

Author Chat Transcripts

Friday, May 21, 1999 3pm ET

On Friday, May 21st, barnesandnoble.com welcomed Michael Prescott to discuss STEALING FACES.

Moderator: Welcome to the Auditorium! We are about to begin chatting with Michael Prescott, author of STEALING FACES. How are you, Michael?

Michael Prescott: I'm doing fine, and I'm very happy to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

Pac87@aol.com from XX: Hello, Michael Prescott! Would you consider yourself to be a "horror" author? What are your thoughts on the direction the horror genre has been moving over the past five years?

MP: Actually, STEALING FACES is more of a suspense novel or a psychological thriller. That's the genre I know best. I've read some horror authors, but I'm not an expert in the field.

Monroe from Aurora, CO: Who are some authors you like reading? Also, is there any one book you think had the most influence on your writing career?

MP: I think [Stephen King's CUJO](#) influenced me the most, because it showed me that you could do a horror/suspense book with realistic characters in a realistic setting. I had always thought of writing thrillers, but I knew I wasn't knowledgeable enough to do a spy novel or something requiring a lot of specialized knowledge. King showed me that you can write about ordinary people and still make it thrilling. Other writers I like include [Michael Connelly](#), [Thomas Perry](#), [Stephen Hunter](#), [Steven Saylor](#), and [Dean Koontz](#).

JWC901@aol.com from New Jersey: Do you do extensive research on your novels before beginning? I really enjoyed COMES THE DARK.

and I am anxious to read the new one.... Are you like [Patricia Cornwell](#) with your preparation of your novels?

MP: Yes, but it's mostly library or Internet research. I read quite a few books about ancient religion and mythology before (and during) the writing of COMES THE DARK. And I researched psychology, mental hospitals, issues in evolutionary psychology (which used to be called sociobiology), and other things before I wrote STEALING FACES. If I get stuck on a scene, I usually do more research -- this stimulates fresh ideas. Thanks for your kind words about COMES THE DARK, by the way.

Cassie from NYC: Is it hard to write novels that go so deep into the mind of the characters? STEALING FACES gets into the deepest thoughts and feelings of the characters.

MP: Thank you. I think you have to find the character within yourself. If you're shy, but you're writing about an extrovert, try to remember a situation where you were very outgoing and get back to that mood and mind-set. Evil characters are handled the same way -- we all have dark thoughts and feelings now and then, so just focus on those and ask yourself what it would be like to feel that way all the time: What would it do to you...how would you relate to other people?

Janie from Virginia: I loved COMES THE DARK, and I am almost finished with STEALING FACES. I like the way you describe the killer as an animal.... Are you planning another book?

MP: Thanks very much. Yes, I'm almost finished with my third book. It takes place in Los Angeles and involves a stalker obsessed with a celebrity. It might possibly become the basis for a short series with a continuing character, but that's not certain yet. There are pluses and minuses to a series -- on the plus side, it's easier to market the books; on the minus side, I like doing something different each time. So we'll see what happens. As for the villain in STEALING FACES, he sees other people as animals, and the irony is that this perspective makes him an animal himself.

Hannah from Los Angeles: Do you agree with the killer in your book that everybody wears a mask that covers up who they really are?

MP: Not really. The killer's point of view is far from my own. I mean, we all masquerade to some extent, but I don't accept the killer's premise that the "essence" of who we are is our animalistic traits, and all our civilizing features are an illusion. I have read this view espoused by others, for example in [THE MORAL ANIMAL](#) by [Robert Wright](#), but I don't share it and in fact wrote STEALING FACES in part to criticize it.

Clare from Washington, D.C.: It's so great to be chatting with you! I just bought my Rocket eBook, and I love reading your new book on it -- do you think the e-book will be a success?

MP: Well, I think e-books will occupy a niche in the industry, like books on tape. I doubt they will replace printed books any time soon. As for being a success, the main advantage of the electronic publication is the publicity it has provided, and the opportunity for reviewers and some readers to get an early look at the book. Hopefully this will help the book, if word of mouth is favorable.

