

THE HORROR...

# THE HORROR

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY



RICK

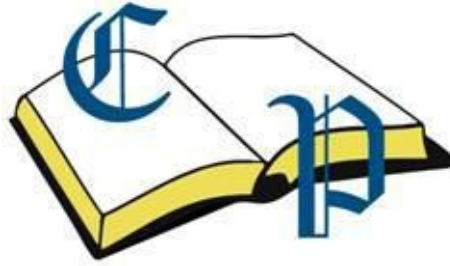
# HAUTALA

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## AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By Rick Hautala



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# Meet the Author

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Under his own name, Rick Hautala wrote close to thirty novels, including the million-copy best seller *Night Stone*, as well as *Winter Wake*, *The Mountain King*, and *Little Brothers*. He published three short story collections: *Bedbugs*, *Occasional Demons*, and *Glimpses: The Best Short Stories of Rick Hautala*. He had over sixty short stories published in a variety of national and international anthologies and magazines.

Writing as A. J. Matthews, his novels include the bestsellers *The White Room*, *Looking Glass*, *Follow*, and *Unbroken*.

His recent and forthcoming books include *Indian Summer*, a new “Little Brothers” novella, as well as two novels, *Chills* and *Waiting*. He recently sold *The Star Road*, a science fiction novel co-written with Matthew Costello, to Brendan Deneen at Thomas Dunne/St. Martin’s.

With Mark Steensland, he wrote several short films, including the multiple award-winning *Peekers* based on the short story by Kealan Patrick Burke; *The Ugly File*, based on the short story by E. Gorman; and *Lovecraft’s Pillow*, inspired by a suggestion from Stephen King.

Born and raised in Rockport, Massachusetts, Rick was a graduate of the University of Maine at Orono with a Master of Arts in English Literature. He lived in southern Maine and is survived by his wife, author Holly Newstein.

In 2012, he was awarded the *Lifetime Achievement Award* from the Horror Writers Association.

For more information, check out his website [www.rickhautala.com](http://www.rickhautala.com).

## Book List

### Novels and Novellas

Beyond the Shroud

Cold River

Cold Whisper

Dark Silence

Dead Voices

Follow

Four Octobers

Ghost Light

Impulse

Little Brothers

Looking Glass

Moon Death

Moonbog

Moonwalker

Night Stone

Reunion

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Shades of Night

The Mountain King

The White Room

The Wildman

Twilight Time

Unbroken

Winter Wake

**The Body of Evidence Series** (co-written with Christopher Golden)

Brain Trust

Burning Bones

Last Breath

Skin Deep

Throat Culture

**Story Collections**

Bedbugs

Glimpses: The Best Short Stories of Rick Hautala

Occasional Demons

Untcigahunk: The Complete Little Brothers

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# THE HORROR... THE HORROR

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# INTRODUCTION

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In 1990, a young horror writer, and publisher of a magazine called *The Tome* stepped into another world. At NECON X I met rooms full of living legends. Robert McCammon, John Skipp, Craig Spector, Charlie Grant and F. Paul Wilson ...and a very friendly guy with an odd resemblance to Martin Mull – Rick Hautala.

I'm not going to go into that experience in detail, but I am going to say that I was made to feel at home. I was drawn into conversations, treated as if I belonged. Rick, in particular, would talk to anyone. He always smiled, he had a million stories, and over the years, off-and-on, we remained friends.

He was one of the first authors who sat down and told me about the world of writing from the other side. Through successes, the problems when the mid-list crashed, his growing love of screenplays he was candid, helpful, and full of enthusiasm. He was one of the most self-effacing writers I've ever encountered, with one of the biggest hearts, and he left a huge mark on the horror genre.

We are extremely proud to be bringing his works out in digital and helping to preserve his legacy, particularly with this short autobiography. Like that day I walked into NECON, you have a rare opportunity here. In these pages you'll meet one of the greats. Rick will be sorely missed, but his legacy lives on.

—David Niall Wilson



# Prologue

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## “I ‘Yam what I ‘Yam”

**Y**ou really want to read my autobiography?

I doubt it, but if you want a summary, the “short version,” all you have to do is read the following quote from one of the best writers ever. I used it as the epigram for my collection of novellas, *For Octobers*. It bears repeating:

**“I want my place, my own place, my true place in the world, my proper sphere, my thing which Nature intended me to perform when she fashioned me thus awry, and which I have vainly sought all my life-time.”**

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote that something like two hundred years ago.

