

From the Reservation to *Dawn of the Dead*

to James Dickey and Back Again

Among the most frequent questions I get when doing public readings of my work is, not surprisingly, "how did you become a writer?" It often makes me uneasy, because it seems to imply that the phrase's emphasis word could change the question's meaning significantly. For example, "How did you become a writer" is very different from "How did you become a writer," and "How did you become a *writer*," in its meaning. At least two versions of that question imply that someone in my situation--a reservation-dwelling welfare kid who grew up in a house with no plumbing and one electrical outlet--would seem an unlikely candidate to be sharing my words in public forums. It's safest to regard most of these questions as innocent, as they're frequently from students in college settings, hoping to become writers themselves. That discomfort remains, though. I suspect that there are some who in fact do mean to deliver the emphasis in those dubious ways, perhaps not even aware of its tone, themselves.

Given the frequency of this generic question, one would think I might have an actual answer. However, that would not be the case. The answer is different, nearly every time, but the answers are not so different from one another that any are truly inaccurate. For me, the writer's life is all about the conversation, the one readers have with each other, the shared experience, certainly.

It eventually also became about the conversation the writer tries to have with the reader, the dialogue in which I had obviously decided at some point to make an opening volley. The exact moment in my life that decision happened, though, is an event I have not, to my satisfaction, been able to accurately pinpoint. The response I usually give has some relationship to my interests at the time of the asking, and in accumulation, the answers serve as a kaleidoscope of how one becomes a writer, or at least how I arrived at that moment.

This essay originated when a student of mine, Mike DiGiacomo asked me if I would be interested or willing to be the speaker for the induction ceremony of Sigma Tau Delta, the English Honor Society. I told him, jokingly, that having never been invited to be a member of any sort of honor society, I felt much like I were living out that Groucho Marx axiom, where he stated: "I don't care to belong to a club that accepts people like me as members." I then clarified that this organization seemed to be in pursuit of a relatively formal kind of academic excellence, one perhaps a little more scholarly than I have pursued, myself--in short, the views of someone not as low-brow as I am. I further explained that am not a particularly good lecturer, and am much more of a storyteller, in and out of the classroom, but if he were willing to have his name associated with what I might conjure, then I would be happy to do this presentation. Mike, who was at that time enrolled in my "Film as Literature" class--where we discussed film adaptations of novels we'd already read--encouraged me to approach whatever topic I wanted. He suggested, laughing, that I might even talk about *Dawn of the Dead*, a zombie movie I had been

enthusiastically discussing in class the week before. With these things in mind, I wrote the first version of this essay.

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In my family, I have generally been somewhat of an alien, even from the beginning, "bookish" in a household where that was not a compliment. All members of my family are rabid sports fans, running from reservation to reservation all summer, chasing lacrosse games, and I could not in the least care for sports--playing or viewing. Once, I found a photograph of myself at maybe the age of three, in lacrosse gear, holding the stick fiercely, even appearing to cradle skillfully. I had no memory of this photo being taken, but I waved it triumphantly as proof that I had indeed belonged to my family's aesthetics and sensibilities at some unremembered point. One of my sisters looked nonchalantly at the photograph, and exclaimed in a bored voice that the family had wrestled me into the outfit, and that I remained in it for the approximately thirty seconds it took to snap the picture. A contrarian from the beginning, I was always off dreaming in some other place, negotiating other worlds, worried more about *Lost in Space*, than the Loss the Buffalo Bills received the week before. In that light, I suppose books were a natural attraction.

Aside from a set of encyclopedias that were current some time before I was born, when the moon's surface was still a myth and mystery in the night sky, I can recall five books in my family house when I was a child. That was probably four more than were in many

households on the reservation where I grew up. There might have been others, but these are the five I remember. We, as American Indians, are members of oral cultures, for the most part, not reading cultures, and while we might have embraced the immediacy and orality of television--the voices transmitting across the air--the reading of books seemed not as natural an inclination. I have no idea how we came by those books, but I attempted to read them as soon as I could read.

Years later, at the age of fourteen, I made my first formal book purchase, the sixth book I remember existing in our house, the first one I brought in. I had loved horror movies since I was a very small child. While babysitting me one Friday night when I was five, my cousin encouraged me to stay up late with him and watch *The Blob* on the late night scary movies on Channel Seven. In my desire, I even endured local newscaster/celebrity Irv Weinstein riveting western New Yorkers with stories of Buffalo Blaze Busters conquering another four alarmer on the city's West Side. After that Friday, my life would never be the same. On Monday morning, I ran into the classroom and announced: "Man, this is the coolest thing!" and I regaled classmates with a plot synopsis, including shrieks and pantomime of the Blob's victims, and gained instant popularity with the more prurient members of my class.

