

Scott Ruddick's 1998 Interview with Robert Devereaux

SR: When - and why - did you decide to become a writer?

RD: The start date of such things is always fluid, always subject to memorial reconstruction. I wrote my first story in fourth grade, a silly little thing called "The Monstery, Monstery, Monster Story." Most likely it was in response to having been read aloud two horror stories by Mr. Haley, one of which was "The Monkey's Paw," the other a ghost story I've never been able to track down. I dabbled in writing at Oberlin College, where I had two one-act plays produced. Then a bit more in Montreal (1971-73), where my first published story (no pay) appeared in a magazine called ALIVE! It was while I was working on my doctoral dissertation at the University of Iowa (circa 1980) that I also researched OEDIPUS AROUSED, my first completed novel manuscript, which was cobbled together a few years later and landed me my first New York agent but no book contract. Meanwhile I was busily at work on SANTA STEPS OUT and on attempts at the short story, mostly in horror and fantasy. So I suppose my decision to launch into the odd waters of fiction writing, and the marketing of same, occurred somewhere in the late eighties.

SR: Tell us about your first professional sale.

RD: My first published horror story (again no pay, but quite an honor at the time) appeared in Dave Hinchberger's OVERLOOK CONNECTION catalog. That was my werewolf story, "Running with a New Pack." If by first professional sale is meant the one that first involved the payment of professional rates, that would be "Fructus in Eden" in PULPHOUSE 9, a hardback devoted to dark fantasy. "Fructus" is my Adam and Eve story (no, no, really, it's good, don't roll your eyes). Its premise, toying with Milton's view of the fall: "Suppose God had forgiven their first transgression, and their second?" It's available online, a proud freshman effort. I had the chance to meet and hang out a little with my first editors, Kristine Kathryn Rusch and Dean Wesley Smith, when I stopped in Eugene on my way back from attending Clarion West 1990 in Seattle.

SR: In your opinion which three writers have most influenced the horror genre in the past ten years?

RD: If only I had the godlike power to answer such a question! I have no idea.

SR: How about personal influences? Are there any writers you consider mentors or role models?

RD: Literature is a constant dialogue with itself. The exuberance of DEADWEIGHT, my first published novel, was fed by the existence of Rex Miller's SLOB, the kick-ass energy of David J. Schow's "Jerry's Kids Meet Wormboy," and the moody chiaroscuro of darkness laid down by the

masterful brush of John Webster in *THE WHITE DEVIL* and *THE DUCHESS OF MALFI*. The wider one's knowledge of the infinite net of world literature, the richer and more widespread the works that influence one's own fiction. As for mentors, I suppose the men and women who have most clearly played this role in my career are Dennis Etchison, Gene Wolfe, Jeanne Cavelos, David G. Hartwell, and Patrick LoBrutto, though many others along the way have been sustaining and supportive.

SR: What writers have influenced you the most?

RD: The word "influence" has its roots in emanations from the stars. So those writers most influential to me are the ones whose works have astounded me at one time or another, consistently or sporadically. These would include Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante, of course, and many other dramatists and essayists of the English Renaissance. More recently, I'd cite Dostoevsky, Vladimir Nabokov, Russell Hoban, David James Duncan, Nicholson Baker (pre-VOX), and Cormac McCarthy. Extend the definition of writer to include composers and you'd have to add Richard Strauss, post-LOHENGRIN Wagner, Bartok, Beethoven, Mozart, and Bach. This, in no way, is to rank my work with any of these. Influences are those creative icons that inspire one always to raise one's sights higher.

SR: What do you like the most about being a writer?

RD: Following the flutings of the imagination in its interplay with what has come before. Tasting the well-turned phrase, being pervaded by a sense of gratitude when such manages to spin out from the morass of mundanity that daily surrounds us. Meeting other souls who cherish and nurture the creative impulse, theirs and mine.

SR: And what do you like the least?

RD: The impoverished culture we live in in the USA. It really ought to be easier to make a living as a writer in this country. No writers, indeed no creative artists outside of the top echelons of pop music and the flicks, are revered as they ought to be by sufficient numbers of people. Writers provide the pulse, the heartbeat, of a healthy community. Ireland lets them live tax-free. Small towns in Europe are rich in culture. But ours is an ailing society, one that elects, and elects again, the odd lot of pinheads and geeks, troglodytes like Helms and Barr and others of a proto-fascist anti-cultural bent, eructators on congressional benches who squeeze dry schools and libraries, who starve the arts to make the world safe for the pince-nez. Read *OUR DUMB CENTURY*. You'll get the picture.