Jim from Brooklyn: Did you base the serial killer in STEALING FACES on a real-life person?

MP: No, although there have been killers who took body parts of their victims as souvenirs. I'm not aware of any who took the faces.... My main interest in the character is his philosophy, and I did base that on some intellectuals who espouse what might be called reductionism or materialism: the idea that all the mysteries of life can be reduced to instincts and chemicals, DNA code and ingrained habits and reproductive strategies. I think this idea has some truth in it but is dangerous and demoralizing if carried too far.

Jennifer from Seattle: I think it's cool that your book is out as an electronic book. Are you planning to release your next novel in this form. too?

MP: I've only done an electronic deal for this one book, but you never know -- others may follow. I think it's cool, too. I feel like I'm on the cutting edge ... and considering that I only got on the Internet last year, that's a pretty unusual feeling for me.

Doug from Cardiff, CA: Can you tell me more about this putting your book online before in print? Do you see this happening more and more?

MP: STEALING FACES is the first book my publisher has ever done as an electronic debut -- in other words, the first time the book has been available electronically before the print edition comes out. (I don't know if other publishers have done this.) So it's an experiment, and we'll see how it goes. Frankly, I can't say too much about the details because all I did was sign a contract, and other people handled the rest. I think you'll see more books coming out electronically, sure -- eventually it'll be standard, just like every movie comes out on videotape now. Whether there will be a lot of electronic debut editions, I don't know.

Kathy from Rochester, NH: As a second-grade teacher, I am curious about when you first became interested in writing. Did you enjoy writing as a child? What advice would you have for young writers?

MP: The first thing I published was the story of Tucker J. Mouse. It appeared in the school paper when I was in the third grade. My parents still think it's my best work. I always enjoyed writing, although I had an interest in filmmaking, too. If I hadn't been a writer, I might have been a special effects artist. For young writers, learn the basics of spelling, punctuation, syntax, et cetera. Read a lot. Read what you enjoy -- I was somewhat turned off by reading classics I was too young to appreciate, but I loved science fiction, and that's what kept me interested in writing as a kid.

Dawn from Hoboken: The serial killer in STEALING FACES is an author, a respected doctor...do you think that, in a way, he is wearing a mask too, just like his victims?

MP: Absolutely. He is a wolf in sheen's clothing. (And it takes a con

named Shepherd to stop him ...) I do think people put on different personae in different situations -- we're different in a job interview than we are at a party -- but few of us mask anything like what Cray is hiding.

jlopez from New York: Do you think that violence on television and in movies, books, et cetera, results in things like the recent school shootings?

MP: Good question. I would lay the blame mainly on the shooters. They were old enough to know what they were doing. They chose an act of evil, and they should not be glorified, glamorized, and celebrated for it. They should not be put on magazine covers. Some blame may also lie with the parents. Did they ever discipline these kids, or did they give in to their every demand? Kids need limits if they are to learn self-restraint and self-control. A kid whose every demand is granted never learns how to deal with frustration. When frustrating things happen to him, he just explodes. That said, it's likely that various other factors contribute to the problem. Guns, violent entertainment, moral relativism, even some of the ideas I deal with STEALING FACES -- ideas that rob kids of hope and optimism about the human condition... It's a complicated issue, but the shooters themselves are the moral agents here. They made a volitional choice, and they should be held accountable.

Sarah from Michigan: I really admired the character Elizabeth -- she is so brave, and in spite of her past, she knew what needed to be done to stop the killer. Do you think that her strength came from her knowledge of how horrible the killer was or from her own inner force?

MP: I would say her inner strength. Some people have a very low breaking point -- others are more resilient. I see her as the resilient type, down but never out.

Janice from NYC: I have just started reading your books and like them very much. Is California the setting for all of your books? Are you from L.A. or somewhere on the West Coast? Are you from a family of writers?

