

Author Michael Prescott recently spoke with *Fiction Fix's* Shannon Riggs about writing the psychological thrillers *COMES THE DARK*, his best-selling first novel, and *STEALING FACES*, his new release.

**FF:** Who were your early literary inspirations? Who do you like to read now?

**MP:** The first thing that probably inspired me was a short film that our class was shown in elementary school. It explained the life of a writer--specifically, the author of a children's book about a hermit crab. I think the book was called *PAGOO* or something like that. What I remember was a close-up of the author crossing out a word in his manuscript and writing in a better word as a replacement. I found this very interesting--the idea that you could work on the story word by word and get it exactly the way you wanted it. Of course I was only eight or nine years old at the time . . .and already a control freak! So I think it was the editing, the detail work, that appealed to me at first.

I liked dinosaurs, so later I read a lot of dinosaur books; my favorites were Edgar Rice Burroughs' *PELLUCIDAR* series, which concerned a world of dinosaurs and cavemen at the earth's core. In high school I read mainly science fiction. The big names back then were people like Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, and Harlan Ellison. I have to admit that high school literature classes didn't fire my imagination at all. I hated *MOBY-DICK* and most of the other classics we were forced to read. As an adult, I've come to appreciate some of the classics, particularly Shakespeare and the ancient Greeks, but I've still never been able to bring myself to reread *MOBY-DICK*! I'm not sure that force-feeding difficult books to kids who aren't ready for them is the best way to cultivate a love of reading. On the other hand, many of these kids may never look at a literary classic once they're out of school, so the teachers probably figure this is their one shot. In college I went through a period of really liking Ayn Rand's books--I read them all and was very taken with her philosophy, Objectivism. But eventually I moved away from her views somewhat, because I came to see them as cultivating a rather rigid, emotionally stunted personality, and stifling creativity. A friend of mine once put it very neatly when she said that Ayn Rand as the ultimate spokesperson for the left hemisphere of the brain. The left hemisphere, loosely speaking, is the center of logical reasoning and methodical, step-by-step analysis. But there's the right hemisphere to consider as well -- intuition, symbolism, feelings, holistic thinking or pattern recognition, and grand creative leaps. I've come to feel that it's a mistake to put too much emphasis on either aspect of human nature; what's needed is a balance. I'm not sure any system of philosophy has found that balance. Maybe that's a job for the next century. Some of the authors I read now include Michael Connelly, Thomas Perry, and Stephen Hunter. I enjoyed many of Ken Follett's earlier novels--books like *LIE*

DOWN WITH LIONS and THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH. Stephen King is another writer who's been a big influence on me and on nearly every writer of "dark" thrillers. His book CUJO is one of my favorites. It has a compactness and a sense of realism that appeal to me, and the plot unfolds like the inexorable workings of fate.

**FF:** How long did it take and how difficult was it to get your first novel, COMES THE DARK, published?

**MP:** I sold the book on the strength of a proposal, which ran about 13 pages. Selling it was not difficult, but actually writing the book was quite a chore. I expected it to run about 400 manuscript pages, and the first draft was only slightly longer. But my editor wanted a lot of things developed further, and in the rewrite the book grew to more than 550 pages. These changes improved the book and were very worthwhile, but I was worn out when I finished.

**FF:** Does an agent represent you? If so, at which point did you seek your agent?

**MP:** My agent is Jane Dystel, of Jane Dystel Literary Management in New York City. I sought out an agent after establishing some writing credits in other fields. I wrote freelance magazine articles for a while, and I also worked in the low-budget end of the movie business as a screenwriter. I didn't enjoy either job very much. Magazine writing pays almost nothing unless you get a staff position. Movie writing seems glamorous, but not when you're given one week to write a hundred-page script, as I once was. The other thing about movie writing is that you rarely get to do your own ideas; you usually have to develop whatever story the producer has in mind. Anyway, I used my credentials, such as they were, to pitch myself to New York agents in an unsolicited letter, and that's how I obtained representation.

**FF:** What was the most challenging aspect of writing about your villain, Robert? Did you have to do much research in psychology for this character? Who is your favorite villain in literature?

