

RIISING SHADOWS OF DARKNESS

A CONVERSATION WITH WILLIAM P. SIMMONS

September 2003

For us, one of the joys of editing a series of books such as Darkness Rising for Prime Books is reading stories from authors whose work we are not yet familiar. The Wind When It Comes by William P Simmons was just such a story. It is beautiful in every respect and we were proud to include it in Darkness Rising volume 2. After that we were eager to include a Simmons in each volume that came out and luckily for us William was just as keen to be included. Now the first of the now annual Darkness Rising anthologies is published he has been included in each and every volume with the exception of the first. He only missed out there as we filled that initial volume from stories already read for Enigmatic Tales.

We are delighted to say we have become friends with William Simmons. This has developed from a mutual respect of writing in the supernatural genre. His reviews are better than a lot of fiction we receive for publication. The thought and workmanship that goes into his critiques of books should make many a writer take note. The review he did of our book Echoes Of Darkness is a supreme example of an essay on the subject of supernatural writing. His anthologies are carefully crafted, the stories blending into each other with seamless precision. These avenues of work alone would gain him honors in the field but he continues with fiction.

His prime cause for celebration is his stories. Elegant, eloquent, the words building into a slow strangulation of anticipation that brings the reader to a climax of emotion. Sometimes that emotion might be fear; other times it might be sadness. His characters are often lonely misunderstood individuals who feel out of place in the real world. They move almost mystically towards the faint lights of another world just out of clear vision, only to find they have been tricked, the lights are not pleasurable at all; rather they are there to highlight every fault and weakness the character could previously have hidden.

There is dark humor here too, and characters that are as much to blame for their plight as the sins of the world they inhabit. There is real terror, building slowly sometimes, at other times rushing headlong to greet the reader in a warm but uncomfortable embrace.

In this interview we have merely occasionally prompted William Simmons to open up on the subject of writing, editing, and on life in general. We begin with the current biography of the man before moving to the conversational opener.

Holding a Cum Laude Honors Degree in English Literature from the State College of New York at

Oneonta, William P. Simmons is an award-recommended fiction author, poet, reviewer, journalist and editor specializing in dark and fantastic fiction.

Writing for three years, his first published story, "*THE WIND, WHEN IT COMES*", was given an honorable mention in **THE YEARS BEST FANTASY AND HORROR** (2001), and "*THEY NEVER COME BACK*", a new story, was awarded an Honorable Mention in **THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY AND HORROR** (2002). His first collection, **BECOMING OCTOBER**, received praise from such authors as T. M. Wright, Tom Piccirilli, Tim Lebbon, Gary Braunbeck, etc., and has sold out its print run. "*TELLING STORIES IN THE DARK*", a story featured in **BECOMING OCTOBER**, was recommended for the Horror Writers Association's Bram Stoker Award, as was **VIVISECTIONS**, his anthology of emotional pain and spiritual awakenings, a bestseller at several online bookstores and retailers, which features supernatural and psychological terror fiction from Ramsey Campbell, Tim Lebbon, Tom Piccirilli, Nancy Kilpatrick, etc.

This October, **UNDAUNTED PRESS**, a specialty publisher, proudly presents **DARK HARVEST**, a collaboration collection of dark fantasy and horror between William and fellow award-recommended author Paul Melniczek. A seasonal offering of tales centered around the October country of heart, mind, and soul, these poetic, insightful tales interweave the simple good pleasure of chills and thrills with serious inspections of morality, transformation, and the power of emotion.

This November 2003, **BY REASON OF DARKNESS**, a lyrical collection of William's best dark fantasy and supernatural horror tales, will be published in hardcover and trade paperback by **PRIME BOOKS**. This collection includes all of his award-recommended literary horrors and several new pieces written exclusively for the collection. Displaying his knowledge and love of various genres, the twenty three tales collected in **BY REASON OF DARKNESS** include everything from classic ghost stories and modern supernatural terrors to existential surrealism and psychological fear, the tone ranging from the chillingly suggestive to the mythical, all tied together by the author's concern for his characters and a love of atmosphere. Thus far, the book has received rave reviews from such notable macabre masters as Graham Masterton, Hugh B. Cave, and Al Sarrantonio, who said:

"Atmospheric and eerie, with echoes of Bradbury's *THE OCTOBER COUNTRY*. If the *SHADOWS* series was still around William Simmons would fit right in. Keep an eye on this one!"

