

*Tim Waggoner*

343: Writing in the Dark: How to Write Horror

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome word nerds to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are at diymfa.com/343 because it's Episode 343. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on iTunes, Google, or, you know, all the usual places where you might listen to a podcast, and please leave us a review. This will help other word nerds out there discover the show as well.

Now, today I have the pleasure of interviewing Tim Waggoner.

Tim is a critically-acclaimed author of over fifty novels and seven short story collections. He writes original dark fantasy and horror, as well as media tie-ins. He's also the author of a comprehensive book on writing horror called *Writing in the Dark*; and that's what we're going to be discussing today on the show.

His novels include *Like Death*, which is considered a modern classic in the horror genre – as well as popular *Nekropolis* series of urban fantasy novels. He's written tie-in fiction for *Supernatural*, *Grimm*, *The X-Files*, *Doctor Who*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Alien*, and *Transformers* - I'm kind of geeking out here – among other properties.

And he's written novelizations for films such as *Kingsman: The Golden Circle*, and *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter*. His articles on writing have appeared in places like *Writer's Digest*, *The Writer*, *Writer's Journal*, *Writer's Workshop of Horror*, and *Where Nightmares Come From*.

In 2017 he received the Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in Long Fiction; and he's been a finalist for the Shirley Jackson Award, the Scribe Award, and the Splatterpunk Award. His fiction has appeared several times in the Year's Best Hardcore Horror, and he's received numerous Honorable Mentions in volumes of Best Horror of the Year.

In 2016, the Horror Writers Association honored him with the Mentor of the Year Award. In addition to his writing – as if all of this is not enough – he's also a full-time tenured professor who teaches Creative Writing and Composition at Sinclair College in Dayton, Ohio.

Welcome, Tim, it is so great to have you here.

Tim Waggoner: It's wonderful to be here.

GP: You know, as I was looking at your bio and everything, I was like, how does he have the time? It's just, oh my gosh, so many things. So, I always like to start by asking about the story behind the story, but before we even get to like why you wrote *Writing in the Dark* in the first place, I kind of want to know like, why did you get into horror? What was it about this zone that spoke to you?



TW: Yeah, you know, it's hard to say, but I've been fascinated with 'things strange' ever since I was little. And one of my earliest memories is sitting on my dad's lap and he'd be reading like that non-fiction dinosaur book to me; and I couldn't read, but I was so fascinated by the creatures that I memorized the shape of their names – I could recognize them by the shape, but I had no idea what letters were or anything like that.

And I was fascinated by the idea that these things once existed, like right where I live; they might have been walking around and, you know, we only have skeletons of them now. It's almost like, not only were they monsters, but they were kind of like ghosts too when they were real.

GP: Yeah.

TW: And my parents would let me-- I mean, you know, I'm 56, so back when I was little, you didn't have too many things that were intense on tv. So, they'd let me watch any kind of monster movie or Science Fiction movie that would come on because they would be watching it too; and, you know, they had anything really violent will be cut out.

So, a little bit different than let somebody watch something on Netflix today. And so, you know, I just grew up watching those kinds of things; they just fascinated me. There's just something about monsters and something about things that are in the dark that I think really, at least, for me, sparked my imagination.

GP: So, you know, it's interesting that dinosaurs were that original spark; and you mentioned like, you know, they were monsters but also ghosts – and there is something terrifying about them. But of all things to go into, like, you know, you'd think a kid who's fascinated with dinosaurs would get into like science or paleontology, but you chose Horror.

Like you went in the direction of story, which is a bit of an unexpected turn, you know, if you started with like this fascination around dinosaurs. So, can you talk a little bit, I mean, what is it about Horror and scary stories that really grips us as readers?

Tim Waggoner: Well, I think there's a lot of mystery to it. It's different than the, you know, whodunnit kind of mysteries. But the horror stories kind of threaten our view of the world because if things like whatever it is – you know, like a vampire, werewolf, whatever – if these things exist, it means we don't understand reality the way that we think we do.

And it also means that some of the wilder fears we have, like when we're kids and we think something's in the dark and all the adults tell us there's nothing there, but in Horror something could be there; and it tells us that all the fears that we have – that they're real, they could be coming for us.

And it's a safe way to work those things out too, because when you close the book or the movie goes off, you know, you're back in the real world and everything's fine.

Just the ending of a story or the ending of a movie sort of psychologically implies that Horror has an ending. And you can control the reading. You can control the movie; you know, you can turn the movie off, you can pause it, you can go ahead and pause your reading. You're probably not going to read a novel in one whole sitting.

And so, there's a level of control of that kind of dark stuff that we may not get in real life, you know, when we're ill or a loved one dies or something like that. So, I think that it's a-- You know, not only does it spark the imagination with the mystery level of it, it allows us to engage with dark things in a safer way – in a way that reassures us, I think.



GP: Yeah, you're totally right. Like this idea, you know, in real life, like kids and adults alike, we can't turn off the bad stuff that's happening necessarily – but with Horror like reading or movies, we can.