I especially like the “...**when she fashioned me thus awry...**” part.

So true for writers and artists in general, isn't it?

Everything that follows is mere commentary.

# Chapter 1

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## “First Terrors”

You would think that growing up Finnish would be terrifying enough, but as far as I can see, I had completely normal (at least to outward appearances) childhood. No drunk parents, no violent abuse beyond the usual “spankings” I got whenever I screwed up...which was often enough. I wasn’t a wild kid, by any stretch of the imagination, but I crossed enough lines, and when I did and my folks found out, my father “corrected” me...strictly out of love, I’m sure...not like Jack Torrance in *The Shining*. When my father died, I was sad, and I miss both him and my mother on a daily basis. More on both of them later.

Although I was born in 1949 in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and lived the first five years of my life in Rockport, we moved to the house my father built in Pigeon Cove, diagonally across the road from the house my grandmother and grandfather lived in. My father built the house pretty much by himself, evenings and weekends, over — I have no idea how many years. He was an electrician, an engineer, but besides the wiring, he also did the framing, masonry, plumbing, finish work...pretty much everything. One of my earliest memories (but certainly not the first — more on that later, too) was mixing cement for the granite stone foundation. We have pictures of “Little Ricky” (Don’t even call me that!) mixing cement and carrying a hod full of bricks. Years later, after grad school, I worked as a mason’s tender for a while. I never liked the work.

As “normal” as my childhood was, it was a different story when it comes to my imagination. That is where we may begin to understand why I write what I write.

I grew up — and remain — scared.

Scared of what? (You may ask.)

The answer is simple enough: I was scared of both life and death.

In trying to figure out why I write horror...and not just “horror” since most of my novels are ghost stories...I wonder — often — why I feel so damned haunted...especially because I came from a loving, warm home with loving (if strict) Finnish Lutheran parents, a kind sister two years older than I, and a bully of a brother one year my elder. Maybe he’s the reason I turned out warped. More on that later (perhaps...this shouldn’t be a therapy session).

Okay, so we can agree that, for better or worse, for whatever reasons, I’m haunted.

Haunted by what? (You may ask.)

I’m not sure. I mean, I could make a list of the things that frighten, unnerve and terrify me, but it goes deeper than that. Maybe writing this essay will help me focus on the reason with some clarity, but I have to tell you that I have increasingly come to believe that self-analysis isn’t necessarily good for a writer. It’s a given that most (maybe all?) writers are warped. I tell people in interviews and the few public lectures I’ve given that writing is a disease because its source is “dis-ease.”

Am I saying I’m diseased?

Well, yeah. I guess so. More on that later, too.

So back to my childhood. Maybe it’s significant that my first clear memory is an incident where I was absolutely, totally terrified. It happened like this. We were coming home from a visit to my grandmother’s house (in Lanesville, Massachusetts, where my mother grew up) to the home I lived in for the first five years of my life. So I was no more than five years old...probably younger. It was dark. I mean, *really* dark. The house was a fair distance from the main road, and it was the only house on the dead-end street, so it was quite isolated...surrounded by woods and a large quarry that still supplies Rockport with its drinking water.

When we got out of the car, I heard a sound. If I describe it to you now simply as “An owl, hooting in the dark woods,” you won’t begin to appreciate how frightening that sound was. A low, whistling hoot, faint with distance, wafted through the night. It, in fact, seemed to be *part* of the night.

I was petrified. I remember I started crying. With tears streaming down my face, I asked my parents what that sound was. Someone — probably my mother — calmly explained that it was “just an owl.”

*Just an owl!*

The sad, lonely notes drifting to my ears from the dark wood were all but supernatural in their effect. They reached to the deepest levels I could have had at five years old, and something was awakened in me for the first time.

And not the last.

That sound could have come from a lost and lonely ghost, crying in the night for the life it had lost...it could have been a demon, wailing in the dark, calling to other demons or trying to lure an unsuspecting human deeper into the woods...it could have been anything, but it was definitely *not* “just an owl.”

So is that why I write horror? That terrifying experience...an experience for which — to my mind anyway — had no rational, reasonable explanation...opened a door in my — what?

My mind?

My imagination?

My soul?

All of the above?

Perhaps, but there’s one more element to this story that may also explain why I write what I write. My older brother, Bob. When I heard the owl hooting and reacted in such panic and started crying, he started laughing at me. The humiliation I felt for reacting as I did was devastating...especially to a dopey little kid who had never heard an owl hooting in the night. Even now, when I hear an owl calling, I am overcome with a soul-deep awe.