William's fiction, blending the supernatural and psychological with moments of emotional and physical borderlands – events or perceptions *between* reality and fantasy – have appeared in the acclaimed supernatural anthology series **DARKNESS RISING 2-9** (making him the only author in that series to appear in practically every issue), and such magazines and anthologies as **OCTOBERLAND**, **FLESH&BLOOD**, **DECADENCE 2**, etc. His upcoming fictions will be published in **CEMETERY DANCE** magazine and the anthologies **BLACKEST DEATH** and **DARK LURKERS**. A poet as well as a fictionist, his poetry has been published in such publications as **CHIZINE**, **GOthic.NET**, **ART&SCOPE**, etc.

A respected reviewer, critic, and genre historian, William's reviews have appeared regularly in both nationally published and small press magazines, including **ALL HALLOWS**, **WORMWOOD**, **CEMETERY DANCE**, **HELLNOTES**, **RUE MORGUE**, **MYSTERY SCENE**, **GAUNTLET**, etc. As a columnist and critic, he has penned the *LITERARY LESIONS* column for **GAUNTLET**, a magazine devoted to culture and issues of censorship. He also wrote *DIGGING UP BONES*, a column of obscure gothic fiction for **HELLNOTES**, the industry's number one source for

news and markets, and before its demise contributed the popular *FOLK FEARS* column to **TWILIGHT SHOWCASE**, revisiting dark folklore across the globe.

As a journalist, William has spoken with some of the finest authors in the imaginative field, including Ramsey Campbell, Graham Masterton, T.M. Wright, Ramsey Campbell, Caitlin Kiernan, Poppy Z. Brite, Nancy A. Collins, and best-selling F. Paul Wilson, from which came **THAT TERRIBLE FREEDOM: AN INTERVIEW WITH F. PAUL WILSON ON REPAIRMAN JACK**, a special exclusive chapbook, from Gauntlet Press. **OUR LADIES OF DARKNESS**, Simmons' last interview series for **CEMETERY DANCE**, spoke with such influential female authors as Poppy Z. Brite, Nancy A. Collins, and Caitlin R. Kiernan. William has recently finished work on a mammoth collection of interviews entitled **DARK DIALOGUES: CONVERSATIONS WITH ARCHITECTS OF FEAR AND WONDER**, a survey collection of informative and intimate interviews with such authors as Hugh B. Cave, Joe Lansdale, and Jack Ketchum, which a respected publishing house is considering.

Currently the editor-in-chief of **UNDERWORLDS**, the unique magazine of Noir-inspired supernatural, horror, and suspense fiction and commentary, William is working on a new collection of dark fantasy and supernatural horror for a specialty publisher entitled **THE AUTUMN PEOPLE** in addition to **EVEN DEAD FOLK GET THE BLUES**, a poetry collection.

William currently works and lives in the North County with his lovely wife, Valarie, and his daughter, Bonnie.

Why did you begin writing?

The first piece I published was an appreciation of Bradbury's *THE OCTOBER COUNTRY* for *HELLNOTES* (when it was published by David B. Silva). I wrote the piece, sent it in, was paid my 5 cents per word, and felt delighted that I had been able to share something of the respect and awe – *the love!* – which I felt for that book and its author. I have continued to write and publish since, if not as quickly or as skillfully as I would have liked, then at least as stubbornly, striving to use my love and knowledge of dark fiction and fantasy as a means of giving shape to my own anxieties and dreams (while commenting on the works of others). Reviewing for three years, I've only written fiction and poetry for the last two.

I take reviewing very seriously – in fact, I spend the same amount of energy on anything I write, regardless of genre or form. Reviews are my way of communicating my interest in, and knowledge of, fiction to others while sharing the value or lack thereof of a particular book. I try to treat each title of as fairly and sensitively as I am capable.