SR: When do you write?

RD: Early mornings. I rise at 4:30 or 5:00, write a few hours, then head off to my day job. At lunch hour, on a good day, I mull into a notebook.

SR: What projects are you working on now? What can we look forward to in the future?

RD: I'm finishing up my first screenplay. I can't say much about it, as I'm bound by contract not to, until (perhaps two years hence) the film is made and released. But I am excited about the prospects for the film in question. The task of learning how to write screenplays has been a delightful one, though I don't plan to write another any time soon. When the big studios beat down my door, then I'll be happy to take vast quantities of money from them and oblige. After the screenplay is wrapped, it's back to novels. Although darkness may make its sometime appearance, my fictive mood these days is far more bright, and I'm looking forward to dwelling more among the mountaintops of human potential and less in the darkling vales.

SR: How do you write?

RD: I establish, in my notes, a latticework of story and plot. I'm the kind of writer who needs that sort of overview to be certain that the completed work has a clear sense of direction and dramatic unity. In the course of making these mind-maps, the **way** of writing, so that style fits the substance, comes to me.

SR: Have you seen changes in your writing as your career has progressed?

RD: Vast changes and subtle. Every new work I write takes on a whole different flavor from what has gone before. What seems common among all my projects is an ever burgeoning confidence. What is true of me is true of anyone who writes: No one has my own peculiar voice but me, and it's being true to its inner sounds which brings the highest quotient of personal satisfaction to me and to my readers, ergo the greatest potential remuneration. Now the money is not and cannot be the goal. But it does buy freedom, and I'm waiting (and my does the wait seem long) to reach a place where I can afford to purchase said freedom and devote far more of my time to creative endeavors than is currently possible.

SR: What is your personal definition of the word "Horror." What makes people so fascinated with it?

RD: I can't define it and prefer, actually, to avoid such terms. There is only the story, and the writer's task is to be true to the characters whose story it is. I'm sure many things draw readers to the literature that has come to be known as horror or dark fantasy. One is that it doesn't flinch from the less pleasant sides of the truth; it doesn't sugarcoat the human condition. Now, one can turn to Emile Zola for the squalor and misery of human existence. But adding the uncanny to the mix really focuses the mind on these aspects of living, reveals their grandeur, dares to play with volatile stuff, even accepts and celebrates what, in waking life, is rightly condemned as not-

niceness. It is an acknowledgement of the complete definition of humanity, and as such, it carries with it the freeing breath that accepts imperfection. Jung spoke of this, as did Ursula LeGuin in the Earthsea trilogy. As for those fascinated with "horror," it's my hope that they not limit their sights to simply this. The vistas are so much broader. Richard Strauss would have been a dull boy indeed if he had repeated ad infinitum the depravity and obsessiveness which pervade SALOME and ELEKTRA.

SR: A general consensus seems to be that horror writing - in both quality and readership - is on the decline. Do you agree? Why?

RD: I have no idea if horror writing is on the decline.

SR: Your first novel, *Deadweight*, was about Karin, a victim of paternal and spousal abuse who finds she can raise the dead. In *Walking Wounded* the protagonist Katt is a woman in a bad marriage who has healing powers that she uses to solve her problems with her husband. Two novels, both whose chief characters are troubled women in difficult circumstances. Quite a stretch for a male writer to write from a women's point of view. How do you handle it?

RD: The passions are genderless. All of us hate, fear, long for love, provide nurturing or scorn, grapple with problems or flee from them. Storytellers have always written of characters who differ from them, have approximated the mindsets of aliens, extremely rich or poor people, oldsters, monsters, the really sick in the head, the really saintly. The secret is to be true to the character. Of course, what emerges will be inevitably tainted by one's own values and concerns. I can never really *know*, in the deepest sense, the joys and anguish of being female, being black, being gay, being a devil, being an angel. But creative re-imagining gives one the chance to glance along such spheres of being in intriguing tangents.

SR: In fairness your work is not all doom and gloom. A lot of your work touches on issues of spirituality. Is religion or spirituality an important part of your personal life?