From then on, I tried to stay up late every Friday, to catch the scary movie. It was easy to go unnoticed in our ancient house, with my mother and members of her generation playing quarter ante poker in the other room. My mother, like many American Indian parents, allowed

her children tremendous freedoms and the responsibilities that came with those freedoms. I was invisible, in the darkened living room as they filled the house with smoke and laughter and the sounds of quarters trading back and forth, as if a quarter didn't mean a thing to anyone at the table. The truth was that "spare" quarters were scarce, and each of them were doing exactly what I was doing--engaging their fears by risking what little they had.

Sometimes, I sat directly in front of the television, hand-tuning the dial for the duration of a film, in a desperate attempt to improve the signal I was receiving from a television-station ninety-miles away in Rochester. We didn't have a dedicated Channel 13 on the television's VHF dial, and I often cruised through its snowy atmosphere, delicately turning the sensitive outer dial, hoping to pick up strange transmissions from other places. I found out recently that Canadian film-maker David Cronenberg had done similar things as a child, searching out the exotic in those blank spaces, and developed the seeds for his subversive television-based horror film, *Videodrome*, partly from engaging in this frequency cruising. One Friday evening the Rochester transmission was a terrible film called *Plan Nine from Outer Space*. Vampira has never looked scarier than she had in those early morning hours, phasing in and out with shifts in the wind sending her ghostly walk out to my family's finicky reservation television set.

It was an era before VCRs, and the only way to see a movie you had enjoyed for a second time was to wait for it to be broadcast on television, or read the wonderful novel upon which the film was based,

or read the badly written novelization culled from the screenplay. While *The Blob* would certainly reappear, continually taunting mid-century teens on late-night television, and *Vampira* would likely chase Tor Johnson across a makeshift graveyard again in a year or two, a different film entered my life around the time puberty arrived. *Dawn of the Dead* is, in short, an overly graphic film whose basic premise pits a ragged band of human protagonists taking refuge in a shopping mall against a horde of lethal antagonists--flesh-consuming zombies who return from the dead and attack the living. This film was the sequel to the independent horror classic, *Night of the Living Dead*. One of my cousins who lived next door had actually seen *Night of the Living Dead* at a local drive-in theatre with some friends, and had lorded it over me for several years, occasionally offering fragmentary plot elements at random times and immediately growing silent if I asked for more.

*Dawn of the Dead* was mine and I claimed it entirely. I went to see it on opening day, lying about my age, as I was fourteen, and it was a film with the unusual distinction of having been released unrated, but with a self-imposed younger viewer limit of eighteen. I had been so preoccupied by its eminent release that in the weeks before any commercials aired on a real television, I had literally dreamed my own advertisements for the film, and I was not at all dissatisfied when I left the theatre that Friday afternoon. It was as outrageous as I had imagined, unlike anything I had ever seen before and I tried to go back the next day to catch another showing. The ticket taker on Saturday, however, was a little more authoritarian and

could see, even through my "older-teen" costume, that I was indeed not eligible to enter the theater.

The film was gone a week later, and I had lost my second opportunity to see this horror film that I knew would be considered a landmark at some future date. However, given its graphic nature, explicitly the frequency with which zombies vividly devoured the living, I was quite certain, even at fourteen, that this film would not be airing on network television at any time in the near future. I could spin that dial as long as I wanted on Channel 13 and I would never find it. The novelization of *Dawn of the Dead*, co-written by the director, and including eight color stills from the film, was the book I bought, the sixth book to enter my family home as a welcome addition since I had been born. I even special ordered it from The Book Corner, an independent bookstore on Main Street in Niagara Falls, and read it in a single day when it finally arrived.

Of the five Pre-*Dawn of the Dead* books in our house, one was a book titled *Coolly*, a biography of a surgeon, whose name I imagined was Coolly, until years later, when I realized the title was an adverb, describing his disposition while exploring the innards of anaesthetized others with sharp instruments. The second was a biography that I had cashed in my baby-sitting savings to get my mother for her birthday. It was of either Doris Day's life story or Dinah Shore's; I always confuse these two entertainers. Okay, I admit: this one, I never did try to read.

The third was Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. When I saw a book with *this* title, I avidly read it, planning my next classroom

epic, only to discover there was not a single avian murder in the book. I was disappointed. I wanted the sensational. I wanted *The Blob to Kill the Mockingbird*. Even in my disappointment, though, I understood the implications for race relations in this country and that my future would forever involve similar cross currents, like those strange transmissions from other places, familiar and foreign simultaneously. The balcony seats will always exist for us, as far as I could tell. The fourth book was Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, which was an important book to everyone on the reservation, but it was too dense and formal for me as a child. I was unable to enter that world, but knew its examination of the ideological battle all Indians had to maintain in this country, waited for me when I would be ready.