Raised as an only child, books and stories were my only friends to speak of, something which has not really changed. Fiction helped keep me sane during twelve miserable years of public school (may I have some more gruel, Mam?), and fiction helped me survive personal tragedy when I first attended college, where Literature in all its forms – fiction, poetry, drama, oral lore, etc. – was there for the picking (if one could survive the professor's blatant disregard for

anything not strictly Realism, the academic snobbery, and the politically biased critical theories that threaten to drain the juice and joy right out of fiction!), and I added to my appreciation of horror a wider interest in such authors as Herman Hesse and Thomas Mann, the English Romantic writers, naturalism, etc. During college, I was more interested in where my own interests were leading me than in the enforced academic/cultural routes of study – more at home when conducting independent studies on folks like August Strindberg (a personal favorite!) than when I had to set in a classroom and partake in so-called cooperative education (translation: let everyone do a little of the work so no one person learns or achieves too much).

The point is this: while I am well read, and while I fought for an education in a society where my personality was not conducive to today's "let's pretend to love one another and write stories about cuddly bunnies!" culture, and have always had a deep love for storytelling, the value I place on individualism, my instinctive fear of "the crowd" (which sums up society in a nutshell), and a preference for my own company has made it difficult to share my thoughts and views. Writing, and the ability it provides to be extremely intimate with people you don't know while paradoxically sheltering one from the dull pettiness of everyday interaction, let's me be a part of the world without *giving in* to it. Reviewing was my first step toward becoming a professional writer, and it remains an invaluable way for me to test myself and the genre, with every new book and every new review.

Of course I'm aware of an author's credentials when reviewing a book – it's impossible *not* to have some familiarity with popular author's works. If I pick up a book by an author whose work was influential in shaping the genre, whose words fairly sing with insight, and it happens to be someone I personally admire, of course I *WANT* to enjoy the work. Hell, I want to *LOVE* it! Yet, as we all know, even the best author can write a bad book. This is when I grit my teeth and give my honest opinion. It is the *ONLY* thing to be done if you want to have credibility. You owe it to your readers, the books, and the writers to be as honest as you can . . . while not being rude if you don't enjoy something, and being sure you can support your position – something too many critics fail to do.

What specialized knowledge or skills have helped you? What should a good review accomplish?

Besides enthusiasm and affection? If we're talking non-fiction like reviews and interviews, I would suggest that my education in various forms, ages, and types of literature, both formal and personal, has been a factor. This is not elitism, as those without college often suggest, nor is it an expression of solidarity with the academic set (which I often disagree with). There has always been a debate between the formally educated and the self-taught, with either side, in my opinion, too extreme in their arguments. I pick and choose what I need to support my personality.

I believe that five minutes of personal experience – a deep impression made by a shift of light and shadow, an intense encounter with a loved one or an enemy, *any* moment of strong emotion – is worth two year's of square-desk, socially-sanctioned academia, and of course many of the greatest writers of the Westernized cannon were self-taught, learning and writing by passion and experience, not guided by the prejudices or limitations of a particular teacher, institution, or community. On the other hand, higher education, if one's will is strong enough to separate the

chaff from the wheat, is handy for exposing one to authors, genres, and related areas of study/the humanities/arts that wouldn't be encountered working at a gas station (*which I've done – eeeek!*). I was a piss-poor student, barely graduating from Stamford Central School in upstate New York, where good-boy politics and saying “yes, Mam!” were valued by the community and teachers infinitely more than skill. Afterwards, wanting to prove to myself that I *could* do it, I enrolled into a state college, and with at least some control of subject matter (finally), went on to become a Cum Laude Honor's student with a half dozen grants and honors. I am proud of my formal education because I had to fight for it. Still, anything I have ever learned of lasting importance was either self-taught, gathered from reading stories themselves, or translated to me from my parents or grandparents – self earned knowledge and experience. In short, I believe both my formal education *and* personal experience and enthusiasms aid me in the art of criticism and writing.