This wasn’t the first or last time my brother tormented and mocked me. There’s a reason I wrote a novel titled *Little Brothers*.

Like I said, though, my brother was — I can’t sugarcoat it — he was a bully through and through. He lived to pick on me, always beating me up and making me cry. We squabbled continuously, and I’m sure, drove my mother nuts with our endless fighting. My sister would lecture us, telling us we should be kind and loving. And then, from my mother, we heard the words a lot of people in my generation heard and reacted to with sheer terror: “Wait until your father gets home.” When my father did come home, we straightened up because he didn’t hesitate to “give us a lickin’.” I’m sure that would be construed as child abuse now, but when I was a kid, my friends and I all got “lickin’s.” It was just the way it was.

My brother’s laughter at me that night I first heard an owl only made the terror deeper...stronger. And yes, his laughter increased my lifelong resentment for my brother who has to this day done everything he can to torment and abuse me, emotionally, if not longer physically.

Were there other terrors in my early life?

Oh yeah. I had (and still have) nightmares several times a week.

I told you: I’m haunted. That’s why I write what I write.

But the mournful call of an owl, so long ago, still echoes in everything I write. What I experienced that night is the same feeling I try to communicate in my writing. Not just “horror” or “terror,” and certainly don’t go for the gross-out, but a deep ineffable feeling for the things the darkness can hide and that are beyond our understanding. I mean, when it comes to understanding life and death and the universe, we are all just frightened five-year-olds. I’ve said on occasion that because I don’t sleep

well, and have roaring nightmares that awaken me, often with a scream, sitting bolt-upright in bed, bathed in sweat, maybe I'm trying to write something that will so unnerve my readers that they all might not be able to sleep, and when I'm awake in the middle of the night, I'll know — somewhere — someone — is also awake with me, and I don't feel so alone.

Is that a comforting thought?

It is for me.

## Chapter 2

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### “More Frights”

I will never poke a dead animal with a stick.

Let's get that straight right away.

I am not someone who enjoys the gruesome, bloody, or violent in anything...not in fiction and not in the world. Some people might even say I am squeamish. Holly and my sons take a bit of delight when, occasionally, at mealtime someone raises a fairly disgusting topic. They take pleasure and even laugh at how I can't listen to gross stuff when I'm eating.

I'm not saying I'll throw up. I've seen my share of violent, gruesome, gory movies and I've read books high on the gag factor. I can sit through them (as long as I'm not eating). But when it comes to “horror,” I fall squarely on the “Charlie Grant” side of the spectrum. I like my horror “quiet” and “subtle” and “unnerving,” rather than bloody. I'm not saying the gruesome doesn't have its place or that “my” type of horror is superior. I'm just saying what I prefer and what I try to do. (Emphasis on the “try.”)

But let's talk movie frights for a while because it wasn't just owls hooting in the woods that scared me.

I can't remember the year, and even a moment of research on the Internet would give me the right answer, but I was around ten years old when I saw my first horror movie. It was *Rodan*, and I saw it at the theater when it first ran. So you can figure out the year, subtract 1949 (the year I was born) from it, and you'll know how old I was when this happened. I prefer to “imagine” I was nine or ten years old.

My brother and a friend of ours — John Halman, another Finn — went to see the movie. There was no “parental advisory” board back then, but my mother made it absolutely clear that she didn't want me or my brother watching such things because they would give us nightmares.

(Interesting concept: “Give” us nightmares — like a nightmare is a gift you receive. I like that!)

Around the time I was ten something else happened. There was this new TV show called *The Twilight Zone*, but more on that later because of the three or four people you can blame for not becoming the writer I am, Rod Serling is at the top of the list.

Back to *Rodan*.

My brother, his friend, and I took the bus to the Strand Theater in Gloucester, paid for our tickets (Damned if I can remember how much. Probably a quarter or so), went in, and sat down.

Other than a Disney cartoon or two, this was one of my first experiences in a movie theater, and not too long into the film, I began to be upset...Did I say “upset?” I mean scared...frightened, and wasn't long before I was terrified and — you guessed it — I started to cry. I cried so much I had to leave the theater. My brother and his friend John came with me. Thank God they didn't turn me loose alone on the streets. But, my brother, once again, began to make fun of me because I was a “scared cat.” (That was the extent of our insults back then. It was a kinder, gentler time.)

