and Harlan Ellison. Trish has been my unofficial mentor and tireless morale booster ever since.

Oh — and did I mention she’s a damn fine writer?

Take a look at her bio, at the awards she’s won, and you’ll get a sense. Read some of her stuff and you’ll know it for sure.

So, I’m thrilled to be able to present to you this e-mail interview with P.D. Cacek.

—R. Michael Burns

(Note: Various titles mentioned will be punctuated as per standard rules, but titles of P.D. Cacek’s works will also appear in all capital letters.)

CSFWG: To start, for the sake of those unlucky enough not to know you and your work, can you give us a quick bio?

PDC: Don’t suppose you could just make something up, could you? To be honest, I really hate talking about myself, but . . . okay, here goes:

P.D. Cacek was born in Hollywood, California and, once upon a time, had aspirations of being an actress. This dream of stardom was dashed, however, when — while playing Dinosaur Number 1 in her high school’s production of *By the Skin of Our Teeth* — she inadvertently crawled off the stage and landed in the orchestra pit. Dinosaur Number 1 died that night, but the experience did help put P.D. back on her true path, one which she had begun at age five: That of Horror Writer. One cannot live through an experience like that and not want to

write horror.

With her goal set firmly in mind, P.D. was one of two graduates of the Class of '73 to obtain a Bachelor's Degree in English/Creative Writing Option from the University of California, Long Beach – when last seen, the other recipient was working at Taco Bell. Keeping body and soul together through a number of “careers” as a Touring Guide (Telling people where to go and how to get there), Pre-school Teacher, Book-binder, housekeeper and a Starbuck's “Barista” (“It's only coffee, folks,”), P.D. nevertheless kept writing and, after threatening the All Mighty with, “If I don't sell something by the time I'm 40, I'm going to stop all this %@#!” she sold her first story at age 39 3/4.

Who says God doesn't have a sense of humor?

From that humble beginning, P.D. has had more than 200 stories appear in magazines and anthologies, and has won both a Bram Stoker and World Fantasy Award for her short fiction. Primarily a writer of what she likes to call “twisted reality,” she has penned a collection, LEAVINGS, two humorous erotic vampire novels, NIGHT PRAYERS and its sequel, NIGHT PLAYERS, and a modern tale of lycanthropy, CANYONS. Currently she is working on the second book set in New Hope, PA (“The most haunted township in America”) entitled REFLECTIONS THROUGH BEVELED GLASS.

And if this . . . and the following interview still haven't scared you off, you can check out her web-site at: Enjoy.

On Craft

CSFWG: First, the question that all of us who work in this genre probably have heard: Why horror?

PDC: Why? Well, have you ever been walking by yourself, late at night, and heard the leaves rustling along behind you . . . and then realized there was no wind? That's why. I enjoy being able to give my readers a chance to go back to their childhood and enjoy the same tingling, goose-bumpy feeling we used to get from watching Boris Karloff tromp around on platform shoes. It's all innocent fun, until someone puts out an eye with a chainsaw . . . and then it's a movie. “Horror,” as a genre, has gotten a bad rap over the years, which is probably why I'm asked this question quite a bit. Actually, “horror” isn't a genre. True, if a book or story is about werewolves, vampires, serial killers, things that not only go bump but gurgle in the night, it will be classified as “Horror” (or “Dark Fantasy” — which always made me think of elves in leather jackets riding Harleys). Horror is an emotion, something that reaches past all the barriers and finds the one dark corner of our self-image that has not grown up. Horror doesn't have to include dismemberments or gushing wounds or ancient demons dredged up by a new housing development. Anything, even a simple evening's walk, can be horrific if you look at it the right way . . . and I do.

CSFWG: Stephen King and others often complain about the second most asked question, “Where do you get your ideas?” “There's no idea bank,” they argue, “from which writers make frequent and secret withdrawals.” So I won't ask that dreaded question. Instead, I'll rephrase it like this: What sort of things provide inspiration for your stories? Do you seek out inspiration, or just let yourself stumble across it?