**MP:** The most challenging thing was that Robert Garrison is supposed to be brilliant, a genius, yet he practices an archaic pagan religion that probably would strike most people as rather silly. My original concept was that he simply believed in the pantheon of Greek gods and goddesses--Hera, Zeus, Athena, etc. But I couldn't convince myself that any modern person, even a psychotic, would take these colorful figures literally. In the course of researching ancient religions, I learned that Greek mythology was largely an offshoot of an older, primordial

religion centered on the Mother Goddess. I also learned that the British poet Robert Graves, an eccentric genius in his own right, believed literally in the Goddess. So I read Graves' main work on the subject, a rather difficult nonfiction book called *THE WHITE GODDESS*, and got an insight into how a highly intelligent, modern man might come to take this ancient religion seriously and even practice it. I also learned that Goddess worship persists today in some circles, though I gather that its practitioners vary considerably in their commitment, with many just doing it as a political statement. So this is the kind of research I did -- not research into psychology, exactly, but into the philosophical or theological outlook of the character.

What really interested me about this research was how mythic and ritualistic patterns have persisted across the centuries. For instance, cave paintings and stone carvings from the Paleolithic Era show a shaman wearing horns and an animal hide, leading worshipers in a dance. Read Euripides' play *THE MAENADS* (a.k.a. *THE BACCHAE*) and you'll see how the Dionysus cult was simply a further development of this primordial religion. Then fast-forward to Shakespeare's England, and read eyewitness accounts of "witch cult" rituals; it's the same ceremony, led by the same satyr-like figure. So this basic pattern has continued unchanged for more than 8,000 years! The image of the horned man persists even today, in such things as Mardi Gras masks and popular depictions of the Devil.

The same is true of Goddess worship, which is part of this age-old religious tradition. (The horned man was the Goddess's consort and an intermediary between the ordinary worshipers and the deity.) The Goddess religion started in the Stone Age and has continued, in various permutations, down to the present day. The Christian Church tried to stamp out all vestiges of the Goddess, but the old patterns re-emerged as Marianism, i.e., devotion to the Virgin Mary. Mary was eventually given the title of the Queen of heaven, the same honorific used for the Goddess. Most of the Goddess's temples were rededicated to Mary. These images, ideas, and rituals are so persistent that one wonders if Jung was right in thinking that there are archetypes hardwired into the human brain. In any case, the more I learned, the less far-fetched Robert's obsession with the Goddess started to look. By the end, I was beginning to wonder if he was on to something! As for my favorite villain in literature, there are several possibilities. Iago in Shakespeare's *OTHELLO* is probably the most influential villain ever created by an author. He certainly helped to inspire Milton's portrait of Satan in *PARADISE LOST* -- another great, larger-than-life villain. On a lighter note, Ian Fleming came up with some brilliantly inventive villains for his James Bond books -- Dr. No and Goldfinger comes to mind. Dracula, in the novel by Bram Stoker, is a terrific villain; no movie has ever captured all the dimensions of the character.

So I guess I like villains who are kind of melodramatic and operatic, bigger than life in some way. Hannah Arendt famously talked about the banality of evil, and I think in most real-life situations, her observation holds true. The challenge in creating a fictional villain is to do a portrait of evil that is not banal.

**FF:** Which approach would you recommend for new writers, still developing their writing styles: over-writing and cutting back or getting the basics down on paper and then embellishing later on?

**MP:** Frankly, I have no good answer for this, except to say: Do whatever works. In my own case, I started off writing screenplays, which have very little description and no introspection. In writing a novel, I had to force myself to learn those techniques and then use them to flesh out the text. I think William Goldman has said that screenplays are compression, and novels are expansion. (He's been successful in both media.) When I was getting started, I tended to put down the bare bones first -- such as the dialogue--and then add descriptive and emotional details in the rewrite. But for another writer, the opposite approach might be called for. I'm wary of anybody who tells you that there is only "one right way" to do it.

**FF:** Do you keep a writing journal? If so, can you tell us about it--what kinds of things you write there (images, characters, scenes?), and how often? Do you work on one novel at a time, or do you have several projects going at once?

**MP:** I don't keep a journal, other than the notes I scribble to myself when I'm doing the research or writing the book. Usually if I have a problem with the book, I start writing out the possible reasons. This often yields quick results. For instance, if I find a particular scene boring to write, I'll scribble, "This scene is boring to me because..." Then I'll just start writing possible answers one after the other, like brainstorming. One of those answers (often the first one) will actually be correct (i.e., "because it's too similar to the scene ten pages ago," or "because we already know this expository material, so it's unnecessary to repeat it"). The answer is frequently obvious once you see it before you, though it eluded you until then. But I don't think of this as a journal; it's too haphazard, and I don't keep the notes. As for multiple projects ... no, I do only one novel at a time. I can't even think of another story until the current one is finished. Splitting my focus doesn't work for me, although it does work for some other writers, who switch from one project to another with ease.

