

Lisa Cantrell Talks About Her Novel

Lisa Cantrell is a writer from Greensboro, North Carolina. Last year, she won the Bram Stoker Award for her first horror novel, *The Manse*. In May 1989, horror writers and fans gave a tribute to Stephen King at the Stanley Hotel in Colorado, which was the inspiration for the movie, "The Shining."

Lisa and I arranged to meet at Stapleton Airport and sit together on the chartered bus to the Stanley Hotel. This seemed to me a perfect place for an interview. The following story was published in the August edition in "2 AM" magazine.

By STEPHEN T. WARD

Interview with Lisa Cantrell

If Lisa Cantrell were a house, she would be a Southern suburban bi-level with auburn shingles and azure vestibules. There would be blooming mourning glories framed by open curtains and a huge "welcome" doormat on the stoop.

Lisa Cantrell looks anything but the image you might have of a horror writer. She's pretty, candid, and smiling. Her description of *The Manse*, the house she wrote about in her award-winning first novel of that name, is as far removed from describing her personality as one can get: "The Manse looked pretty eerie on its own, even in the broad daylight and minus Halloween embellishments."

Though she is not a house that resembles Elvira, you can be sure that the outside light that falls upon the windows does not penetrate the darkness within. Concealed behind those portals is that wonderfully vivid imagination that translates into horror on the pages of her novels.

I met Lisa Cantrell several months ago and became fascinated with her both as an author and a person. Upon discovering that we were both attending the 1989 Horrorfest being held at the historic Stanley Hotel in Denver, Colorado in May, I requested an interview and she obligingly agreed. We arranged to meet at the Stapleton Airport on Friday afternoon, and we began our conversation on the bus ride to the hotel.

As we traveled toward Stanley, I couldn't help thinking of the coincidence. The Stanley had been used as the Overlook Hotel in the movie *The Shining*, starring Jack Nicholson in the lead role of Stephen King's best-seller. In a way this was to be a meeting of the haunted: The Overlook and *The Manse*. And that led to my first question:

Question: You write so believably about the unknown.

Do you believe in the supernatural?

Cantrell: Ah, I believe in the possibility of anything. Nothing is impossible, we just haven't found out about it: like all the talk and debate as to whether there is life elsewhere. Either way, it's phenomenal, whether or not we are the elite. If we are or are not, that would be an outstanding discovery. I don't necessarily believe in flying saucers... I would have to see for myself to believe. That's how easy I feel about the supernatural. I know there are a lot of people who do believe in it. I've never had any experience that would make me believe that ghosts exist, or that the creatures we write about are real. But, who knows?

Question: Your writing turns fear into almost living things that envelopes the characters. What is the heart of the fear?

Cantrell: Trying to do something that would move me emotionally, and yet trying not to be so specific that it wouldn't move somebody else emotionally. For my fears may not necessarily be your fear. I can be scared of a dark room in a house by myself at night. My husband wouldn't be bothered by that for a minute. But he's scared of death of ticks and they really don't bother me. I wouldn't like one on me or giving me Spotted Mountain Fever, but they're not something I'm afraid of.

I try to play on the emotions of the reader, yet not get too deep into the description of what I'm trying to scare them with. The idea is to let the reader's imagination come in and supply his own boogeyman. When I get to the heart of fear, I think it has to be what scares me. As Stephen King says in his preface to *Night Shift*, it's the thing under the sheet. And if we lift that sheet, we're afraid the face we see may be our own. What he is ultimately saying is, death is the bottom line. We are all afraid of death; how it is going to happen, or what comes after death. Maybe death is the bottom line. Anyway you approach it - a million ways - it's a circle. And right there in the center is where the heart of fear is, the thing that touches the majority.

Question: Is your writing based on themes, or are there issues in your own life that you try to contend with through writing?

Cantrell: I think I do use themes, especially when it comes to fear, I try to work out what scares me. The first thing I think about when writing something

scary is, would it scare me? Would this be intimidating to me if I were put into this situation? So, I try to put myself as a person and reader in a situation that I know would frighten me and try to understand my emotions. So, in a way, yes, I'm working through what starts out immediately where I would say, "Oh, God! that would scare me to death!" As I write about it and explore my character's reaction and what happens, and maybe I am working out - taking the heart of fear - and dissecting it. And maybe it's not quite so intimidating anymore to me. Afterwards, I'm able to say, that's really not so bad.

Question: Even though it's real bad for the character...

Cantrell: Uh-huh, right. And I've noticed 'm a confirmed Friday-cat-cat in the dark. I don't like the dark by myself, that's for sure. But now I find myself instead of reacting on an emotional level to it at times. When I wake sometimes, thinking I heard something, I'm thinking, "How can I use this in a scene of a future book?" Then it sort of snowballs on me. "What if it's a nine-foot hairy monster?" Then it starts getting funny. You start playing games with yourself. So, I think I've learned to dissect the actual first gut-reaction, which is to be afraid, and make it less intimidating for me. I think it's helped me in that way.

In *The Manse*, I started with the basis that many people believe a house could be haunted. I don't happen to be one of them, because as I said, I'm a show-me-first type of person.

Question: Which was probably why *The Manse* was so terrifying. You place yourself in *The Manse* with your own skepticism and rationality, then do what it takes to convince yourself that the horror is real.

Question: Which was probably why *The Manse* was so terrifying. You place yourself in *The Manse* with your own skepticism and rationality, then do what it takes to convince yourself that the horror is real.

Cantrell: Right. Exactly. It's a different approach to the heart of fear. Of course, there are certain things I stay clear of in writing.