PDC: As I mentioned in the first question — I really don't have to go out “looking” for ideas . . . anything and

everything is a potential story, dark though it may be. Example: My story “THE GRAVE,” which appeared in 999: New Stories of Horror and Suspense, was inspired by a walk I took with a friend in the woods behind his townhouse. He walked that same trail every day since moving into his home, but didn’t notice a rather odd shaped rock until I pointed it out to him. The pink-colored rock was only about a foot off the trail, knee-high and shaped like a headstone. It was obvious that the rock had been there awhile, but my friend never saw it. The idea for my story started there and gelled by the time we got back to his place. I spent that night and the rest of the weekend writing the first draft. Another example: “THE MUSIC BOX,” which will be appearing in Cemetery Dance sometime later this year was inspired by a song. I listen to music while I write — generally classical or New Age (except when I’m writing about vampires – then I have to have Alice Cooper) — and one day, while I was at Office Max I picked up one of their Easy-listening “Music to Keep Employees Happy” CDs. I had no idea what the music would sound like, but it turned out to be very soft instrumentals. There was one piece that almost brought tears to my eyes and I found myself playing it over and over again. I finally set my player on “Repeat” and began writing. “THE MUSIC BOX” took all of eight hours to write, start to finish. When I finally checked the CD to find out what I’d been listening to, I discovered it was a traditional German folk song. “THE MUSIC BOX” is set in a German concentration camp.

I will tell you of the only time inspiration took it upon itself to stumble across me. If anyone has been to my web-site, they will have already read this, so I’ll keep it short: On my first visit to New Hope, PA, I was literally given the entire plot and list of characters for not only my novel NEW HOPE, but for the three other books which will, one day, make up the New Hope Quartet.

What can I say . . . inspiration happens.

CSFWG: What authors have had an influence on your work?

PDC: I’d have to list Ray Bradbury as the first author who influenced and inspired me. He can take the simplest, most ordinary items and turn them into things of wonder. Bradbury was the first author I noticed, next came Edgar Allan Poe and Bram Stoker. You’re surprised? I’ve also read everything by Ernest Hemingway and Charles Dickens . . . who, I supposed, do write “horror” (if you go back and check my personal definition of the word).

There are many current authors who inspire me, but I’d have to say Peter Straub heads the lists. He is an absolute craftsman in word and image. Ghost Story is and always will be my favorite novel.

CSFWG: Do you experiment with different styles of writing? Different genres? Are there any characteristics of your writing which you feel define the “P.D. Cacek” style?

PDC: This is difficult to answer as I’m never really sure, before I start, how I’ll actually write it. The story usually lets me know the style it requires. Does that sound like I should be getting ready for the nice men in the funny white coats? The genre stays pretty much the same, although in various degrees. My earlier work is a lot more visceral than the things I’m working on now . . . which, if you have to classify it, can be considered non-traditional, neo-Gothic (no, not Goth, Gothic . . . 19th Century ghost story stuff).

As for the “P.D. Cacek” style — I would have to say it’s my ability to immerse my story, and the reader, into whatever time period I’m writing about. Going back to my (unpublished) novel NEW HOPE, for example, I

have four “stories within the story,” each set in a different time period in American history. The first, “SHIN-GAS’ TALE” (which has appeared on the Chi-zine website and in my mini-collection IN THE SPIRIT), is set in pre-colonial Pennsylvania and I’ve tried very hard to keep the “flavor” of the time and people harmonious. The next story begins a few years after William Penn’s perchance from the Lenni Lenape Indians and, again, I use my background in Natural Anthropology/Archeology to make sure the speech patterns and manners of that time come through. I’m also pretty good, I think, at writing dialects and will do so at the drop of a story line.

Humor — dry, black or smart-assed — used to counteract a stronger emotion, is another characteristic of my “style.”

CSFWG: How do stories come together in your imagination – do you tend to start from a scenario and then discover the characters, or start with the characters and see what they do? Or does it work altogether differently?

PDC: NEW HOPE, and the three novels to follow, came to me, fully formed, no questions asked . . . but that was unique. Generally, I start with the scenario and title, then I write the last line. Regardless of how good I think a plot is, I can’t write it until I know how the story/novel will end. Once I know where the story ends, I can go back and take a closer look at the plot and characters because I now know who the point of view character has to be and what twists have to happen in his/her life to get to the finish line. This then allows me to explore my characters and their reasons without having to worry about where the story is going. I already know. I’ve written it down. <whew> Problem solved.

I’m not recommending this as a suggestion on how to write . . . it’s just the way I write.

CSFWG: How do you cope with writer’s block – or are you immune? (And if you are immune, what’s your secret?)