You know, it was funny as you were mentioning, as you were talking about that, I had this flashback to an episode of that TV show Friends; and there was an episode where I think one of the guy characters was trying to convince the girl characters to like read The Shining.

And so, they'd get to a scary part, and they'd hide it in the freezer. Like they'd had to like put the book away so that they couldn't come out and get them. But there is that element of like, we can put the scary away, we can lock it in the freezer; and it's at least contained for a time.

TW: Right.

GP: So, in terms of the writing Horror, obviously, it's been a big part of your life for quite some time. At the same time, you now have written this book, Writing in the Dark, which helps other writers write horror. Can you talk a little bit about where this book came from? Like, what was the impetus for creating this book?

TW: Yeah, sometime in my late teens, my dad brought home a copy of Writer's Digest that he saw in a bookstore; and I had no idea that Writer's Digest existed. And he just said, you know, I thought you might be interested in it.

And he handed it to me, and it must have been warm weather out because I was sitting on the porch; and I read that thing from cover to cover, just fascinated by all the different articles about different types of writing. I didn't care what it was; poetry, writing greeting cards, whatever they had in there.

And the writing about Writing; listening to people talk about their process, their inspirations, how they did it, the business of it, all of it was just fascinating to me. And as time went by, I really fell in love with the Fiction Writing column by Lawrence Block, and just loved his approach.

You know, he had a real kind of sort of casual kind of voice like he was just talking to you, and I learned an awful lot from him; and I sought out his books on Writing, and sought out his mystery novels to read. And you know, as time went by, as I was doing my own writing, I was thinking, 'You know, it would be nice someday to do something like Lawrence Block did – to either do a column on writing.'

And this was back before there were blogs. I didn't have an opportunity to do it myself or maybe even a book. And then as years went by, I did start a blog; and I wasn't sure what to do with it. And a friend of mine, who's one of my editors at a small press publisher, he said, "You're a teacher, write about writing – people will read that."

And I thought, 'This is awesome.' So, you know, I started a blog; and I write about all kinds of things about Writing – sometimes Horror, sometimes it could just be any topic that would relate to any kind of writing. And then, as the years went by, you know, I've started thinking, 'Now's a good time.'

You know, I've been writing for a long time. I've been teaching for a long time as a teacher, even as a kid, I was fascinated with the way teachers taught and how they communicated things.

And you know, I've tried over the years so hard and learned so much about how to communicate concepts in writing to students; I thought, you know, 'I think maybe now I'm ready.' So, I just started doing proposals and, you know, the publishers said, "Great, let's go ahead and do one."



And you know, I used some things from my blog, I expanded them. A lot of the stuff I put in there was new writing. It was weird. It was like everything just poured out of me. You know, I couldn't even tell you how long it took me to write it, but it wasn't very long.

And then, it all kind of like left my mind after I wrote it. People ask me questions about it, I'd be like, 'I don't really know what's in there, I remember the title of it.' But my memories kind of come back to me a little bit.

But, you know, it's sort of like the culmination of everything; it's the culmination of my writing and my teaching and my love of Horror. So, in a lot of ways, it's like the ultimate book, you know, because it fuses so many things. There's such a big part of me.

GP: I love it. So, you know, I wanted to kind of get into some of the How-To aspect of Horror. Obviously, we can't cover all the things that are in your book, but to give our listeners a bit of a taste of what some of the topics that you go into.

Now, one of the things I wanted to address, first and foremost, is the landscape of Horror. As you mentioned, I think in one of the early chapters, there are a lot of little different flavors.

There are different ways that Horror plays out on the page and on the screen. Can you give us just a-- Like, if Horror were a landscape, could you give us a quick tour of the main landmarks that we might see in the Horror space?

TW: Sure. I mean, in terms of styles, you get what's called 'Quiet Horror', which is much more suggestive. It's a lot more like ghost stories from the end of the 18th century, and it's still here today. A lot of people love that. It's more about a slow build, it's more about chills than it is about shock.

The polar opposite of that is 'Extreme Horror', which anything could happen. And it usually deals head-on with aspects of pain that's kind of just only implied in Quiet Horror. So, you might have gore – but you might also just have a very intense emotional pain, psychological pain that the characters might go through.

And so, those are, stylistically, the two, kind of, poles that you have. Then you have horror that, two other poles, I guess, if I was going to make this like a map; that would be the east and west, and this would be the north and south, I guess, would be Fantasy.

So, supernatural, that means anything, it's magical in any kind of nature. And then, the other end of the pole, that would be anything that's realistic; it could actually happen in the real world. And so, you have kind of those four as sort of like your, I guess, your directions to kind of navigate around the landscape.

And then, within those, you'll have things like Psychological Horror which focuses more on – not so much serial killers because they're just another version of a monster in human form – but, you know, the actual kind of distortion that may be happening inside a person as they're trying maybe to deal with it. The Tell-Tale Heart is a good example of that, since the narrator.

GP: So, just to, like, because I love the visual of the compass. So, like, Psychological Horror would be like more on the lower left quadrant-ish, is that right?

TW: Yeah.