One thing I believe a reviewer *NEEDS* to do if he is both a professional and a decent human being is to support his views. It is not enough to simply spew out one's opinions, period. Too many reviews blindly attack or just as blindly praise a work without providing readers with an argument or examples of why they reached a particular conclusion. *WHY* is one work better than another? What elements *MAKE* a fine piece of fiction? Support your position with details from the text, from other works, from historical or genre contexts. Reviewing is an art form, something that several magazines, which often disguise plot synopsis as reviews, appear not to notice. I try to entertain and inform my readers, not only describing what a book is about (plot, characters, themes, setting, etc) but, in addition, going on to discuss authorial style, comparisons with other work, and, when room allows, trying to place a work in a historical or cultural context . . . all the while remembering that not everyone is a critic and that the principle function of fiction is to *entertain*.

As an interviewer, I interview those authors whose works I love. Occasionally I'll interview a subject based on an editor's request, but even then, I ensure I'm well acquainted with that author's work. I focus on questions that interest me, believing that readers will share my fascinations, focusing on the work itself first, and then examining an author's personal life, opinions, conflicts – all which makes for good reading! I want my readers to feel they have come to really KNOW the writer when I'm finished.

Why did you start writing? For what artistic or emotional reasons?

While I've told myself stories since I was a child, and my imagination has long been more “real” to me than everyday life, I only began trying to write professionally beginning two years ago. My first story, “THE WIND, WHEN IT COMES”, for *DARKNESS RISING (2)*, was given an honorable mention in *THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY AND HORROR (2001)*. I write because I need to, and because I feel I have something worth saying, emotions worth expressing, and because it has become an integral part of my life.

My goals when crafting a story are nothing less or more than to tell the best story I'm capable at any given time. Hopefully, one that entertains and moves people on some level.

Why horror? Why is anyone drawn to a particular subject? All I can say is that elements of the

macabre and fantastic had no less a part in shaping my life than did my own family. My earliest memories are of dark corners and odd faces, whispers and anxiety. The first film I recall seeing at the Drive-In was *EMPIRE OF THE ANTS*. Some of my favorite experiences in life have revolved around those times when, as both a child and an adult, I have been able to enjoy a sense of the mysterious, the magical, or the unknown. A hunger for dark miracles led me to fiction and movies, legends and folklore, at a very early age, and it is the only place in the world where I feel comfortable. On a more analytical level, I believe horror as both emotion and genre, and the fantastic in general, are crucial to a fully realized life.

Sure it matters, if horror is an emotion or a genre, though I'm not sure how much or to whom . . . Horror *IS* an emotion, as Douglas Winter so eloquently stated. But Horror is *ALSO* a genre, which simply means that it is a form of art that has behind it (and informing it) a tradition of core subjects, themes, and approaches. How one uses these conventions/traditions makes all the difference.

How has your writing style evolved through time?

I'm not sure I have a style, or if I do, that I know what it is. I try to place myself within what I identify as the flow of a story, listening for the rhythm and movement of a piece, which also suggests different scenes, sequence, etc. Now while this later part may be considered structure rather than style, I find that I often need to consider both as I'm writing a draft, and that the kind of story I'm trying to tell – its content and desired effect – in part inform style. The style I feel most comfortable with is an approach both descriptive and subtle (usually!), rich in description and atmosphere but without losing the momentum of a tale or distracting the reader from the pulse of characters and events.

I don't know that the content of my stories has evolved through time – except to say that everyday everything we feel, imagine, lose or gain changes and is reflected in our work. I am still fascinated by cracks between the real and unreal, surface reality and the possible truths lurking beyond or perhaps within the very fabric of what our perception decides is objective truth . . . the supernatural is crucial to my writing, particularly malignant spirits and powers, as are mythic images and archetypes, and perhaps even more importantly, those hinted-at powers and beings, events and places that are anchored neither in the realms of the everyday or impossible but which contain something of both . . . I want to find the magic, both dark and light, outside of the everyday as well as within the very routine lives that we *think* we know. I'm obsessed with the ambiguities of Self and Other, good and evil (whatever they may be for any one person or time), real and imaginary . . . you see how it goes, and believe me, I could go on . . . and on . . .