**FF:** Have you ever written short fiction? If so, how would you compare or contrast it with writing novels?

**MP:** As a kid, I read a lot of short fiction. Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison have both worked primarily in that format. But as an adult, I seem to have lost my taste for it. I prefer reading novels now. I think John Gardner has said that writing short stories doesn't help you to learn how to write a novel, because the two formats are so different. A short story is a sprint; a novel is a marathon. This is probably true, although you can at least practice techniques like writing dialogue or descriptive passages in a short story, and if you can get it published, it's a big morale boost. But if you can't sell it, don't despair. The market for short fiction is so limited today that it may be easier to sell a 400-page novel than a 4-page story!

**FF:** How do you decide on which point of view to write from? Do you have a personal preference, or is each piece different for you? What about in your reading--do you prefer reading one POV over another?

**MP:** I generally avoid reading fiction written in the first person. There are exceptions -- I've enjoyed Steven Saylor's series of mystery novels set in ancient Rome, all written from the point of view of his irascible detective, Gordianus the Finder. But mostly I dislike first-person narratives. I can't imagine writing any long piece of fiction in the "I" voice. It feels too restrictive to me, too confining. Sometimes I write a scene from one character's point of view, and if it feels flat, I try it from the point of view of somebody else. This can make all the difference. For instance, if a man and woman are arguing, and it doesn't work when written from the man's point of view, try it from the woman's.

Generally speaking, if there is danger in the scene, you want to be in the point of view of the endangered party. That's where the suspense comes from -- being in that person's shoes. So if an ax murderer is chasing a housewife through an abandoned shopping mall, you want to be the housewife, if possible. Her reaction is where the terror is focused, so it's where the reader's identification should be focused, as well. Of course, there are always exceptions.

One rule of thumb is to stick with one character's point of view for the duration of the scene-- don't jump back and forth between the housewife and the ax murderer without indicating a scene break. But this is not a hard-and-fast rule. Robert McCammon, just to name one successful writer, violated it all the time, no doubt intentionally. In *THE STAND*, Stephen King starts out just using one point of view per scene, but as the characters' lives become increasingly interconnected and they start to establish a "group identity," he begins to interweave their points of view within the same scene. Again, whatever works.

**FF:** Where do you come up with your plot ideas? Where did the whole religion and mythology theme come from in COMES THE DARK?

**MP:** It came from my interest in the subject. I'd read a few books on the Greek myths, and I'd read the ancient Greek tragedies and the ILIAD and the ODYSSEY, which are the greatest literary presentations of those myths. I had not gone deeper into the origins of the Greek religion until I started seriously researching the book.

How did I come up with the plot? That was a rather odd experience. I had thought of a few elements of the story but couldn't see any way to put it together, so I just forgot about it. Actually, I got frustrated, fed up with thinking about the whole thing, and simply put it out of my mind. I went to bed thinking that I would never come up with a decent story idea. The next day, as I was doing some chores around the house, I suddenly had the urge to try again. I powered on my laptop computer and started typing a synopsis. And the words just came. The title, the characters, the setting, the theme, the several parallel plot lines, and all the main plot twists--everything just came to me. It was as if I was simply typing, and someone else was doing the actual writing. A few times I started to slow down, and then I would say aloud, "What's next?" And, boom, the pump would be primed again, and more words would come. When I finished after an hour or two, I had a complete synopsis that contained all the essentials of the story. Before I sat down, I had nothing workable at all. Nothing like this has happened to me before or since. I know that the obvious explanation is that my subconscious put the story together while I slept. This may be true, but I wonder if it isn't a rather facile explanation. Subconscious" is a catchall word like "instinct." (How do birds know when to fly south? Instinct. What's instinct? It's what tells birds when to fly south...) Perhaps it would be more precise to say that the right cerebral hemisphere, which excels at pattern recognition and symbolic insights, put the story together while my logical left hemisphere was busy with other things. Even this seems like too prosaic an explanation. In any case, if you want to know where I got the idea for COMES THE DARK, the answer is -- out of nowhere!

**FF:** Do you find it easier or more challenging to write believable characters of the opposite sex? Can you share any tips for writing across gender lines?