RD: Codifications of value are double-edged. Definitions of spirit beguile and invite, as does any sort of creative invention. They crystallize community, connectedness, which is all to the good. But if one takes them too seriously, they split one off, demonize The Other, become demonic themselves. Organized religion is anathema to me. Yet ritual has its value. It lets one state, in poetic terms to oneself and one's loved ones, what is of import, what one fully commits to. Spirit means breath in Greek. In that sense, spirituality is all there is. But it's a spirituality full of life, vivid, in the now, impossible to pen in, as indefinable as the sea's majesty.

SR: Something I didn't know about you until I began researching this interview but - you have a Masters in computer Science and a Ph.D. in

English literature. How does such an accomplished academic career segue into a career as a craftsman of horror writing?

RD: Degrees are outcroppings of doggedness. I was too long a mongrel in the world of doctorates, though the bones of old plays gave me rich gnawings that I regularly mine in my fiction. As for the masters degree in computer science, it landed me my current day job, which pays handsomely and surrounds me with splendid work colleagues and friends.

SR: What do you consider to be your best work?

RD: In long fiction, "A Slow Red Whisper of Sand" from Poppy Z. Brite's LOVE IN VEIN and "Holy Fast, Holy Feast" from John Mason Skipp's MONDO ZOMBIE. In novels, I love all my offspring but my order of delight goes somewhat thus: SANTA STEPS OUT, DEADWEIGHT, ICE GHOUL DAZE (unpublished), OEDIPUS AROUSED (unpublished) WALKING WOUNDED. In short fiction, I have too many favorites to name.

SR: Where do you see yourself in five years?

RD: This must remain my secret. I dream very big, you see. Envisioning direction, particularly in a culture unsupportive of the artist, is well nigh essential. I love to spin off possibilities, no limits, both in my work and in my life. Out of these emerge directions toward those possibilities, some of which paths I then choose to take. The challenge is to stay focused, to rededicate oneself to the work, to nurture one's relationships, and to take to heart the reminders that all of it is ephemera, and that one can never be too kind to one's fellow travelers.

SR: Poppy Z. Brite has written that "I wish I could hope to ever attain one thousandth the perversity of Robert Devereaux's least toenail clipping." Now that's a compliment worth savoring! But it brings up a good point - much of your work has been somewhat controversial and featuring numerous scenes of graphic violence. Your critics decry this as gratuitous. Do you worry you can go too far with scenes of violence in a piece of horror fiction? And why do you rely so heavily on such violence?

RD: Why is it that ice-cream scoopers and fast-food servers everywhere put out coy jars for gratuities, yet the same is devalued in fiction? My occasional dollops of graphic violence are to be viewed as an added bonus, the extra dollar under the plate. And who are these damned critics? Let them decry to my face! But seriously now, my work in fact (with the exception of "Grace Under Pressure," alas, which I now disown) contains no gratuitous violence. It all serves an artistic purpose, as much as the ten-minute love song to a severed head in Strauss's SALOME. The writer must above all be true to the depiction of character. If one of my actors in a novel is totally depraved, then I'd better be damned sure I get in touch with the potential for depravity in me and in my readers and unflinchingly depict that character's depravity of

thought and deed. But violence must always serve some purpose beyond itself, and so it is in my work. In fact, I have done with the depiction of excessive violence. I'm pleased that one critic referred to DEADWEIGHT as "AMERICAN PSYCHO with a heart." But once one has had one's say in that arena, it's time to move on. Far more intriguing paths lie ahead for me.

SR: In this vein, do you think it is getting harder and harder to shock or surprise the reader of horror fiction?

RD: I don't. Let's widen the scope to all readers. What do readers want? To be delighted, on a sustained basis. The worthiest novels, poems, plays, and screenplays do that. From whence comes that delight? From the artist's being true to his or her emerging creative vision, to the gestalt of the work as it germinates, gestates, unfolds red-faced, wet, and wailing from the womb. To shock readers is cheaply done. To surprise them? That is by far the greater challenge, and the worthier. And how does one do that? By being open always to surprise in oneself, by risking paths off the beaten one, by daring, by challenging oneself. One of the screenplay books I read suggests that if it seems obvious that a character is about to say or do X, chances are your audience also senses X upcoming. "Startle them," it advises. "Don't be content with the bovine lull of the obvious. Life is far richer than that. People react in unexpected ways, ways which, on hindsight, make perfect sense." If one keeps oneself open, there always appear new ways to surprise, ergo delight, the reader of any sort of fiction.