I am interested in all sorts of characters – male and female, young and old, fat and lean, etc. Personalities and inner conflicts interest me more than skin and shape (at least on the page). While I don't limit myself with focusing on any one kind or type of character, preferring to allow each one to grow in accordance with a particular plot or theme, I do seem to focus most often on people who are lonely or alone, outsiders and rebels in a world that cares little for them and, more often, is downright hostile. Perhaps my characters reflect who I am, then, at times . . .? I don't care to analyze to deeply, afraid of what I might find. Which, in fact, is precisely what the

best characters nevertheless can achieve through the arena of a story, revealing through their actions and reactions, their thoughts and feelings that you fear to gaze at without the protective talisman of fiction . . .

Why did you get into editing and has your reason for continuing to edit changed through time?

Simple: I wanted to play a part in shaping the field I so admire, bringing authors and readers together. I wanted (and continue to want) to help good stories be read and enjoyed, which itself gives me satisfaction.

With *VIVISECTIONS*, an anthology of emotional and spiritual pain that strived to disturb readers in a profound way without the coddling or moralizing so often seen in popular fiction, I searched stories that were great examples of storytelling, which evoked sufficient emotion, pain, and wonderment, and which complimented one another without imitating or mirroring one another too closely. As with all editing work I do, be it for magazines or anthologies, there are various considerations I have to keep in mind, such as determining the quality, themes, and style of individual stories while striving to create a sense of balance and diversity throughout.

After the last real-life terror story I had with the publisher of *VIVISECTIONS* (Come, gather around and listen to the sorrowful tale of a foolhardy editor and his trusting writers who were duped, cheated, and disregarded!), I have resolved to take some time out from editing, wishing instead to use that time for my fiction and family. That said, I will have taken over *UNDERWORLDS* magazine after issue 3, and look forward to raising the magazine to the creative heights I think it has the potential to achieve. I hope to make *UNDERWORLDS* a unique publication devoted to noir-influenced fiction and commentary that celebrates the pleasures of a well told, *complete* story while daring to take risks concerning content and genre. Supernatural horror, psychological suspense, dark fantasy, crime, and surrealism: issue 4 alone offers readers tired of any one formula or context of “Dark Fiction” a chance to enjoy a diversity of startling and thought provoking tales, including work by T.M. Wright, Scott Nicholson, Gerard Houraner, Bruce Boston, and several other fine craftsman.

What have been some of your greatest challenges? Your highs or lows?

My greatest challenge has been battling the depression that I constantly face (and which medications and doctors do little to help) and various forms of physical illness that make each day of getting out of bed a chore. To be the best writer and man I can be at any given time. The mystery, allure, and wonder of supernatural fiction – the presence and teasing possibilities of the fantastic in life and art – keep me alive, as does love for my daughter and my wife. My lowest points so far as editing goes has been the dishonesty and abusive treatment with which the publisher of *VIVISECTIONS* treated the book, me, and the authors. *Vivisections* was (and is) a good, sound collection of brave, entertaining, and risk-taking fiction, and to have been forced to kill it off because of a publisher’s dishonesty, misconduct, and poor business sense was horrible. My highest point thus far? Getting to meet and speak with some of my literary heroes ranks up there, as does the satisfaction of work well done, crafting stories/moments for other people to experience from the stuff of my heart and head. Every story I have written.

Your collection *BECOMING OCTOBER* exhibited a love of, and artistic preoccupation with, the ambiguous nature of reality and the fantastic, the mind and the supernatural. What is the importance of fantasy and the supernatural to your work? To people in general?

Fantasy, as we all know, was our entire species' first (and most lasting) form of literary expression, oral lore, and story-telling, as is evidenced by studying the cross-comparative mythological systems, folklore, and legends from any civilization, from the Ancient East to modern day American urban legends. This genesis of storytelling themes and subjects, focusing as they did on characters, places, and events of a supernatural and fantastical nature, sought to lend recognizable form to primal forces and emotions of the unknown that could be captured or faced no other way, entertaining and serving as a means of catharsis to early man. Not much has changed today. We, like our ancestors, still NEED our symbols, which is all words really are. We need stories to explore the worlds around us and the worlds inside of us, and imaginative tales most of all. Horror and dark fantasy is crucial to the health of a society as well as indispensable to the individual. I can think of no other human impulses or emotions I would rather explore, nor any that more satisfying to work at unearthing, than terror and wonder, mystery and, perhaps most importantly, the feeling of awe aroused by considering the unknown.