GP: Like if Fantasy is toward the top; like if fantasy is north and realism is south, it would be more like on the quieter side, right? Or would that be sort of more in the middle? Where would you put it, just so that we get a picture of the landscape?



TW: Yeah, I guess, you'd have two versions because you could have Psychological Horror that the way it plays out is more extreme in the way the writer deals with it. Or you can have quieter horror that deals with the psychological as well, like Shirley Jackson and something like *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.

That would be Psychological Horror that would be, you know, skewing toward the quiet. Something like *The Tell-Tale Heart* kind of does both.

GP: Yeah.

TW: You know, it starts off at the quiet then it kind of gets a little bit more extreme, certainly for the time--

GP: Yeah, exactly.

Tim Waggoner: -toward the end.

GP: And, it's pretty graphic at the end.

TW: Right, right.

GP: And then, you know, you mentioned like we've got monsters as well, so like as you mentioned, the serial killer might be like the more realistic monster, but then you could also have like much more fantastical monsters that could go sort of more toward the north-end of the map.

TW: Right, right. And you could take any kind of science fictional concepts and put them there too. Because right now, they're magic; you know, genetically engineering a monster, we can't do that. So, it counts as magic, but it just seems more believable to people. But I would put that up in the north with the supernatural.

GP: Gotcha. And you know, one of the things that you address in the book is the issue of monsters and that, you know, certain monsters have almost become cliché, like the vampire, the Dracula-style vampire – and now, you know, like vampires are basically sparkly dream boys who glitter in the daylight, kind of thing. Like they're no longer scary because they become so cliché. So, how do we come up with unique original monsters?

TW: Well, one of the things that I always tell people to do is to try to drill down to the core of an archetype. So, if you wanted to write a vampire story, one of the things you can do is try to drill down to, you know, what is a vampire at its core? And a lot of the myth images, they last because there are a lot of different things at their core.

So, one of the things that might be there is they're immortal. And so, you say, "Okay, that would seem to be something that people might find attractive, but instead of the vampire just being immortal, what if they--"

And it wouldn't be a vampire at this point, you call it something else, "But what if they also made other people immortal, and they weren't happy about it?" You know, as the years dragged by, these other immortals are very unhappy that this thing has turned them immortal. And so, they're seeking out to destroy it maybe in the hope that it'll finally end their lives.

And you don't ever use the word 'vampire', just leave it out – come up with a different name. And what you have then is you still have the power that lies at the core of that archetype or, at least, one of the things that lies there. And it's not going to be familiar to people.



So, they'll feel the power of it because, otherwise, the vampires are things that they've been minimized and pared and turned into toys; and I love them, don't get me wrong. I'm sitting in my office with my pops, my pop figures. So, I've got-- I Dracula up there and, you know, I love these things.

But once they've become so familiar, they've become like cuddly friends to us on a level, it loses its power to really affect people unless you're really little and then you're reading like stories for the first time – or seeing like movies or cartoons and vampires in them for the first time.

So, drilling down to the whatever, you know, an element of the archetype, sometimes I'll call it like putting new clothes on an archetype, like a new costume. One of the examples I use in the book is Jason from Friday the 13th, when I'll do a workshop on this kind of thing, I'll ask people, I'll say, Okay, what kind of other figure reminds you of Jason?"

"A figure that has a white face. The features are completely immobile, they're dressed in kind of monochrome; and they have a sharp instrument, and they go around and they kill people. They go around spreading death." And somebody will eventually say, "The Grim Reaper."

And I'm like, 'Yep, and that's all he is – completely silent, just kills people kind of at random, not much you can do to stop him.' Nothing really, because he keeps coming back. And since you don't say "Grim Reaper", you don't have that comical image that we have that shows up on Halloween greeting cards and stuff, the power of The Grim Reaper comes out in Jason. That's why so many people respond to an archetype like that.

So, the more you can do that-- I mean, the more you can take things that have already been done, the more you can go ahead and drill down, find out what their core kind of power is, and then build on that. And then, nobody will know that you're writing a vampire story. Nobody will know that you're writing about, you know, death, incarnate; but they'll feel the power of it.

GP: You know, I wanted to unpack something that you hinted at, just now, in your answer; that idea also of like that central power in the archetype, that he can cut both ways. Right? So, you gave the example of a vampire being immortal and turning other people immortal; and how on the surface it might seem like a good thing, but it might not.

You know, the image that popped into my head right when you said that was, you know, in the myth of Hephaestus – the son of Zeus and Hera – and when he's born, they don't like the look of him. So, they throw him off Mount Olympus, but he's immortal so he can't die. So, now he's all mangled and hurt and harmed, and he's a little baby; and yet, he cannot die.

I mean, can you imagine the torture that that character would go through? So, this idea of kind of taking something that most people would assume is a positive or is the superpower, but actually making it bad thing, like making it their biggest curse, I think is also incredibly powerful.

TW: Yeah. It's a simple technique is just taking an idea and then reversing it and asking yourself, is there something in there that you can use? And you can do that with anything. You can do that with character types, story structures. It doesn't have to be Horror; it can be anything, and it can work really well.