My brother was relentless in his teasing, and in at least one way, I can't say as I blamed him. He did want to see the entire movie, but his numb little brother couldn't handle it, so he and his friend who were a whole year older than me lost out.

That wasn't the only movie that scared the bejesus out of me, but it was the only one I got so scared watching I had to leave. Years later, when people were throwing up and having to leave *The Exorcist*, I actually found myself laughing at how absurd the movie was...on some level.

My next movie was *The Blob* — the original, not the remake. I had trouble with this one, too — m

mother was right, it “gave” me nightmares — but I was already predisposed to nightmares, anyway. So I sat through it. ~~Again, a little research will turn up the year *The Blob* was released, so I could figure out how old I was.~~

I enjoyed the creepy feelings this movie gave me, and I found other scary movie experiences more pleasant than terrifying.

## Chapter 3

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### “Humor and Horror”

Then there were girls.

I discovered girls early. My “first love” was a girl named Sue Crowell. I was five years old. I know that because we were living in the house in Rockport, and Sue lived not too far away, on Landmark Lane. We kind of lost touch over the years, through elementary school, after I moved to Pigeon Cove; but in junior high, when all us “Cove-ahs” went to junior high and high school in Rockport, Sue and I reconnected. I think we even went steady for a while. I gave her a tie clip to wear. How quaint!

But after Sue, there were several other girls. When I was in junior high, one of the things we did to “date” was arrange to meet our steadies at the Strand Theater. (Sadly, the Strand went out of business. The building is now a liquor store. Sign of the times.) I remember that the first movie I went to with a girl was *The Premature Burial* with Vincent Price. I can’t remember who I went with. In junior high, we changed girlfriends almost as frequently as we changed socks. My “date” might have been Jackie Tuck, who, like Sue Crowell, is happily married today. This would have been a year or so before Jackie slapped me across the face in Roy Moore’s math class.

Now, I have to admit that our rationale for going to a scary movie was simple. We were hoping that the girls we were with would get so scared during the movie that they would cuddle closer and closer to me as the tension built. My friends and I, I’m sure, had our own tensions building in our pants. We hoped against hope that we would maybe even get to put an arm around our girl’s shoulders and — we were *really, really* brave — maybe even kiss her.

No French kissing and certainly no “copping a feel,” much less rainbow parties like junior high kids have today. All we wanted was to touch a real live girl, and getting her to a horror movie seemed like the easiest way to get her to cuddle.

I had a problem, though.

I was more frightened by the movie than the girl I was with.

Laugh all you want. It’s a sad truth. I was petrified, and if I did get to hug and maybe even kiss my date, I forgot. But the memory of how frightened I was during that movie is almost as sharp today as it was back then.

This wasn’t the last time I messed around with a girl in the movies. I got better at it. But don’t fret. I’m not about to go X-rated on you. I do, however, have a funny little story from when I was in college in the Sixties.

(For the record: I was an undergraduate at U Maine Orono from 1966 to January 1971. I started to work on my Master’s in English in 1971 and got my degree in 1974.)

Back to the story: Dateless, as was often the case for me during my college years, I went with some friends to a free screening of *Psycho* on campus. As it happened, a girl I was interested in sat directly in front of me with some of her friends. I was dying to talk to her and maybe even work up the courage to ask her out for coffee or something after the show. (We all know what any college guy means by “or something.”)

During a particularly tense scene in the movie...it might have been the famous shower scene...I don’t remember...I got what I thought was a brilliant idea. I leaned forward and very lightly brushed my fingertips across the back of the girl’s neck. She jumped. She shrieked. She stood up and spun around to glare at me, and in front of the entire audience, screamed, “You ASShole!”

We never dated.

But I had learned something valuable that served me in later years. I learned that people often use humor as a defense against “horror” and fear. I mean, why not laugh? Someone famous once said, “If you don’t laugh, you’ll cry; I prefer the former. Less cleanup,” or words to that effect. I think it might have been Kurt Vonnegut, God rest.

Okay, so my first attempt at mixing humor with horror didn’t work out as well as I had hoped. But it was a start, crude though it was.

Somewhere between these two events (having to leave *Rodan* and getting yelled at by a beautiful girl in a crowded theater) there was another movie that terrified me. Research, again, would give me the exact date and my age, but does it really matter?

The movie was the Disney film *Darby O’Gill and the Little People*.

Do you remember it? This was one of, if not *the*, first movie with Sean Connery in it. But Connery — as good as he was a few years later in the Bond movies — wasn’t terrifying.