In such stories as "The Halloween Boy", "The Field", "Telling Stories In The Dark", and "Becoming October" you exhibit a love of October people living midnight lives, ordinary places seen through slightly odd angles, and a sense of the wondrous and (usually) horrific combined. Will the same kind of atmosphere be evoked in your new collection *DARK HARVEST*, co-written by Paul Melniczek?

Yes! *DARK HARVEST* includes pieces from both Paul and myself (written separately) that, much like my *BECOMING OCTOBER* stories, attempt to capture something of the melancholy-tinged joy, fear, and exhilaration of October, Autumn, and the Halloween season – a place where the heart is dark and it's always midnight. The collection includes a wonderful Introduction by Michael Laimo and an Afterward by Gene O'Neill.

When writing a supernatural story, your work seems to operate on more than one level, with the internal conflicts of a character as important to the piece as the supernatural element or fantastical situation. Is this intentional? If so, why?

Because this is what scares and intrigues me. I believe that fantastic and supernatural fiction is most effective when the external manifestation of such is in some way connected to an emotional crisis or conflict embedded in everyday experience, such as family decay, alienation, and both the joys and terrors of childhood.

I don't think I'll ever stop writing. I may be a hot-seller next year or I may never be lucky enough to sell another story so long as I live. While I would certainly prefer the former, I would continue to write even if I had no audience but myself. And for better or worse, our internal audience is often the most important one.

What authors influenced you to write supernatural horror fiction and what about them did you appreciate?

Eeek! How long do you have? Um . . . Ray Bradbury. His leaf-swept races through October Country swept me off my feet as a child, and his detours into ravines, haunted souls, and miracles of magic and emotion keep me young still. Stephen King, who, despite what a sad few academics setting in their cobwebbed basements might suggest, is an excellent popular writer no less worthy than were the popular entertainers Charles Dickens and Rudyard Kipling. King fed me feasts of horror and character, irreverent humor and an honest voice during an age sorely lacking truth. Clive Barker, whose unfettered imagination, raw skill, and ability to weave complex original mythologies with the intimate passions and fears of the individual has still to be equaled. Arthur Machen supplied a mystical belief in language and symbols, as well as fostered a healthy appreciation of awe, hinting at worlds within worlds and realities lurking just beyond (or within) the exterior crust of so-called “reality.” Algernon Blackwood, for the simple beauty of his visions and the authenticity of his love for nature. August Strindberg, because he was mad in a way worth sharing, and whose plays of fantasy and pain speak so very truthfully to me. Matheson and Buemont, Rod Serling, whose storytelling and characterization mastery has never been equaled. M.R. James, H.R. Wakefield, E.F. Benson, and many other practitioners of the ghost story who could describe in one brief sentence more awe and terror than several modern books can accomplish in four hundred pages . . . Charles L. Grant, who made the ghost story grow up in Oxrun Station, mirroring truly disquieting external evils with the confusion and fears of all too average people caught up in webs of self deceit, loneliness, and alienation. Graham Masterton and Hugh B. Cave, both excellent storytellers. Al Sarrantonio, who runs right alongside Bradbury in his ability . . . countless others, each for different moods and techniques, wonders and nightmares.

Many of your stories suggest horror through atmosphere and description and implied threat rather than through graphic violence. In which ways do you think a whisper is more disturbing than a scream, shadow more dangerous than dripping grue?

I don't necessarily have a preference. Whatever elements a story seems to need, I try to provide. Sometimes this requires a well placed shadow or a hint of cold lips against one's cheek. Other times, an ambiguous shadow of motive or emotion evokes a confusion that leads to the terror of disorientation. Other times, you need to bombard a scene with scents and sounds and images and raw feeling. And, yes, sometimes violence is required, no less an art, and capable of no less a beauty (if done effectively), than suggestion.