GP: You know, another thing also that came out when you were talking about like, when your reference to The Grim Reaper, and you mentioned like the 'white face that you can't see immovable features; there, the image that popped into my head immediately was the Ku Klux Klan, and like this feeling of dread.



And you know, for me, it's interesting, it sparked this idea of like, 'Well, it could also be something that's real.' Like, you know, Jason isn't real, The Grim Reaper isn't real, but there are actual real monsters that could take a form that is similar to this monster that you're referencing in the story.

So, I think also that idea of-- In a way, it's almost like if we took the map – of the north, south, east, west – and we flipped things to the other, like the opposite quadrant-- You know, if you take like a scary, like a monster figure, but then planted in a real space in potentially real characters, that could create a whole other form of terror.

Tim Waggoner: Right. And somebody like Hannibal Lecter is a good example of taking-- He's kind of a combination of Dracula and The Wolfman, because the way he's portrayed is very, very civilized, very educated, even has an accent. And then he suddenly will turn into this beast when it's time to feed; and all of that is not necessarily the way serial killers really are.

They tend not to be super, you know, intelligent or anything like that, but he is a real thing; you know, in that world he's just a person. And so, yeah, that can work really, really well; and that can be done.

It doesn't even have to be Horror because you can go ahead and have the power of those kind of Horror archetypes in any kind of story; and it could be mainstream, it could be mystery, it could be anything. Yes, that's a really good insight.

GP: That actually raises a question because, you know, I've asked folks to talk about like, sort of, how Horror relates to different genres. Because we often see for instance, like Sci-Fi Fantasy and Horror all sort of lumped together – or Horror also gets tacked into the Mystery, Suspense, Thriller, Horror kind of space.

Like it often gets included with other genres; and yet, it is also its own thing. Do you see Horror as being-- I mean, aside from being a genre in its own right, can it be superimposed over other genres? In which case, is Horror sort of like a super genre or like a mood or an aesthetic? Like, how would you classify it?

TW: Yeah. Writer and critic Douglas Winter said a couple decades ago, a famous quote that, "Horror isn't a genre, it's an emotion", because of that, it can be overlaid on all kinds of different stories.

I think one of the things though that happens with Horror overlapping other genres or blending with them – in a lot of ways, it's practical, because it's really hard to stretch horror to novel-length without having some other kind of paradigm in there.

So, a lot of Horror has a mystery paradigm, even though they're not trying to find out who did it, they're still trying to figure out what's going on and how to deal with it. Or maybe there's a quest they have to find something in order to stop whatever the horror is.

A lot of times, a horror story is kind of built of just a couple different things like anticipation and aftermath; and it kind of depends on which you focus in a short story. You know, is it to build up more? Is it what happens afterward? Or both, equally?

But in a novel, you tend to have little chunks of anticipation and aftermath; and you kind of need something you know, to string those things on. Like, if those were beads, you need something to string them on.

GP: Right.

TW: And so, the framework of, it sounds silly to say this, but a framework of a romance will work. It won't be a category Romance that has a happy ending necessarily but, you know, the framework of that or a mystery or a Western or anything or just different story structures like the coming-of-age tale – or anything like that.



So, you know, in a way, it's kind of almost like having two stories; you know, like if it was a musical score – or you see, like for orchestra and like one level is the violins and another level is the flutes and whatever, so you'd have one level that's kind of the horror and another level that's the mystery angle of it.

And you kind of just weave them together, you know, as you go. But I think that's one of the big reasons why, why that tends to happen is it's a longer form.

GP: Yeah.

Tim Waggoner: Or it needs more help to sustain itself. You don't need it in a short story as much. You can just go ahead and focus on that one element of anticipation and aftermath – or anticipation and confrontation, I guess, if there's no aftermath in there.

GP: So, can you break that down for us? What the anticipation, aftermath, or confrontation and aftermath look like?

TW: Well, sure. The anticipation would be the sense that something is wrong; and that wrongness is building or it's coming for you. And then the confrontation point is when you actually-- It can either it presents itself to you or you go and find it, you try to hide and you can't, you know, whatever; but you are forced to confront it.

And the confrontation is, you know, the proof that reality isn't what you think it is; that it is far more deadly, far more malicious than we think – the rules aren't what we think. And often, that's where a horror story may end.

So, it may just be the anticipation and then the confrontation, especially a short one, aftermath. And you could start a story with the aftermath because you could have your character already. Like we could do a story about the narrator from The Tell-Tale Heart assuming he's not so insane that he's made this whole story up because he's an unreliable narrator; he's crazy, I'm telling you.

But we could start with him in the asylum and, you know, this is all done with; and now the aftermath is maybe he's haunted by the heartbeat still. Maybe he comes back for some reason, he doesn't know why.

And so, then the aftermath can lead into a new anticipation and confrontation. And then, in a novel, you have a lot of little anticipations and confrontations and aftermaths; and they tend to get bigger as they go toward the climax. So, it's like their little like real discrete building blocks of horror.