It was the *banshee*.

If you’ve seen the movie, you damned sure remember the *banshee*. If you haven’t seen it, I would suggest that, even as an adult, you find a copy of this movie and watch it. Besides having one of the most frightening supernatural elements out there, it has — to my way of thinking — an almost perfectly structured story.

But the *banshee*. I won’t ruin the experience for anyone who hasn’t seen the movie, but it was without doubt the most frightened, the most unnerved, I have ever been in a movie. Maybe I was so scared because I was so young. Maybe what got me was the simply terrifying concept that when you hear a banshee’s wail, you know someone in your family will die soon and *it might be you!* Maybe it was the coffin-like interior of the Death Coach.

I don’t know.

All I know is, I want to recapture in my own writing that stark, nameless dread I felt watching that scene in *Darby O’Gill and Little People*. I’m glad my brother wasn’t there to tease me about it. Maybe he was, and I was so used to it I don’t remember. He does, to this day, tease me for crying at the end of *Lassie, Come Home*, but that only proves he has no heart.



## Chapter 4

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### “Your Next Stop”

So why do I write what I write and not, say, westerns or romances or (Heaven forbid!) “lit’ry” novels?

The answer is probably buried (and not very deeply) in the list of authors I read and was impressed by when I was growing up. There are only a few who are absolute landmarks. In no particular order they are: Edgar Rice Burroughs, Ray Bradbury, Rod Serling (both when I had to sneak to watch the show and when I read the anthologies he compiled), Alfred Hitchcock collections, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and — yes, above all — William Shakespeare. (Come on! Take the ghost out of *Hamlet* or the witches out of *Macbeth*, and you have no story!)

Of course there are many other writers who influenced me later in life. Can you say Kurt Vonnegut, James Lee Burke, and Stephen King?

I knew you could.

If I start naming names, though, I know I’ll forget (and possibly insult) dozens of other writers who consider mentors, and in many fortunate cases, good friends.

But let’s start with good old Rod Serling and *The Twilight Zone*.

Forget about the “social consciousness” and the surprises and jolts to the system in any *Twilight Zone* story. Who doesn’t remember the gremlin peering in the airplane window at William Shatner’s classic episode? Serling’s show, whether he wrote the episode or not, displayed a mastery of “hiding” social commentary. If you didn’t see what, say, “The Monsters are Due on Maple Street” was saying about us as a species, then you’re riding in the wrong part of the hearse.

But Serling did something more profound than “social commentary,” at least as far as I was concerned as an aspiring writer. Truth to tell, I’m not sure I was aspiring to be a writer then. Later on, I did aspire. I’ll tell you what really opened the door for me.

Serling made being a writer look totally fucking *cool*.

Come on. Admit it.

What was my sense of a writer before *Twilight Zone*? For a long time, it was what are now called “Dead White Guys” — Hawthorne, Poe, Hemingway, Faulkner, you know ...all those writers...all of them were, to me, anyway, aloof...distant...refined...miles away from the common. And then — here comes Rod Serling. The TV didn’t show how short he really was, but here’s this cool looking guy who was smoking a cigarette while he introduced the evening’s episode, and he was talking *passionately* about story and character and meaning.

Rod Serling was a genius as well as an amazingly prolific storyteller.

Sure, not every TZ show was a classic, but when you consider the pressure-cooker circumstances under which he produced *Twilight Zone*, you have to be astounded. The Beatles didn’t do Sgt. Pepper’s every time out either.

My mother, of course, wouldn’t let me watch the show when it first ran, so I didn’t see all the episodes in their original run. I had to sneak watching the show, and I saw enough to know this show and these stories and this guy Serling were *cool*! I have no doubt that the seed was planted early in my mind that I wanted to be a “cool” writer like that guy on *Twilight Zone*.

What got to me most in *Twilight Zone* — just like an owl, hooting in the night-shadowed depths of the forest — was the tone of so many of the TZ shows, struck with sentimentality...nostalgia...wistful longing...and chances lost and gone.

**“Of all sad words of tongue or pen,**

**The saddest are these: ‘It might have been.’“**

~~Okay, so Rod Serling didn’t write those lines, and you may be stunned that I’ve actually quote poetry in this piece, but in the end — and in what was the beginning for me as writer — “being cool” and “nostalgia” were the most important lessons I learned during my time in...”The Twilight Zone.”~~

## Chapter 5

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### “Swinging Through the Trees”

I think we’re clear now that I was...not really a “geek” in junior high school. I don’t think the term had been invented yet. Maybe it had, in California, and like all good things took its time coming to the East Coast. But I was definitely...different when I was a kid. I might say I was the “black sheep” of the family. (What writer isn’t, other than Owen King and Joe Hill?)