With that said, I will admit that, if forced to chose, I value suggestive atmosphere and description over overt violence, particularly if the violence is childish, slopped on so heavily that it ceases to disturb and becomes the equivalent of watching a kid pick his nose, or committed without purpose. It may surprise you to know, but I don't mind violence for its own sake. In fact, I admire some very violent film-makers and authors, including Lucio Fulci whose films were VERY graphic, yet which approached viscera with a child's wonderment and sense of fascination, and which, unlike many so-called extreme horror authors out there, was able to make acts of carnage beautiful in their extremity, creating through spectacle and, most often, a sense of the fantastique, an *ATMOSPHERE* conducive to inviting not only physical horror but emotional awe. It is this sense of emotion, this sense of atmosphere and feeling, that I most value in art and entertainment, in fiction and film, and consequently in my own work. Problem is, many artists

or entertainers who use as their paint and canvas the workings of physical carnage are either not interested or sufficiently capable of exploring the intellect and heart as well as bodily fluids. This is where the traditional dependence on suggestive atmosphere and detail wins over, at least in my view, many purely visceral works.

What *might be* is more terrifying than *what is*. What is unseen (but expected) bothers me on a personal and aesthetic level far more than what is already seen. To use an example everyone can relate to, let us examine death for a moment. Death in and of itself is explainable, a natural if unpleasant phenomena dictate to us by scientific fact and nature itself. While physical death, then, may sadden and in some cases scare us, isn't the unknown quality of how, when, where, and why you might die a more frightful premise? To take this further, what is more disturbing to consider as an idea – the knowledge you will die, or the unknown factor of just HOW you might expire? What, if anything, exists afterward? Can you tell me that, friends? No, not for certain (people of religious faith aside, which is itself a willingness to believe simply for the sake of believing, hoping that belief justifies the reality). So we begin as cavemen lighting our pits with branches struck by lightning, and now live as cavemen in name brand clothes lighting our caves with electric bulbs, but in each case, and forever, I think, until death itself is no longer a mystery, we're hiding in what light we can find or make not simply from darkness but from those mysteries of the unknown (or too terrible to face) *IN* the darkness. To bring this back to writing, and supernatural horror fiction in general, what better way to embody the fear and awe of our condition than with the unsure ness and unease evoked through suggestion and atmosphere?

What do you enjoy outside of writing and editing?

I like to cook (I was an assistant chef for a while after high school), and I like to eat (which is why I my pants are a bit too tight). I love spending time with my wife, Valarie, and my daughter, Bonnie. Other interests include gathering folklore and legends, listening to old time radio shows, watching Abbot & Costello shows (who are funnier than anything today!), horror and science fiction cinema of every age and country, reading, of course, and just about everything about Autumn. Music, favorites of which are Pink Floyd, Black Sabbath, Johnny Cash, and Wagner. Oh, and baseball, which I've only recently began to enjoy. I also have an interest in the supernatural, the occult, and world religions, and dig old Looney Tunes cartoons.

You are a young man but what is the Simmons' life story so far?

As I said, an only child, I grew up in the woods and around small rural towns in upper New York state, which I prefer to cities. The first novel I ever read was Stoker's *Dracula*. That, the ghostly stories my family told me about werewolves and spirits, and what I suppose was an early fascination with magic, fantasy, and all things "spooky" developed into a life-long interest in the macabre. The happiest moments I recall in life are from childhood, when magic(light and dark) was around every corner, and belief was sincere and powerful enough to make even the most fantastical creature and/or belief reality . . . and while adulthood has its own magic and mysteries, if one can bother to look deep enough in between changing diapers, paying bills, or trying to raise a family, it sometimes seems to me that my continuing desire to write and tell stories, and my need to get lost in the work of others, is an attempt to capture something of that childhood sense of wonder, as well as a means of better understanding a life and world where

our minds and perception – the very way in which we interpret “reality” – are limited at best. Literature and the macabre has always played an integral part of my own life.