**MP:** I think it's actually easier to write female characters, because women are generally more open about their emotions and can show a wider range of feelings. You can have a female character that becomes very upset and starts to cry, then pulls herself together -- and she can still be tough, can still be a hero.

Try doing that with a male character. Imagine Philip Marlowe crying in his office because he's having relationship problems, then going off to solve a crime. It probably won't work. Men, particularly heroes, have to operate in pretty restrictive emotional straitjackets. This limits their vulnerability and their accessibility. They tend to be stiff, reserved, and therefore relatively uninteresting. At least I think so. Many writers, I'm sure, would disagree. To take just one example, Michael Connelly has done a great job with his continuing character, Harry Bosch, a cop who's tough and strong but hardly unemotional. But it's awfully hard to pull off a characterization like that.

Male villains, on the other hand, are easy to write. They're nuts, or at least wildly grandiose, so they can have any kind of thought or feeling. In general, I like to play off a really scary, dangerous male villain against a smart, strong, but emotionally vulnerable female protagonist. That combination seems to work best for me.

**FF:** Can you describe your revision process? Do you revise as you write or do you plod through to the end and then start revising from the beginning? Do you have any advice for a new writer who has just completed/is close to completing their first novel's first draft?

**MP:** I revise each scene after writing it, but then I go over whole sections of the novel and revise again. Once it's all written, I review it and revise again. Then I get editorial feedback and, you guessed it, I revise again . . .

When you finish your first draft-- celebrate! I usually order a pizza. As celebrations go, this is pretty boring, but it's what I do. Then, if possible, take a little break--a week or two. Put the book out of your mind. Go to the movies. Play tennis. When you take a fresh look at the book, expect to feel a little disappointed with it at first. In your editing" mode, you may tend to be super-critical and see only mistakes. It's good to remind yourself of all the good things you've done with the story. On the other hand, if you see only good things and keep telling yourself it's a masterpiece, you're not being critical enough! Cultivate the little voice in your head that will tell you, politely but honestly, where the book needs work. That little voice is the one essential difference between a professional writer and one who is not yet a pro.

I'm not saying you can ever achieve complete objectivity with regard to your own work, but you can try to be as objective as possible. Remember that the main thing is simply to tell the story. If you have wonderful stuff in the book that you really love, but it doesn't advance the narrative, it may have to go. Raymond

Chandler called this "murdering your darlings." Think of it as a sculptor chipping away every part of the marble that's not an elephant until what is left is pure, unadulterated elephant.

**FF:** Do you work with a critique partner or group?

**MP:** No, but I get editorial advice from my editor, Joseph Pittman, and recently I've started to work with my agent's assistant, Miriam Goderich, who is quite a talented editor in her own right. My agent, the editor-in-chief, and the publisher all read the books and often give suggestions, so I get plenty of feedback.

I would not want to share an ongoing project with a critique group. Frankly, I think it's better to keep the work private and internal as long as possible. A story is fragile, and insensitive or ill advised comments from other people may kill it before it's strong enough to defend itself. This can happen even if the critic "means well." And a lot of people enjoy criticizing someone else's work a little too much. For some of them, it's a control issue. They may like to think they're "just being helpful," but often their "help" can sour you on the whole project at an early stage. Of course, it's different if the people offering criticism are genuinely knowledgeable and well-meaning, but even then, there's something to be said for keeping your story close to the vest, nurturing and sheltering it for as long as you can. All it takes is somebody saying, "I saw something just like that on TV last week," and--poof! --your enthusiasm goes up in smoke.

**FF:** What advice do you have for aspiring writers working on their own psychological suspense novels?

**MP:** The best advice is two rules of thumb that are closely related. First, always assume your characters are smarter than you are. Second, always assume your reader is smarter than you are. Dumb characters, for the most part, have no place in serious thrillers. Make everybody smart. I don't mean that all the characters have to be intellectuals, but they should be always thinking, coming up with shrewd or clever insights, looking two or three steps ahead, overlooking nothing. And they should be as self-aware as possible. Self-awareness is often what makes the difference between a stereotyped character and a realistic, multidimensional portrait. If a character has an eccentricity, show that he knows it's an eccentricity and it doesn't bother him because he's comfortable with himself. If a woman in the story is a workaholic, show her thinking about her workaholic tendencies, aware that it's something she needs to deal with. Layers of self-awareness make the character come alive by giving the character depth.