I wasn’t a spaz, but I wasn’t really athletic.

I played baseball, both Little League and pickup games with friends.

In high school, I ran track. I did the pole vault. (Best height: 10’ 6”...not bad for back then), and I ran the high hurdles.

Here’s a sad story for you: In individual team meets during my senior year, I ran against and beat everyone in all the schools in our (admittedly small) conference. Then, when we had the bi-conference meet, I was hoping to do it all again and win first place in the states. Because there were so many runners, we ran on the field instead of the track. After clearing the first hurdle, when my right foot came down, one of my spikes hit a rock, and I went face down on the ground...I came last. Life lesson, there, folks!

I also liked to draw and paint, but I wasn’t nearly as good as a handful of friends in school — Frank Sheldon and Alan Crane, especially.

I liked to read, but the books I chose to read were...odd, according to my English teachers.

I had always been a compulsive reader. My mother, God rest, encouraged me to read and, I think, was aware that I was the “dreamer” of her children. She always enrolled me in some book club or other. First there was the “First Book” series and then the “Landmark” series. These were educational books, usually dealing with science, nature, or history. Later, when I was in college, she enrolled me in the Time Reading Program, which published great — but unappreciated — books of fiction and non-fiction. The text editor was a man named Jerry Korn, who later went on to edit many of the famous Time-Life series of books. Years later, I served for two years on the Maine Arts Commission with Jerry.

But back in the seventh grade, I was awkward with girls, growing a nice little crop of pimples on my chin and forehead, and trying my best to find *some* way to express the thoughts and feelings of guilt and sadness and nostalgia I had churning inside, that seemed to have no outlet.

Why did I feel sad and guilty and nostalgic?

I have no idea.

It’s just the way I was (and am) wired.

I also suffered (and still do) from a terrible sense of inferiority. I know where this comes from. It comes from having a workaholic father (God rest) and an older brother who delighted in both putting me down and beating me up. The ups and downs of sibling rivalry.

It’s my low self-esteem I want to address right now. You see, one thing I am sure of is that writing is an all but impossible job if you want to feel a sense of accomplishment. If you’re doing it correctly, you are *never done!* Even when you finish a new story or novel or screenplay, you *have to* get on to the next piece of work. There’s a line from a movie I’ll never be able to identify, but it says “In a job like yours, even when you think you’re finished, there’s always one more thing to do.”

That’s the curse of being a writer, but when I was a kid, that’s also how I felt about life.

My older sister and brother far excelled me in scholastics, athletics, and “social life” (as in: they had one, and I didn’t). I can’t tell you how many times a teacher said to me, “You’re not half the

student your brother and sister are.” If that sounds familiar to you, you’re probably a writer or artist of some type, too.

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So what did I do?

Sure, I had a “normal” childhood, at least outwardly, but I was a dreamer. I lived in an imaginary world, and when toys had to be put away like all things of childhood I needed something to fill the void. Fortunately, I found books. I was a voracious reader, but I found myself drawn to — and reading — books which most of my teachers despised.

I say “most” because there was this one teacher...Fred Ives. He was my seventh grade social studies teacher, and once he moved up to the high school, my history teacher. One day, I was up at my bookcase, filled with books for “extra” reading. Mr. Ives came up to me and asked if I *really* had all my work done. I, of course, immediately panicked. Since I was *not* half the student my sister and brother were, I took the implied criticism and asked, “Am I missing any homework?”

Mr. Ives chuckled and said that he wanted to lend me a book. He told me I could not laugh or prejudge the book based on any movies I may have seen, that the book (the first in a series) was *far* better than any of the movies based on said series.

Intrigued now (and relieved that I wasn’t in trouble for not doing all of my required work), I said something intelligent like, “Ahh...yeah...okay.”

He went to his desk and got a dusty red book, no book jacket and handed me a hardbound copy of *Tarzan of the Apes*.

I have to admit that I wanted to laugh — I had seen a few of the lame movies — but I recognized even then that Mr. Ives must have seen something in me that indicated I would respond to an action-adventure of the kind Edgar Rice Burroughs wrote. (Andrew Stanton, the writer/producer of *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E* graduated from my high school years after I’d been there, and while I don’t know if Andrew had Mr. Ives hand him a Burroughs book, I wonder why Stanton’s next project is *John Carter of Mars*).