Things that there is no way to take apart, such as a psychopathic killer, a person that could be after you with a knife and torture you for hours. And the drug-crazed brutes. I don't enjoy reading about things like that, or the possibility that it COULD happen. I don't really



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think a vampire is going to attack me at midnight in the basement of my house. But yes, someone could follow me in a parking lot one night; somebody could lay in wait with a knife. So that's fear stuff that doesn't go away regardless of how you dissect it. It's still there because it could really happen.

Question: Like the death of Gage in King's *Pet Semetary*?

Cantrell: Yes. That's something that would touch anybody at a certain level. In *The Manse*, I have the death of a child, a bunch at the end of the book, and people you have learned to care about. That makes for an almost personal experience that allows you to feel as if it were your own son or daughter. To reach the readers emotionally, you must make them care about the character. You must do something bad to a character as a

writer - you have to sometimes because these aren't fairy tales. They are in a way, but bad things do happen to people. If you can make the readers care about the character and then you do something to make them feel the emotions that the remaining characters in the book might feel, then you've touched them.

If you kill somebody's wife or child in the book and you have succeeded in making us, the readers, care enough about the husband or father, then we share in his grief. We understand. We put ourselves in his place and then it touches us more than in an abstract way. Not only do we experience death, but we feel the grief of the one that is left. So you have both sides; you see the bad thing happen to a character that you cared about, then you feel the grief of the other. That's the double whammy.

Lisa suddenly grew quiet; we had arrived at the Stanley Hotel. I studied her closely after she stepped off the bus. She gazed upon the white hotel; its white contrast with the dark blue rockeries reflected in her eyes - it was shining.

It dawned on me that the Stanley to Lisa was the embodiment of the Bram Stoker Award she won for her novel *The Manse*. I thought of the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* and then of *The Manse*. It came to me that this was indeed a meeting of the haunted.

Two houses made a neighborhood; and on this weekend in May, the residents (horror writers) had come home.

Note: Lisa Cantrell's second novel, *The Ridge*, is scheduled to be published this fall. She is currently writing a sequel to *The Manse*.

Historical Sketch Of Fayetteville State University

By DR. IZOLA YOUNG

In 1867, only two years after the end of the Civil War and the freeing of the slaves, black citizens in Fayetteville saw fit to create a school for their children. Together they raised the tidy sum of \$134 for two lots on Gillespie Street (near the Market House) and named the proposed school the "Howard School," honoring the popular Civil War General O.O. Howard, head of the

Freedman's Bureau. (Howard University in Washington, D.C., is also named for General Howard.) At the same time that they purchased the land and named the school, the same citizens appointed seven black men to a board of trustees and instructed them to maintain the property, permanently, as a site for the education of the black children of Fayetteville. The men were Matthew N. Leary, A.J. Chesnut, Robert Simmons,

George Grainger, Thomas Lomax, Nelson Carter, and David A. Bryant.

While all the appointed trustees were prominent citizens—businessmen and ministers—two of them became fathers of famous men. Matthew Leary was the father of Lewis Leary, the black rebel who rode with John Brown to Harper's Ferry in that famous effort to use guns to overthrow slavery.

Young Leary's widow, Mary Patterson Leary Langston, also from Fayetteville, was later to become the grandmother of Langston Hughes, a well known writer. Trustee A.J. Chesnut was the father of Charles W. Chesnut, another writer. Young Chesnut attended the Howard School as a student, and later he became a teacher and finally its second principal. In 1883, Principal Chesnut moved from Fayetteville to Cleveland, Ohio, and went on to write five novels, numerous short stories and essays, many set in Fayetteville and/or the general Cape Fear region.

At the beginning, the Howard School, of course, was not a university at all. Students at many different levels of academic achievement were enrolled from elementary through various secondary levels. The school building itself was an impressive square-frame structure with two floors. Academically lower-level students were taught on the first floor while the higher-level students were taught on the "high" or second floor. Even with its beginning centered on general education rather than university education, the school thrived, and many people noticed how the Howard School provided a high level of education for black citizens. In fact, in

1877, when the state of North Carolina decided to assist in the training of black teachers, officials chose to create a black normal school by giving \$2,000 to support the already established Howard School. With this support, the private Howard School became state supported and consequently the school was renamed the State Colored Normal School. With this change, what is now Fayetteville State University became the first teacher training institution in the state and in the South.

In 1908, the State Colored Normal School (Fayetteville State University) was moved to its current site on Murchison Road. With the help from several other citizens, the third principal, Dr. E.E. Smith, acquired "two acres of woods, a good six room house and a large apple tree and pear orchard," and erected the first permanent buildings since the original Howard School. (The Murchison Road area was considered rural and not a part of the city of Fayetteville.) E.E. Smith's house, built in 1923-24, still stands. It is a two-story white frame building on a hill facing Murchison Road, across from Seabrook Auditorium. The old Smith home now serves as a Guest House and dining room.

On July 1, 1972, by legislative act, Fayetteville State University

became a constituent institution of the University of North Carolina. No longer a one building, teacher training institution, the growth of the university reflects the noble ideas of the hard-working citizens who found it. Serving more than 3,024 men and women from various races and ethnic groups, the campus now consists of 36 buildings on 156 acres and the University currently offers 11 programs of study leading to the baccalaureate degree in 24 disciplines. Graduate programs are offered in 6 disciplines in Education and 1 in Business. With these programs, the University has fully embraced the same educational aims which Principal Charles W. Chesnut wrote about in his journal in 1880:

"We" wish to inspire the young men "and women" with ambition—honorable ambition, and earnest desire for usefulness and "we" would point to them the heights of knowledge, and tell them how to attain them; to the temple of fame and how to reach it. It is true they cannot all be lawyers, doctors, divines, but they will all be better men "and women", if they cherish high aspirations.

Today's Fayetteville State University is nurtured by its proud history and cherishes indeed its high aspirations.



H.L. COOK DINING HALL