GP: I love that. I love that idea. And the image of stringing the beads on, I think like it makes even more sense now that you've sort of explained. It's almost like they're little mini story arc with the confrontation being a climax, but then it's leading into the next story arc.

So, that's really interesting, particularly if we start to think about the psychology of fear, right? Like one of the things, I think, that makes Horror so enticing is that the anticipation builds up our tension level; and then we have that release of the fear after.

So, like, if we're having these little mini arcs, we're having that buildup, but then the mini release and then a bigger buildup and another release until you get to the end of the story. Can you talk a little bit about both the psychology and the physiology of fear, and how that plays into crafting a horror story?

Tim Waggoner: Yeah. I mean, in terms of a movie, certainly, I mean, our senses aren't designed to tell the difference between something at stake and something that's real because in nature everything's real or you better take it as real, because it may kill you if you think it's not.



You know, a shadow of a cloud passing over a bunny rabbit, the bunny rabbit can't afford to ignore it because it might be a hawk.

GP: Right.

TW: And so, everything that we see and think and feel, you know, just physically, our body doesn't know it's not real. So, you can really get a really strong emotional and physical reactions to the anticipation and to the confrontation that a lot of people, especially for like visual horror, they love it.

You know, it does for them the same thing that it might do for other people who like roller coasters, there's a real feeling of being alive just having gone through this.

And it's psychologically too there's, for any kind of horror, there's just this feeling that you've done something not safe and survived – a feeling that you have triumphed over just yourself in some ways that you've managed to go ahead and get through this.

And, you know, there's that relief when you come back to the real world too. And that feels really good. And it depends on people; if people really, you know, have an actual fear reaction to what they read. Maybe some people do all the time. A lot of horror readers, that tends to go away as they get older just because they're used to horror more – so they read the story for other stimulation.

But there are people that really do, like you were saying, they'll put *The Shining* in the freezer. And they do have, you know, that stimulation is, I think, ultimately, it's good. I mean, it's a safe scare. It's a safe confrontation. It's also the kind of thing I think that a lot of animals do when you watch like little puppies playing, they play 'fight'.

And a lot of animals, when they have confrontation, they do a ritualistic fight because, you know, if you hurt yourself in nature, it's really bad, so better off to have threat displays and other stuff, but this is kind of like that. You know, we can sort of psychologically go through like a virtual experience of a threat and dealing with a threat and overcoming a threat.

We get to see what it's like. We also get to like psychologically test ourselves and you know, what would I do in the same kind of situation? You know, it's like all the people that yell at the characters in a horror movie, they're like, 'Get out of there, don't go there.' It's like, they don't know they're in a horror movie; if they did, they wouldn't do this.

[laughter]

TW: We know. So, I think there's a lot of-- There's just a lot of, you know, physically and psychologically that people can get out of dark tales.

GP: Yeah. It's interesting too, like what you were saying, like people yelling at the characters in a horror movie. I mean, characters make really poor life choices in horror movies. Like it's kind of astonishing how bad their life choices are. But like, what you said that-- They don't know that there's the serial killer or whoever hiding in the shadows.

One of the thoughts that occurred to me is-- I mean, basically, what you were saying is that like horror allows us to simulate the experience of the very bad unthinkable thing happening – and experience it in a contained space, which actually ties to a lot of research in, sort of, story theory and psychology of storytelling.



There's actual research that shows that the way people's brains work, it really is like it's simulating the experience for them as they're reading. What about when you can't contain it? Like, what about for people who that fear extends beyond the page? They can't close the book, like they close the book but it doesn't turn off in their minds. Like, what about that?

TW: Yeah, but he should probably stay away from it.

[laughter]

TW: To be honest, I mean, my wife, she can't deal with movies that have very nightmarish imagery. So, she can watch a movie about like a giant crocodile eating people because it's not nightmare, it's just a crocodile and it's ridiculous. But if there's some kind of demonic or ghostly apparition or something that's really like that, she'll have nightmares.

And so, she just knows that, and she avoids those kinds of things. And I think that for whatever reasons, there's no need to torture yourself to have an aesthetic experience, you don't need to do that. There's a lot of stuff to read. But yeah, I think that, I mean, the people are drawn to it like a moth of the flame; and, I guess, they're just going to go through a cycle like this on some level.

Maybe repeated exposure will kind of make that go. I think that's one of the reasons why people tend, if they find a type of story they like, like a ghost story, they tend to stick to it because the more you read, the safer it gets because you kind of know what the rhythms of the ghost story are and, kind of, how they work.

Same with the vampire stories; once you start to know all the basic vampire stories and you know all the rules, they get a lot less scarier just because you become--

You know, you go through the cycle of reading the same story; and then it becomes more about ritual and the comfort and familiarity, which you wouldn't think people would get from a horror story, but they kind of know what they're getting into, they do.

GP: I'm so glad you said that because I am one of those people. Like when I saw *The Sixth Sense*, I had nightmares for months – like, months at a time; and it was just terrifying to me. And, I was an adult. Like it wasn't even that I was like some teenager or a kid or something; like, I was a grownup person – and it was, to some degree, kind of embarrassing because I was like, 'Whoa, why can I not shut this off?'