I read the first Tarzan book which, if you’ve read it, you know ends on a cliffhanger. When I returned the book, Mr. Ives was smiling as he said, “Do you want the next one?”

Did I?

You bet!

And it was Fred Ives, history teacher in Rockport, Massachusetts, who opened my eyes to fantastical fiction far beyond the books I’d been reading up to that point. Fortunately it was only a few years later that Ace Books started publishing paperback editions of Burroughs’s novels — Tarzan, Barsoom, Amtor, Pellucidar, et al — in small, forty-cent editions. You know the books — the ones with the amazing Frazetta and Roy Krenkle covers and title page illustrations.

I bought and read (sometimes in a single sitting) every single Burroughs book they published. I bought two copies, in fact: one for reading and one “to save” in pristine condition. On summer days I would sit under a tree — or sometimes perch on a branch twenty or so feet above the ground — and read Burroughs books.

My brother teased me about it, but what better place to read Tarzan than in a tree? Sure, Rockport wasn’t Africa, but in my mind it was.

Then one day a few years later, someone in high school — a friend of mine, Frank Sheldon — showed me an issue of a science fiction magazine called *Analog* because he, like me, was a Burroughs freak. This particular issue had a review of some of the Ace Burroughs editions, so I bought the issue and then just happened to read a few of the other stories in the magazine.

Needless to say: “Wow!”

Not long after that, Ace Books came out with their (apparently pirated) editions of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Remember the ones with the blue, yellow and red covers? I read those in —

must have been 1963 or so. Again, a little research would give me the exact year, but I'm winging the whole thing, so I'll keep guessing.

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That was it. I was gone — an addicted science fiction, fantasy, horror reader who devoured books upon which my English teachers frowned.

But I didn't care. I was beginning to live a life of the imagination and dreams, and — yes, when I was a kid, I sat in my dark bedroom looking out my window and up at the moon and stars, and wishing...*praying* that I could be transported to another planet and live a life filled with adventure like John Carter.

Instead, I grew up to be a writer.

How is *that* fair?

## Chapter 6

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### “Bradbury Summer”

Okay, so it wasn't all imagination, dreams, fears and nightmares, but there was one writer who combined all of these and then some: Ray Bradbury.

I was sneaking watching *The Twilight Zone* and later reading Burroughs and Tolkien and *Analog* but at some point I encountered Bradbury's work and realized, among other things, that this man could *write!* For the first time, I think, I didn't read for the story; I also read for the style...the voice...the poetry of the written word. I still value story above all else, but Bradbury was the first author I read who had a style — a tone...a mood — that I noticed.

And it hit me like the proverbial ton of bricks. Even today, I could show you the exact *spot* where I was sitting when I read *The Martian Chronicles* for the first time. It was at one of the granite quarries where I used to swim as a kid.

Here's where my “normal-at-least-to-outward-appearances” childhood and the writer I eventually became originated.

Until I was in high school, I didn't have a job except on weekends, when I helped my father — who was a land surveyor — doing fieldwork. Since I was the younger son, I was, of course, the “backsign man,” which meant I stood there, bored out of my ever-lovin' mind while I held a plumb bob or other marker at the position where my father had previously set his transit and had now moved ahead sighting either ahead to my brother or another helper.

Of course I always brought a book with me, and my father who was nothing if not a hard-headed practical Finn would tell me to put the book down and concentrate on my “damn job.” Since my “damn job” required standing around doing absolutely nothing for long stretches of time, I decided I *didn't* want to concentrate on it, so I continued to read, trying to hide the book from my father. I think he knew what I was doing, and I'm sure — to his dying day — that he did not “get” me.

I don't blame my father for being the practical workaholic he was. He graduated high school in June of 1929, so right around the time he was starting college at Northeastern, studying Electric Engineering, the Great Depression hit. Timing is everything. My father's father, who — like my mother's father — was a quarry man, lost his job, and from then until the day my grandfather died, my father supported his mother and father as well as his own family with a wife and three kids once we came along.

He was a hard worker, my dad. He was the Town Engineer for Rockport and, later, worked for the city of Gloucester until he quit to do survey work full time. And I mean *full time*. We're talking eighty hours a week minimum. I don't remember him ever *not* working when he was awake except other than meal times. Even when he was in his eighties and early nineties, he barely slowed down. More than anyone else, he taught me that: “In a job like yours, even when you think you're finished there's always one more thing to do.” Today, when I am trying to relax and forget — at least for a while — whatever I'm currently writing, I (and the love of my life, Holly — Thank you, NECon) have to remind myself to tell my father to be quiet.