PDC: Lots and lots of drugs!

Or chocolate-covered cherries.

Okay, only joking (except about the chocolate-covered cherries). If you’re creative, occasionally you’re going to suffer the dreaded total absence of creativity. Of course it’s happened to me and it is the worst feeling in the world. The longest I’ve ever been blocked was for thirteen months — a record I never hope to break. My usual methods of combating WB — taking long walks, talking to other writers, chocolate-covered cherries, beating my head against the keyboard or nearest wall — didn’t work. To say I was a walking basket case would be kind . . . and I’m sure I was a real joy to be around.

Then I got an invitation to write a story. I can’t remember who invited or what the theme of the anthology was, but after a few moments of alternating between howling my despair to the sky and staring blankly at my computer screen . . . I wrote a last line. Not a great last line, but a line I didn’t immediately want to delete. An hour later I wrote a better last line and then began writing the story.

For those smaller, more manageable bouts, I’ve discovered that pushing myself to write something . . . anything helps. That, and chocolate-covered cherries.

CSFWG: Do you have a fixed writing routine, a time of day during which you work? Do you have a word – or page-count goal for each session?

PDC: Currently I'm a full-time (starving) writer, so I work from the time I get up (8 AM most mornings) to dinner (around 6 PM), Monday through Friday. Weekends I try to goof off with friends, unless I have a deadline . . . and then it's back to the 8 - 6 routine. I'm a hard boss to work for. If the work is flowing, I usually don't bother with page or word count, although I do try to "meet" a minimum of five pages per session (1250 words).

The only time I went far and above this was with my novel NEW HOPE. I was getting up at 6 AM and, after an hour's walk in the morning and dinner break, was working until 1 AM — writing between 2500 and 3700 words per session. After seven months I'd written 155,000 words.

That, I grant you, was unusual and felt more like I was taking dictation than creating.

CSFWG: Do you write notes before you start a story, or simply dive right in? Is it different for novels?

PDC: I did write notes for NEW HOPE, since it was almost eight months between the time I'd been "given" the idea and was able to move back to the area and begin writing. I also needed to know more about the history of the town and surrounding area. Depending on the story, I usually have a pretty solid idea as to what is going to happen and do my research while I'm writing.

Thank God for the Internet and sticky-notes!

CSFWG: About research — what sort do you do? You said above that you do your research while writing — do you do any before you start? After the first draft?

PDC: For novels or stories, especially if I'm going to be using a historical background or am setting it in a different culture, I do as much research before-hand as I need to feel comfortable and then start. I spent a number of months reading articles, watching films and speaking to the keepers at an animal rehabilitation center about the habits of wolves before I felt I understood *Canis lupus* behavior enough to begin work on CANYONS.

I also use the Internet while I'm writing. Waiting until after the first draft is completed to do research is like continuing to throw feed into the pen after you've eaten all the chicken. You might entice another chicken into the pen, but by then you won't be hungry.

Research up front — at least that way you'll know what you're getting yourself into.

CSFWG: Do you have any "secrets" for creating interesting, believable characters? Do you connect with your characters – and, if so, do you ever connect with the darker ones?

PDC: For the most part, I try not to create characters as much as I try to create "people" — individuals with real

emotions and feelings and fears. It's my God complex . . . combined with a real concern that any "character" I create would appear flat and one-dimensional. I try to make the people who live in my stories as real as the people I see every day. I do confess to being a People Watcher (not in a psycho-stalker sense) and take note of the way people react to certain things, how they walk or interact with one another, small things that we take for granted.

Writers need to observe – both externally and internally . . . so, yes, I do connect with my "darker characters." I have heard some writers disclaim their "Darker Half" (with apologies to Stephen King for lifting his title and idea) and have always wanted to know why they feel it necessary to say that. Okay, I'm sure there are some people out there who wonder if I like raw meat. I do . . . but have yet to sprout fangs and bay at the moon (unless you count that time in the hot tub in Phoenix, but that's another story). I'm a writer and, yes, I've created some pretty gruesome characters, but they had to be for the story. It's fiction, people, not real life. If it was real life, I'd have a guest spot on Jerry Springer.

Now, that's not to say I don't know there are monsters lurking inside me. There are and there has to be or else I couldn't write about them. I won't disown them because you wouldn't want them sitting next to you at the dinner table, but I won't embrace or defend them – they're simply characters I've created to make a specific point.