But I think it is important to acknowledge that – for some people, what can be a really pleasurable reading experience, can also be just a 'don't go there' reading experience for another person. I also love what you were saying about like, it becomes safer. I mean, it's almost like we become inoculated or desensitized to certain things once we've been around them enough.

So, although I don't like the idea of us becoming desensitized, like in theory, because it then feels like, like what does it say about our society becoming desensitized to like blood and guts? That's kind of terrifying, in and of itself.

TW: Yeah, I guess, whether you can, you don't keep that compartmentalized, that desensitization becomes like something you apply to the real world too. I mean, most of the Horror readers and Horror writers I know, it's like the stuff that they read and watch and love. I mean, they are so empathetic.

My wife loves going to Horror conventions even though she doesn't like Horror because they're the



kindest, sweetest people you'd ever want to meet. And a lot of that may be because there's a lot of catharsis in getting, you know, a lot of negative stuff out.

But no, I mean, they would-- They wouldn't hurt anyone. And seeing somebody hurt – I mean, there would just be so much empathy toward them that, in some ways, there are people that argue that reading and writing Horror does create a higher level of empathy because of being with characters as they are in pain.

I don't think you get it the same way from a lot of like Friday the 13th movies because the characters, and I'm not picking on them because I like them. Here in my office, they're sitting literally, right now, inches from me. But the people, they just exist to be kind of mowed down like video game characters.

So, there is no empathy. There's only joy and delight and laughter, kind of, at the ridiculous wave that they're dispatched. So, that kind of thing could lead in the real world to, you know, some people, I think, to become desensitized in a bad way.

GP: Yeah. You know, and I love that you bring up the topic of empathy because again, circling back to like the research on the psychology of storytelling, like that is literally one of the things that researchers are finding is that people who read particularly fiction as opposed to non-fiction develop higher levels of empathy.

They're able to put themselves in another person's shoes or experience in a way that people who read only non-fiction or who are focusing only on non-fiction in those experiments don't respond in the same way.

So, it kind of stands to reason that Horror would amplify that, that it would increase that because they're creating that empathy from a place of suffering and being with a character, like you said, when they're in a lot of pain.

TW: Right. And I think that of people who set out to write Horror, at least, a lot of the people I've worked with over the years, they come to it more from movies and more from movies like Friday the 13th, and they don't even think about having any kind of empathy with anybody or anything in their stories. It's just not something they've developed yet.

And I think Horror, it just does not work well at all unless you have empathy with the people at the center of the story. It's like, I always tell people that, you know, if you imagine a monster that's wandering around in a field, it's nothing.

It's only a monster when somebody's there to perceive it or somebody's there to be threatened by it. So, the story is the story of that person, that person who perceives that person who is in danger.

It's not the story of the monster running around and eating people. I guess, that would just be a happy story about a monster getting a full belly.

[laughter]

TW: I don't know what that would be. So, it's like the movie Jaws; I mean Jaws is just a shark. But the people that, you know, perceive this threat are trying to deal with the threat; they're story, they're the people we empathize with. Really, in a lot of stories, like the Jaws character is just a force of some kind. It could be anything.

You know, you can have 'survival horror' where people are trying to survive in the wilderness. It's just the wilderness, at that point; it's against them, it's just nature. It's not even personified as a adjacent



type character coming at them. But the kind of stories that we tell, the way we tell it – I mean, it's the same way; by being empathetic with these characters and trying to get our readers to do that too.

So, I think it's a mistake a lot of beginning Horror writers do – a lot of beginning writers, at least, from my experience, anyway, because no matter how much they read, they come to writing from thousands upon thousands of hours, more of visual media.

GP: Right.

TW: And you know, we watch that as a passive observer. It's not connected to these people, but when we read that stuff's happening right in our heads, then we're a lot more active in creating everything in our head.

You know, we just have these little symbols. I tell students that, you know, writers are composers of music, really; and we give the music to people to play, and we hope they can play it well.

GP: Yeah.

TW: And you know, the instrument they use is their imagination, but we don't tell a story; we give people the tools to tell themselves a story.

GP: Yeah.

TW: Yeah. And the more that you can go ahead and try to create that empathy in your musical school where somebody will, hopefully, learn how to play it.

GP: I love what you said also about like, the example of Jaws is such a great example because, like you said, it's just a shark. I mean, we can't really hate the shark; like the shark is doing what sharks do.

And so, you know, once we start looking at the characters in the story and focusing like it's really about them, what we start to see is that the villain, the threat isn't actually the shark necessarily.

Like yes, the shark is like a logistical threat, but there's actually more insidious stuff happening among the people and like the people who are trying to downplay the danger of the shark versus the people who are trying to keep everyone else safe.

And so, in a way, having that idea of Horror being about the people and like; it's not about the monster, it's about the characters and the story – that also sort of shifts where the threat lies as well.

TW: Yeah, because if they just closed down the beaches, the shark would've swam away, eventually.