The fifth book was the only one I was forbidden to read. This edict from my family naturally made it that much more provocative. The book's title was not extraordinary or for that matter, even interesting. My curiosity was not piqued by a story about someone giving birth, which was what I had assumed, given the title. However, every time I went near the book, someone in the house directed me to put it back. When I was in middle school, I picked it up one day, and no one told me to set it down.

My oldest brother said "You know what that book's about? It's about the rape of the land." I could tell this was a statement someone else had made to him, that he was mimicking some other person's critique of the work, but had not fully understood that analysis, himself. I said, "Oh," and put it back on the shelf. That



phrase was intriguing. It was my introduction to the world of metaphor. I came back to the book a few days later and read the inside dust jacket, which described the canoe journey of four suburbanites in Georgia, and the trials they encountered, from horny and belligerent hillbillies to the dangerous and unpredictable landscape. I could not build the bridge between what my brother had said, and this book description, so I decided to read it when I got to be a better reader, to see if I could find that connection. I hung on to it and eventually took the book with me to college. The book was, of course, James Dickey's *Deliverance*.

It was indeed as graphic and as haunting as the jacket had suggested, but the entire time I read it, I could hear my brother's phrase running through my head, and knew that he had given me a tremendous key to seeing beyond the literal, to seeing the larger thematic issues Dickey was inviting readers to engage, the uneasy tensions along socio-economic borders in American culture, and I could never thank either of them enough for these invitations through the door--James Dickey or my brother.

At this same time that my brother offered this key to me, I purchased an issue of the magazine *Starlog* which contained an interview with George A. Romero, the writer-director of, yes, you guessed it, *Dawn of the Dead*. I was hoping to read about the more gruesome aspects of the movie and how he had arrived at such outlandish ideas, but I received something entirely different. Romero said the film was a social commentary, a critique on the consumerist mentality so prevalent throughout the country in the mid-seventies.

This was of course not an idea exclusive to Romero, but that he had chosen to play out the metaphor in a horror film, to marry two passions, the monster movie and culture critique, caused a total perspective-shift for me. Suddenly, I could see one scene vividly in my mind: the protagonists stand on the mall's roof, staring out at the thousands of zombies surrounding the building and one person asks: "why do they come here?" Another character replies: "Memory? Instinct? This was an important place in their lives." I could not wait to see the film again with my new eyes. My world was changed forever, a second time.

I had always pictured literature as those lofty and only marginally interesting narratives we were forced to read in classes, but after those pivotal discoveries, I could see metaphor and larger thematic concerns in works I had first come to love because of the story. That new door remained open, and instead of telling my classmates about zombies biting other characters, I began showing them the elements of these books and films that made me rethink the ways I looked at the world. I delighted in having this conversation and decided eventually to find a career where I could do this full time. Now, twenty-five years later, having read thousands of books, I am still talking about these ideas, maybe opening some minds, maybe not, but still making the attempt.

In the time since discovering these two works riding in tandem into my imagination, I have published five books, most having to do with reservation life and culture, in fiction and poetry, one of them the recipient of a PEN Award, and even a book of poems, paintings and

creative non-fiction about another horror movie--*The Legend of Boggy Creek*--and the ways it explores the idea of faith. I teach courses in film and writing at Canisius College, where I am Writer-in-Residence, about a half hour from the reservation. The electricity-and-plumbing-deficient house that was home to my family for 150 years has burned down. Most of my parents' generation has gone to play poker on the other side, where the worry over quarters and a royal flush is not so great, and they return often, rise from the dead, but only as smoky voices in my heart, continuing to tell me stories. Their voices fade, like those snowy signals from distant channels, and the way to preserve them is the way I learned all those years ago. I, like many writers, am creating the novelization of a life, trying to remain as faithful to the narrative, but within the confines of a different medium. This is no way to bring those times or people back, but I can keep them in my memory, the scenes as I remember them, with a degree of accuracy that suits my needs. But you know what they say about the more things change.

*Dawn of the Dead* was at the movies again a few weeks ago, having been remade by another director, one who has different concerns--the media's manipulation and "branding" of news, the culture's preoccupation with the formalized degradation and cut-throat sensibilities of "reality television," the ways in which societies respond to those who have been infected with viruses, HIV, SARS, avian flu, and other equally timely and relevant themes, all, again, subversively wrapped in the clever disguise of a horror movie about flesh-eating zombies and the human survivors who try to negotiate the

new and hostile world in which they live. The world, in its current state, left an imprint on that director, and in turn, he tried to contribute to our continuing story. It was sort of odd that the two biggest movies at the box office that week were *Dawn of the Dead* and *The Passion of the Christ*. I guess we each seek out the ghosts that haunt us the most. I was there, in the theatre, for the first showing of *Dawn of the Dead*, waiting for the lights to go down, so I could run out and be among the first to have a conversation about this interpretation. If there is a novelization, I will probably buy it, for old time's sake, and start the conversation again, ready to run into a room full of people and shout: "Man, this is the coolest thing!"

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