So respect your characters, and don't caricature them. Respect your readers too. Don't think that you can just make up some minor "fact" because nobody will know the difference. Someone will know. There are a lot of smart people out there, especially among the segment of the population that reads for pleasure. Do the research and get the authentic facts. Not every reader will appreciate the extra effort, but some will. And if you see a flaw in your storyline, no matter how subtle, don't assume that nobody else will notice. Remember, your reader is smarter than you are! So you'd better fix that flaw, because what is subtle to you will be glaringly obvious to the super-intelligent beings you're writing for! If you train yourself to think this way, you'll avoid the mistake of "dumbing down" your story, and you'll end up expanding your own talents and capabilities as a writer. I have to add that even if you do all this, you will never please everybody. For instance, early in COMES THE DARK, the heroine ventures alone into a secret cave, looking for evidence that will tie her brother to a murder. Several readers criticized this plot development, saying that the woman is "too dumb to live," because if she'd ever seen a scary movie, she would know that she shouldn't go into that cave alone! So did I violate my own rule by writing a dumb character? I would say no. To me, this is a case of the readers not reading carefully (or thoroughly) enough. The character's motivation, including her need for secrecy, is fully spelled out by the end of the novel. It's all there in black and white, but these readers just didn't see it or didn't read that far. A novel is a collaboration between the author's imagination and the imaginative powers of each of reader, and all you as a writer can do is uphold your end of the bargain.

**FF:** You mentioned that STEALING FACES debuted as an ebook. Can you tell us about your experience with the e-publishing industry? Would you do it that way again? What are the pros/cons of e-publishing? How does one market an electronically published book to a traditional publishing house?

**MP:** The book made its debut as a RocketEdition from Rocket eBooks. It was the first novel, I think, ever to premiere in this format -- that is, to appear as an electronic edition before its print publication date. At least that's what they told me. Frankly, I had nothing to do with this deal other than to rubber-stamp the contract, so I can't give any advice on marketing to electronic publishers. My publisher (Signet) and my agent did all of that for me. The book sold well as an e-book; it was number one on the RocketEdition list for quite a while, outselling even the Bible! (It feels blasphemous to say so, but it's the truth.) But since there are still only a couple of thousand Rocket eBook devices in circulation, the actual number of book sales in this format was trivial ... maybe a couple hundred copies (i.e., downloads) in all. Right now, if you want to make any money, you still need to go the traditional route -- paper, ink, binding, the works. The main value of the RocketEdition deal was that it got STEALING FACES some publicity.

**FF:** Tell us all about STEALING FACES, your upcoming novel. When is it due out? What is it about?

**MP:** The print edition of STEALING FACES appears in mid-September of 1999 as a mass-market paperback original from Signet Books. It also is available in hardcover through the Mystery Guild, where it is a Featured Selection, and the Doubleday Book Club. STEALING FACES is quite different from COMES THE DARK. It's a much faster book, for one thing, and it does not deal with mythological themes. Instead, it takes a look at the issue of materialism in the modern world. By materialism, I don't mean the desire for money and property; I mean it in the philosophical sense -- the view that everything can be explained by purely mechanistic theories. With regard to humanity, it's the view that our accomplishments, thoughts, feelings, even our sense of self--all the things that make us human -- are nothing but the result of genetic programming and evolutionary adaptation, or "instincts and chemicals," as a character puts it in the book. I asked myself what would happen if this view were carried to its logical extreme. The result is the villain of the story, John Cray, who regards only the animalistic traits of his fellow human beings as fully genuine, fully real. To "unmask" other humans, he reduces them to their animal essence, stripping away the veneer of civilization and consciousness. He treats his victims as animals, hunting them in the desolate wilderness outside Tucson, Arizona. He kills them and takes their faces as grotesque trophies--symbols of the artificial self he has peeled away. But one night, while trolling for a new victim, he becomes aware that he himself is being stalked. A woman is following him. A woman who is a stranger . . .or is she?

The story goes from there, as we learn who this woman is and how her life intersects with Cray's. It develops very quickly into a cat-and-mouse game between two unequally matched adversaries--the seasoned, sociopathic killer and the shy, scared woman determined to bring him to justice any way she can. That's the basic idea of STEALING FACES. Look for it in a bookstore (or at an online bookseller) near you! Or if you want more information, visit my website.

Thanks for all your questions. I've enjoyed sharing my thoughts, and I hope some of my answers have been at least somewhat helpful to other writers.