GP: Exactly.

TW: And they wouldn't have had to do anything. They're only forced to go out onto the ocean to deal with it because the mayor won't close the beaches.

GP: And that essentially creates, in my opinion, at least, a much more terrifying story because then it's not about humans versus the shark, really. I mean, it is, but that's not really where the true threat lies. It's about humans, sort of, duking it out amongst each other because some people are doing bad things and lying, basically.



TW: Yeah. You know, and it forces the characters to do things they might not otherwise do. I mean, the character Sheriff Brody, he has just moved his family to this place to get away from the city, you know, New York in the 70s where there's more crime than there is now. I mean, it was, you know, different place.

But you know, he thought he was bringing them to somewhere safe, and he didn't. He's completely out of his element and, you know, he's supposed to protect this community, but the way to protect them from the shark could be a way to kill them because they're not going to have the summer money that they need to kind of keep going economically.

And so, he's really in a bad place in a lot of ways and he's forced, eventually, to go completely out of his element to deal with something that he would never, he has no training, no experience for. You know, he's forced to go out there because otherwise, he'd never go out into the water after a shark, ever.

So, you know, there has to be a good reason why your protagonists have to confront the horror. *Poltergeist* is a great example of that too. I mean, the parents can't leave the house because their youngest daughter is stuck in some kind of dimension adjacent to the house; they have to stay there.

And the coolest thing about the movie is that they send their older daughter away; she goes off somewhere, she's not needed. So, they make sure she's safe. And I got two daughters and once I became a parent, I can always tell now a screenwriter or a novelist who does not have kids because of the things they make their parents do.

And they're supposed to be good normal parents, but they'll make choices that a parent would never do. And then when I watched *Poltergeist* when I was older after being a parent, I was like, 'This is perfect, this is exactly the kind of thing that would keep a parent there.'

And so, all of that stuff comes out of your characters. So, I tell people that you need to know how your characters react to danger, to threats, to stress – small stuff, big stuff, long-term. What would push them past the breaking point? What would get them to confront something they ordinarily wouldn't confront?

I usually tell my students that if you know that, it doesn't matter what eye color your characters have, because all of that will tell you what they'll do in a story – it'll help you plot your story out.

GP: And I think that's just such a great insight that sort of ties everything together that we've been talking about. Like ultimately, you know, a lot of people have this misconception that Horror is about the scary thing; and it's about bad things happening like plot, plot, plot – you know, the scary bumps in the night.

But really, at its heart, the best horror is about the characters; and it's a character-driven story like any other piece of fiction. So yeah, I love that idea of really getting to know the characters and understanding them, but, like; on this psychological level of; what would push them to the brink, what would be the worst possible thing that they could imagine happening – and then making that happen.

TW: Right. And it's one of the reasons why Horror is so versatile because you can get very literary horror stories, and then you can also have horror stories that are just kind of cartoonish plots that people might enjoy just for its own sake and everything in between.

GP: Yeah. And I love that you mentioned the cartoonish plots because you had mentioned laughing earlier, like laughing at just all the ridiculous ways that characters can die. There's a tie, I think, between horror and humor. In my mind, I think it comes from the release factor that like laughter is a release.



And so, you could laugh at the ridiculousness of a horrifying situation and the cartoonishness of it. Can you connect those dots for us? Like, why is there that link between horror and humor?

TW: Yeah, I think there's the unexpected and the unexpected, sort of, I don't want to call it a jumper shock, but it is that moment where suddenly, there it is.

GP: The punchline, basically.

TW: Yeah. Yeah. And it's the kind of thing we didn't expect, and it elicits a reaction. And yeah, there's not a whole lot that's different to that. In a lot of ways too, it's like a good magician's act; you know, the way that there is this sort of build-up to something, and then there's this reveal, that's a surprise.

And the surprise can be pleasant, the surprise can be just surprising; it could be a shock, it could be scary. But you know, mechanically speaking, it's the same thing. And a lot of times, especially like if you're, the kind of humor can lend itself to anticipation too.

You know, if you have a comedian who's building up as they maybe tell a story that's going to lead to a punchline, you still get that anticipation and then you get the confrontation, which is the surprise.

So yeah, I think they work great. A lot of times, it's just a super fine line you walk when you write a horror story, whether you're going to, it becomes ridiculous or not. And sometimes, people like to do the ridiculous or, at least, edge over into that a little bit.

Other people just are very careful never to cross that line because once you do, it was one of the things I didn't like about the second *It* movie because they did that, they did the humor in it a little bit too much the kind of, I thought crossed the line from, especially, the way that they did it.

Well, I may have thought the things that they did in the moment were funny looking at the whole movie. I think that they walked a little too closely and kind of crossed it a little bit into the, now we're laughing at it instead of being scared with it or by it or something.

GP: Yeah. I feel like we could talk about all of this stuff forever. Like, there's still so much to unpack, but readers need to read your book to get all of the juicy details. So, I'd love to hear like, what's next for you? What else do you have going on that you want to share with our listeners?