Let’s see, what else can I think of that will bore you all to tears . . .? Well, as I said, I attended college and majored in Literature, helped teach college level courses in Mediaeval Literature and World Mythology for awhile, and worked as a tutor. I met my wife, Valarie, as a Shakespeare tutor. We dated for about five months, married, and had our daughter about a year afterwards. I am only 20 some credit hours away from a teaching master’s degree – those remaining hours requiring a semester of student teaching that I will never finish. About four years ago, due to graduate with an MST in English Education, I was able to see into the politics and hypocrisy of our American school system courtesy of a student teaching placement, grew disgusted, and quit.

It seemed far too apparent that mommas and papas across the country, and those politicians who claim to represent them, were far more interested in teaching children WHAT to think rather than in helping children acquire the different intellectual methods for developing ways of HOW to think. My desire to expose young adults to literature stronger than “Happy Chipmunks Have A Fluffy Love Party” landed me into hot water, as did my verbal admiration of dark and fantastic fiction. Realizing that I couldn’t be a part of what I *still* consider to be culturally enforced obedience training (making sure that our country raises children that can grow into adults with enough mind power to perform minimal tasks for corporations but not so much intelligence that they might start to question the world), I resigned from the position/degree program, picked up my pen, and began doing what I really cared about – making up stories.

Your largest collection, BY REASON OF DARKNESS, is coming from PRIME BOOKS this November. What can you tell us about it? What kinds of stories can we expect? What was your goal in this collection?

A collection of what I consider to be my best work to date, including award nominated reprints and several new tales (some Stoker recommended and a few with honorable mentions in the YEAR’S BEST FANTASY AND HORROR), with an introduction by Gary A. Braunbeck and an afterward by T. M. Wright. I’m pleased with this collection, as it includes everything from modern ghost stories and decadent fantasies to dark eroticism and psychological suspense, all of which, I hope, will entertain and provoke emotion. The collection gathers a little something, I think, for everyone. While I focus primarily on themes of supernatural terror, the dark fantastic, and the surreal, the collection also features a few pieces of hard-edged suspense, painful realism (as all realism must surly be), a few works of dark eroticism, and one or two more visceral excursions. I tried to put together a large collection that celebrates (to the best of my present ability) dark miracles of suggestion and possibility, with real people experiencing and struggling against horrors from the supernatural world and from within themselves. From chilling suggestive horror to daring, hard-edged suspense, these 23 stories have received praise from such personal heroes of mine as Graham Masterton, Hugh B. Cave, and Al Sarrantonio, the former who said: “*Atmospheric and eerie, with echoes of Bradbury's THE OCTOBER COUNTRY. If the SHADOWS series was still around William Simmons would fit right in. Keep an eye on this one!*”

What new projects are you working on?

I've just recently completed an interview collection with some of the genre's most skilled, controversial, and influential authors entitled *DARK DIALOGUES: CONVERSATIONS WITH ARCHITECTS OF FEAR AND WONDER*. A critical survey and study of the field as well as an in-depth collection of intimate discussions with the likes of JOE LANSDALE, HUGH B. CAVE, WILLIAM NOLAN, BENTLEY LITTLE, JACK KETCHUM, RAMSEY CAMPBELL, F. PAUL WILSON and others, these interviews dig deeper than is usual in this form, examining the works and histories of subjects along with their innermost feelings and fears, tragedies and triumphs

Where can we see your newest work?

A story called "THE FORGOTTEN" is going to be published in *CEMETERY DANCE* magazine and "WILL YOU EVER . . .?" will appear in *DARK LURKERS*. I'm also working on a new collection of October-Autumnal dark fantasies called *THE AUTUMN PEOPLE*, which has been requested by a very professional and well thought-of specialty hardcover publisher, which I'm very, VERY excited about!

What frightens Simmons the man?

People. Crowds. Folks who are content to let organizations and institutions to do their thinking for them. People. Organized religion, Politicians, and self-righteous repressed censors . . . and people. The knowledge that I am going to have to watch those I love die and be buried in the ground. The knowledge that my own illnesses are going to force my loved ones experience my own death. People. The fear that there is nothing after the grave but the song of worms, or worse, that there *is!* People. Dolls. Modern sitcoms, reality TV. Myself. Waking up one day to realize that this is it, that everything I fear I know . . . *is.*



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