Do I worry about it? No, I let my readers do that.

But I do have to admit it's sometimes a lot more fun to write from my dark side. It gets away with murder. Literally.

CSFWG: What is the best part of writing for you? Why do you keep going back to the word processor?

PDC: What is the best part? The act of creating.

Why do I keep going back? Because there is nothing else I would rather do.

On Business

CSFWG: What's your opinion of the state of the horror market right now? How is it for newcomers?

PDC: Well, at least you didn't ask if horror was dead. It can't die. That's why it's horror.

Personally, and disregarding everything I've heard from nay-sayers, I think the horror market is stronger than it has been in years . . . and it's due in part to editors like Don D'Auria (Leisure), Tom Strauch (The Design Image Group), Stephen Pagel (Misha-Merlin) and John Turi (Medium Rare Books). And, in my humble opinion, the horror market couldn't be better for newcomers . . . however (you might want to start taking notes now) —

As I've already said, horror is an emotion that doesn't have to rely on "in your face and up your uh-huh" subjects. It can, but I have noticed that a number of new writers seem to think this is the only way they can convey the "true sense of horror." Bull-pucky (sorry if that was too intense)! Read some (if not all) of the masters and see how they conveyed the sense of dread. This is the starting point that a number of new writers overlook. Be-

ing able to write “gross stuff” doesn’t mean you can write horror. Study, my children, study and then take what you’ve learned and give it your own voice.

So endth the lesson.

CSFWG: What’s your opinion of “alternative” markets, such as e-zines, print-on-demand, CD-ROM, audio, and so forth? Are they the new way to get “in the door” – as pulp magazines were for writers like Bradbury and Ellison and Lovecraft?

PDC: I love the fact that there are more markets available for writers – that can’t ever be a bad thing. I’ve had stories in e-zines and CD-ROMS (which I hope one day to learn how to use) and have friends who’ve gone the Print-on-Demand route. These are all wonderful ways of getting “in the door,” but unlike the pulp magazines there is the potential of one serious drawback. The pulps had editors who were very demanding. Now, that’s not to say that all alternative markets don’t have editors who make General George Patton look like a wimp (no, I won’t give out any names), but there are a number of . . . shall we say less reputable Print-on-Demand publishers who will print anything for a price. And this has given PoD books the same sort of reputation Vanity Press books have — ‘Oh, that book really must suck because no real publisher wanted it.’ It’s sad, but true.

Bottom line: I think a new writer should check out these alternatives to the New York publishing scene, but, as I have written on my business card: Caveat Lector — let the reader beware. Do your homework and do it carefully.

CSFWG: So then — how do I go about doing this homework? How can we find out who’s reliable and reputable and who isn’t?

PDC: Writers should always check a publisher’s guidelines and find out how much the advance is. A writer should get something “up front” — working for a percentage of the sales is risky and should send up a red warning flag. If a publisher doesn’t have enough money for a reasonable advance (reasonable being at least a three-digit number), they probably won’t have much money for publicity . . . which means the book could easily be overlooked by the reading public. Also, if a publisher charges the author a “reading fee” or if the guidelines list an “option package” — listing prices for what sort of book the author can have — the author might want to reconsider the publisher.

A look at a publishers Book List, Author List and, above all, Book Reviews can also give the hopeful author a hint of the publisher’s repute.

CSFWG: What’s your take on writer’s organizations like the HWA, the SFWA, etc? Are they helpful to beginning writers? Are they helpful to established writers?

PDC: I wouldn’t be a member of both aforementioned organizations if I didn’t think they . . . have potential of being great. Unfortunately, as with any organization, there is a lot of “internal politics” that can get in the way of the original purpose — which, I believe is to provide its members with a strong support group as well as market reports. Being a new writer is hard — I remember that feeling all too well — and belonging to a group

of people who share your interests and goals is very helpful. I have felt, however, that organizations need to do a whole lot more for their new authors, such as providing seminars, workshops (more than once a year) and more mentoring programs. I've always felt that writers belong to one big family — probably the only family where people don't look at you funny when you mention how much trouble you're having with a particular character.

Thus far, I've only mentioned new writers . . . so, what benefits can a writer's organization provide an established writer? The same. A writer should never feel too established — tastes do change and we, as writers, must keep learning what those tastes are.