TW: Well, I'm going to be doing a sequel to *Writing in the Dark*. This is going to be a book focusing more on writing exercises, horror writing exercises. It's not *Doodle June*, so I don't know when it's going to come out, but also have a couple horror novels that'll be coming out in 2021. One in March called *Your Turn to Suffer*.

And I'm not sure when the other one's coming out later in the year called *We Rise Again*. The latter one's about a ghost apocalypse instead of zombies. Malicious ghost appear all across the world, and people have to deal with them.

And so, those are the things that I got coming up. I also have a-- I did a novelization of a horror movie that I can't tell anybody about because the movie got bumped back a year because of Coronavirus.

GP: Oh no.

TW: Sometime later in the year, this thing will come out; and I'm so excited to do it. I'd love to tell everybody about it, but that's coming out.



GP: So, we'll just have to sit tight and wait to hear more. That sounds so exciting though. It's bummer that it got pushed back because of Coronavirus, but very exciting, nonetheless, that it is coming.

TW: I would much rather have that happen than have people in the theater getting fixed.

GP: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. I mean, it's interesting as you were talking about like all of the bad stuff happening in Jaws, and I was like, 'In a way we're kind of living in a horror movie right now,' so it seems very apropos, all of the things we're talking about.

TW: It's true. I mean, you can-- You talk about people that will make bad decisions in a horror movie. I mean, people are making all kinds of decisions that other people are just like, they can't fathom why they would do it. And a lot of it is individual for all kinds of reasons why.

And so, it's not-- You know, not that this is a good thing, but, I mean, if you take any good things out of it, one of the things is you get a real-world example of how different people react to crises in very different ways.

GP: Yeah. I mean, it's almost like we're living in a case study for how characters react to a horror situation, basically.

TW: Yep.

GP: So, writers, I guess, we have to be taking notes. I mean, it's one of those things, at the beginning of the pandemic, I remember a lot of writers talking about, you know, 'We have to bear witness, we have to like record what we see.'

And in a way, like it's not just recording what we see for journalistic purposes, I think, but also like we are living through research that we can be using in our stories. Not that this-- Like, I would never wish this pandemic to happen ever, but if we have to take something out of it, this is a learning experience for us as well, I think, as writers.

TW: Yeah. And I think that any literature that comes out of it, I think a lot of it will be looking at it in a, kind of a skewed way or indirect way.

GP: Yeah.

TW: A lot of what horror fiction does is like, you can't look at an eclipse, it's too much. So, you kind of look at like the old little pinhole and the cards trick where you'd have a little pinhole in one card, hold over the other, and you can see sort of the shadow of the eclipse.

GP: Right.

TW: So, you're looking at it indirectly. I think a lot of horror or dark fiction, or just fiction that has any kind of exploration of pain and death and things like that, I think they often do that.

They look at it that way, that makes it easier; there's kind of a little buffer or a way to present it. So, I think we'll see-- Yeah, we'll see books about Coronavirus, but I think we'll see a lot of things that are more symbolically about it – not so obvious about it.

GP: Yeah. Like digging into more the emotional truth of the story, and sort of looking at it through allegory or through sort of indirect means as opposed to like literally tackling it.



TW: Right.

GP: So, I always like to end with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

TW: Yeah. My number one tip is to write with an immersive point of view, for a couple reasons; one is just practically, like I said earlier, people, they come to writing Fiction from so many hours of visual media where you are a passive observer.

You know, you imagine you're watching somebody do something else as opposed to imagining you are this person in the scene making these choices and reacting this way. And the other reason is because in terms of like, if you want to call writing a technology, that immersive point of view is something that no other media can do yet.

GP: Yeah.

TW: Maybe someday, you know, maybe they'll hook us up to computers or brains or whatever, and we'll experience the story. But, right now, the only way to get that actual virtual experience is through fiction. And I think that the more that people take advantage of the power of that, the more successful their stories will be.

GP: You know, that's a really good point. Like, I had never thought about that; that writing is, like you said, the only fully immersive story experience. I mean, we have like virtual reality and video games and whatnot, but it doesn't have the story crafted in the same way. The story hasn't been, like the writer or the player is crafting the story as they go.

And whenever we've seen it in films, like I'm thinking, you know, sort of fake documentary-esque films where like, you know, the shaky camera and it feels like we're watching the people-- It feels fake. Like at some point, you kind of get pulled out of that.

Like, I'm trying to think of like whenever they tried to add the camera, like the fact that The Office – the show, The Office – was supposed to be this documentary, every time it's sort of paid attention to itself was when the audience would get pulled out of the story.

Like, we don't want to know that there are these camera people in the office. We just want to feel like we're watching the characters there. I think that's such a great insight that like, writing is the only true storytelling medium that does that.

TW: Right. And it may always be, and it just may be the way human psychology works. I don't know. But it certainly is that way now.

GP: Yeah, for sure. Well, it's been absolutely wonderful chatting with you today, Tim, thank you so much for being here.

TW: Oh, thank you for having me.

Gabriela Pereira: All right, word nerds, thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.