MP: Well, actually the book I'm writing now is set in L.A., but STEALING FACES takes place in the desert Southwest in and around Tucson, and COMES THE DARK is set in Pennsylvania. I lived in L.A. for 12 years, until riots, quakes, crime, and general craziness drove me out. It's a beautiful city in many ways, but it extracts a high price for its beauty. As for a family of writers -- no, there's just me. And I didn't even set out to be a writer; I studied film in college and meant to take Hollywood by storm. It didn't work out that way, so I became a novelist, and I'm actually much happier with this career.

Kurt from Springfield, VA: You got any plans on reading the new [Harris](#) book, [HANNIBAL](#)?

MP: Oh, yes. Thomas Harris is the best writer in this genre. Both [RED DRAGON](#) and [THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS](#) are masterpieces. I will definitely be reading HANNIBAL. To me, this book is a much bigger event than the new *Star Wars* movie!

Isabel from Arizona: Do you think the electronic book will help new writers get published?

MP: Maybe, but there will still have to be some kind of filtering mechanism to weed out publishable material from stuff that just doesn't make the grade. I don't mean to sound elitist, but there is a lot of material out there that isn't up to professional standards -- sort of the equivalent of what gets shown on public access cable TV. But probably e-books, the Internet, et cetera, will open doors for some talented writers whose vision may be a little too offbeat for mainstream publishers.

Arthur from San Francisco: I think it's interesting that you say you were interested in film -- because I think STEALING FACES would make a great, suspenseful movie! Would you ever consider making it into a film?

MP: Thanks for the compliment. I'd agree to a movie if they paid me for it, sure. But I'm not holding my breath. Thousands of books are published every year and hardly any make it to the screen. But if you

promoted every year and nobody may make it to the screen. But if you know a producer who's interested, steer him my way!

Amanda from New Jersey: The killer in STEALING FACES is really brutal... how did you get the idea for his obsession (taking people's faces)?

MP: Well, I'd like to make it clear for those who haven't read the book that I don't go into graphic or gory detail about this. It's really a suspense novel, not horror, and pretty tame compared with many similar books. The idea was simply a way of dramatizing the killer's obsession with unmasking his victims -- it was the only way to make the abstract idea concrete. Also, his M.O. had to be so distinctive that Elizabeth would immediately recognize it from news reports.

Kathy from New Hampshire: Do you expect to be doing any book signings in the New England area?

MP: No, I'm not scheduled to do any signings, but thanks for asking. I think signings work well only if the author is pretty well known. Otherwise you end up sitting by yourself with a stack of books in a corner. I know one author who went on an eight-city tour and sold a total of six books! That's less than one book per city. So I'm a little wary of the idea, at least right now.

Glen from New Mexico: I think people are becoming more like machines than animals.... Do you think that as society advances people will be less animalistic?

MP: Interesting question. Maybe there will be some evolution in the opposite direction -- a backlash against some of the excesses of the machine age. I don't mean to sound like a Luddite, an antitechnology person. I'm not. After all, I'm sitting in an air-conditioned room typing this on a computer hooked up to the Internet. But there are extremes in everything, and perhaps we need to cultivate a higher appreciation of nature, art, poetry, et cetera, to offset the values of the technological world. And this may in fact be happening. I think human consciousness has evolved quite a bit over time -- the mind-set of ancient Egyptians

has evolved quite a bit over time -- the mind set of ancient Egyptians and Babylonians was different from ours, I imagine -- and perhaps it will continue to evolve in new and positive ways, allowing greater harmony between the two sides of the brain -- the logical left and the intuitive right. This sounds kinda New Age-y, doesn't it? Well, anyway, ask a philosophical question and that's what you get!

Moderator: Thanks for all the great questions! We have been chatting with Michael Prescott about his chilling book, STEALING FACES. Any last words for our audience, Michael?

MP: Thanks for moderating. I enjoyed the experience -- my first online chat, ever -- and I want to thank barnesandnoble.com for inviting me. Thanks also to everyone who participated.