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Q&A

With

William Timothy Murray

Where are you from?

I was born in Statesboro, in southeast Georgia (United States). Lived there for about 21 years. Then I moved to northeast Georgia, and I've been living in and around various places in northeast Georgia ever since.

Did you attend university?

I attended college only to take a few courses that I was interested in. I did, however, spend an awful lot of time at college and university, but not as an enrolled student. Some of that time was spent working for a large university library system. The rest of it, before I was employed by the university, was spent using the libraries and collections for my personal reading and research. I was such a regular and reliable patron at the Zach Henderson library at Georgia Southern University that the staff honored me with the same borrowing privileges that faculty had.

Have you always made your living as a writer?

I have not. I've pretty much always been a working slob. Nowadays, my books supplement my income, but they do not bring in enough to pay the bills. I rely on a small pension for most of my financial needs.

You've had a lot of work experience. Has that influenced your writing?

Yes, tremendously. Just because I know what hard work is. Hard physical work and hard, mentally challenging work, too. And by having so many jobs I've met so many people, different kinds of people. And I've learned something about their lives, their values, and their regrets. I can't help but think all that helped when it came to telling this story. The story has so many characters that do important things, that contribute to the outcome.

Do you ever have writers block?

No. No such thing.

What's the most challenging aspect of writing?

I think overall, the most challenging part of it is simply being willing to put in the work. To show up every day whether you feel like it or not and do what needs to be done.

What are some other writers who have influenced you?

Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, Patrick O'Brian, J.R.R. Tolkien, Ray Bradbury, Rafael Sabatini, Robert Louis Stevenson, Edgar Allen Poe, Boris Pasternak, Sir Richard Burton, and Antoine St. Exupery.

When you are not busy writing, what do you like to do to relax?

Read. Listen to music. Stargaze. Tinker. Work outside in the yard. Drive. Sail.

What advice would you give to aspiring writers?

Well, there's no "aspiring" to be a writer. You either are or are not. If you are, then a) you consider yourself a writer, and b) you write. If you don't consider yourself to be a writer then you aren't one, no matter how many words you put down. Besides that, if you are a writer, just get on with it. No sense in making a big fuss over it or expecting others to make a big fuss over it. Just write. Every single day. Even if only for five minutes. Just do it.

You are a native Southerner. How has that affected you as a writer?

I am from a place that is steeped in tragedy and conflict going back to the colonial days. So of course I have been affected by racism, the legacy of slavery, the legacy of war. But the American South is a place with a rich tradition of literature and storytelling. Folk tales, legends, and superstition. And authors like William Faulkner, Flannery O'Conner, Alice Walker, Edgar Allen Poe, Thomas Wolfe, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, Harper Lee, just to mention a few. And, at least when I was growing up, Classical Literature was very important in the South and was taught side-by-side with Southern Lit. Works like The Illiad and the Odyssey, Beowulf, L'Morte d'Arthur, Shakespeare, and so on. As a society in general, the South was not much interested in self-examination, for obvious reasons, and so that void was often filled with literature about heros and such that did not need to carry on any self-examination, who were supremely confident or who were tragic figures.

What was the hardest part of writing *The Year of the Red Door*?

Well, I'm not sure how to answer that. Looking back, I think the day to day grind was pretty hard. Long days and nights when I wished I was doing something else. Pretty severe periods of self-doubt. I guess all the usual issues that many writers encounter. But there was also an awful lot of information that I had to keep up with. About characters, history, distances, what the phase of the moon was, how long since this or that happened. It was pretty daunting at times.

Do you write with a pen or typewriter or computer?

I have used all three. But I no longer use a typewriter. I mostly write in longhand, then transcribe using a computer. I find that a pen and a pad of paper are wonderfully portable, and that I can use them pretty much anywhere.

Do you view writing as a kind of spiritual practice?