CSFWG: Have you ever been part of a writer's workshop group? If so, did it help you creatively and professionally?

PDC: Yes I have, two as a matter of fact: The first in Northern California (The Melville Nine), and one in Denver, Colorado (the Northern Colorado Writers Workshop – with such literary stars as Connie Willis, Wil McCarthy and Edward Bryant). In fact, I'm currently setting up a monthly workshop because I believe so strongly in the benefits it provides the working writer.

Having a group of other writers go over your work not only provides free editorial service (and I'm still terrible at finding my own typos), but it lets you “bounce” your work off people who know what works and what doesn't. I have to admit that both my experiences with workshops have been good, but I have heard other stories that can only be classified as real horror. If you're in a workshop that seems to stress the negative aspects of your work without offering any constructive criticism — get out. If you find yourself offering more de- than constructive remarks, you may want to do a little self-examination as to why you're in the group.

Writing groups should be designed to help, and I can honestly say that both my groups have done that. First and foremost, they wouldn't let me get away with anything! The members of my writing groups were my first and toughest audience, but I know I'm a better writer because of them. God bless 'em!

CSFWG: Those who've taken a gander at your bio know that you edited the Horror Writers Association's anthology *BELL, BOOK & BEYOND*, a collection of short stories from HWA members who had not achieved the association's professional status (including a tale from your humble interviewer). How did you approach the task of editing the book? What was the experience like? Did it in any way change your perspective as a writer? Did it change your opinion of editors? (Dare I ask what your opinion of editors is?)

PDC: Last question answered first: I have nothing but praise and respect for editors . . . and that has nothing to do with the fact that I'm currently a “Ghost Editor” for — well, let's just say an alternative to the larger New York publishing houses. Granted, I've had my share of “not so nice” things to say about editors who reject my work and am fairly sure a number of Affiliate members whose work I rejected had similar things to say about me (How DARE you!), but editing, especially for an anthology is brutal. Every story I received for *BELL, BOOK & BEYOND* showed promise and talent . . . which made it all the harder. It did finally come down to which story I liked and thought showed the subject of “witches” in a new light.

To be honest, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I had been an editor for a couple of small press magazines before this, so knew the basics, but I hadn't planned on so much opposition to the idea of putting together

an anthology for new or lesser known writers. This “resistance” only spurred me on, so I was well into standing amid a pile-o-manuscripts by the time I looked down and went “Oh boy, what have I gotten myself into?” And by that time, it was too late. So, you asked how I approached editing the anthology: With blind terror. I felt I had a major obligation to both the organization and my writers to prove the nay-sayers wrong.

And I think the authors of *BELL, BOOK & BEYOND* did just that.

As for the experience itself — it was the hardest thing and the most fun I’ve ever had and I would love to do another.

CSFWG: Any cautionary tales you’d like to share with we newbies – and even the experienced folks out there?

PDC: I don’t know if this would qualify as a tale, so let’s just call this a caution: Don’t listen to anyone who doesn’t write on how you should write. There are a number of people in the publishing field who (they will tell you) know exactly what will and will not sell. I’m sure they do, but if they don’t write they can’t understand that writing is more than just a living. It is a life unto itself and should not be confined or constricted by whatever the current trend is. I write non-traditional stories that are, I’ve been told, extremely difficult to place. Okay. I know I can write something vanilla and easy-to-digest, they are only words on paper . . . and that’s exactly what it would be: Words on paper without a soul or any shred of character.

Write from your heart, your soul or wherever your inspiration abides, but never from your ears. And if vanilla is your favorite flavor — add sprinkles to liven it up.

CSFWG: What, for you, would, will or does constitute a “successful writing career?”

PDC: I could say being rich and famous like Stephen King and J. K. Rowling . . . but I only write dark fantasy, I try not to live it. So, for me, a successful writing career is being able to write the things I want to write and having someone, somewhere enjoy them.

CSFWG: Any parting comments?

PDC: Dream. Hope. Write on!

CSFWG: Thanks for taking the time.

PDC: My pleasure.



R. Michael Burns is a member of the Colorado Springs Fiction Writer’s Group. He is currently instructing students in Japan. Mr. Burns’ Publications have included the short story “Celia” in *Bell Book and Beyond* and others.