Yes and no. I know that some writers think that writing is a special kind of calling that is somehow elevated above more "mundane" pursuits, and that we are supposed to show others the way, so to speak. And I also know that some writers think that writing is a holy responsibility. But those views are valid only insomuch as any endeavor or any vocation, or any art, for that matter, is holy or is special. So, no, I don't view writing in general as a spiritual practice. But I do view my own writing as being intimately tied up with and part of my own spirit as an expression of my spirit. And I hope that whatever your work is, whether you are a doctor or a mechanic or an accountant that you take what you do seriously enough to see how it is an expression of your life while you are doing it. I don't go in for the fad of so-called work-life balance. Life is work, work is life. And life is inherently spiritual. That makes your work spiritual. If you are uncomfortable with what you are doing, then that's a sign that you should really be asking yourself some serious questions about your life.

Look, writing is hard. It takes a toll on you and on your relationships. And it is very easy to dismiss writing, to put off writing, and to do other things. But to doing so will put your spirit in peril. If you don't have to write, then don't. There are an awful lot of people who have been told, who have been convinced by others, that they have a story in them that they need to "get out" and tell. That's just hokum. That's like being told that there is a car out there somewhere that you ought to repair. Or being told that there's a fish out there waiting for you to catch it. If you must, then you must. And listening to what others, including myself, have to say about will just not matter that much to you. If you must write, then you had better get to it. And that is true of any calling. If you have the power to resist and remain a healthy human being, then you weren't "meant" to be a writer and you don't have what it takes to be a writer, no matter how many MFA degrees you might have. Some people just have the build to be a writer. Not necessarily the talent or the skill, those can be acquired. Just like some people have the build, the physique, to be linebackers. But that by itself isn't enough.

So listening to your calling is only the very first part of being a writer. That's the easy part.

What is the most important thing about fantasy that people DON'T know that you feel they need to know?

I think a lot of people think that fantasy, and maybe all fiction, is just stuff that's made up out of whole cloth, that there's no real connection with real events, or history, or reality. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Besides needing to be internally consistent, fantasy also has to have some foundation in reality, or else the writer and the reader have to work really hard to get over the feeling that it's just a silly story.

If your characters get into trouble and you can't figure out a plausible way to get them out of trouble, then the story is in trouble. You can't just make up some magical solution to every situation that arises. Also, you can't entirely ignore the laws of physics. If, say, a character has to go from one town to another town a hundred miles away, and he's on foot, you had better not get him there in a couple of hours. Not unless you've already assured the plausibility of such a fast walking speed. You have to be way more careful with fiction, and fantasy in particular, because if it is non-fiction your readers for the most part understand this world's essential facts. But if you are writing a fantasy that takes place in a different world, you have to somehow assure the reader that that world is like our own in some way. Or, if it is different, you have to carefully explain that difference.

It is all well and good for some fantasy stories to have their characters speeding about through the air on broomsticks, but I doubt if the average reader can really take that story very seriously.

How long have you been writing?

Oh, I didn't start writing stories until I was about seven years old. The first six years of my life I just squandered.

What kind of music do you listen to when writing?

When I do listen to music, it tends to be classical or cinematic music. I'm partial to Tchaikovsky and Brahms and Rachmaninov. And I like the compositions of James Horner, Thomas Newman, Matthew Fisher, to name a few. But those are all just general examples. I also really like pop music, Eric Clapton, Steve Winwood, and Lorena McKinnett.

But really, I more often just prefer to have silence when I write. Music can be kind of distracting. I'm really sensitive to sound, anyway.

What question do you wish that someone would ask about The Year of the Red Door, but nobody has?

Well, I don't know really. I suppose there are many questions about the story itself that I might find interesting or challenging to answer. I'd much rather be asked about specific passages or characters, especially the secondary characters, than about the process of writing the story.

What do you love most about the writing process?

Hard to say, really. But when I'm writing, I feel as if I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. I mean, writing is hard, don't get me wrong. But when you sense that you are doing that which you ought to be doing, well, what more can you want, really?

If you could spend a whole day with a character from your book, which character would that be? And what would you do during that day?

Oh, that's tough. Not sure. I'd be happy spending the day with any number of characters for the stories they could tell, or for the wisdom they might share. If you've read the story, you know how contemplative many of the characters are. Those are the kind of people that I tend to enjoy. People who don't pretend to know the answers to things, but who like to speculate about the possibilities. Raynor and Ashlord are that way. Robby and Finn. Esildre.