We never took family vacations, although when we were young, on sunny summer days, my mother would take us to the family granite quarry (We called it “going to the pit.”) to swim and work on our future cases of skin cancer. Later, once I was too old to go with my mother, I used to hang out with friends — and try to meet girls — at the beach or at a quarry called “Steel Derrick.”

My mother was an amazing woman because I think she was the first person to realize I was a dreamer...an imaginative boy who in many ways did not, and constitutionally *could not* fit into the

“normal” (whatever the hell *that* means) work-a-day world. One clear memory I have from early childhood right through adulthood when I would come home to visit is of my mother asking me first thing in the morning not “How did you sleep?”, but rather “What did you dream?”

What a question!

What did you dream?

She taught me — perhaps without realizing it — just how important dreams are to ...we all, everyone, but especially to someone who values imagination, with all its light and dark facets.

Now you may think I’ve drifted off course here, but I haven’t. I remember that I was talking about Bradbury. I merely want to emphasize again that I was not some socially awkward, frightened, bordering on paranoid kid. Sure, I had a bully of a brother, a taskmaster of a father, and a head full of rational and irrational fears that I couldn’t talk about with anybody, but I also had a handful of good friends. We ran around the neighborhood and raised our own kinds of hell, doing lots of crazy things that today, no doubt, would get us arrested and slapped with mandatory community service and psychological counseling. But back then, it was what kids did.

We did all the things kids did before video games and the Internet. We played kickball in the street, hide ‘n seek, baseball; we ice skated and went sliding (we called it “sledding”). We swam in the Atlantic Ocean and in fresh water granite quarries; we set off firecrackers (usually in a neighbor’s mailbox or on their rooftop), built “huts” in the woods, explored the Indian Caves nearby, picked blueberries and blackberries, met up with girls and tried to kiss them and, later, cop a feel...all that stuff, that magical stuff that Bradbury captured so well in his writing (well, maybe not the “copping a feel” part). Bradbury, along with echoes from Rod Serling’s *Twilight Zone* combined with Burroughs and Tolkien, made me love reading, or, as it was despairingly called at the time, “escapist reading.”

But how to find an outlet for all the things, spoken and unspoken, bubbling up inside me?

That was the question.

Go back and re-read the quotation from Hawthorne that begins this essay and you’ll see how the rest of this whole essay really is just commentary.

# Chapter 7

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## “Steve-o”

Nobody I know calls him “Steve-o.” I never called him “Steve-o.” To me, he was and always will be “Steve King.”

After stumbling through all the usual nightmares, real and imagined, in junior high and high school I ended up at the University of Maine in Orono. Throughout high school — ever since I was a little kid, actually — I had always drawn and painted pictures. Sure, all kids do that, but I (and others around me, particularly my mother) saw and encouraged me in art. I suppose I had a modicum of talent, and I certainly had the drive to create because of all the things, dark and light, roiling in my imagination.

I was looking for an outlet, and drawing seemed to be it.

Rockport, Massachusetts, in case you didn't know, is (or at least was) known as an artist's colony. If you've ever been to Bearskin Neck, you've seen the galleries, but when I was growing up in the Fifties and Sixties, there were plenty of active painters in town, and you could go to the Rockport Artists Association and see their work on display. When I was ten or eleven, I even posed to have my portrait painted by students in an art class. Probably got paid fifty cents for sitting there for a couple hours. It was hell, I remember that much.

Drawing and art seemed to be the thing. I had been (and still am, to this day) impressed — not blown away by the artwork I first encountered on the covers of the Ace Burroughs books. Frank Frazetta and Roy Krenkel were *great* “illustrators.”

(Side note: I make a clear distinction between “illustrators” and “artists” the same way I make a distinction between “authors” and “writers.” I side solidly with “writers” and “illustrators” — the blue collar working people in the arts.)

All through high school, I had my sights set on being a commercial artist. The daughter of someone my mother knew painted pictures for Hallmark Greeting Cards. I thought even that would be a much better job than...I don't know...being “backsight” man on a surveying team.

So in my senior year, I applied to all the art schools I could. Mass Art...RISDI...At the same time my biology teacher (Frank Morgan) said he was impressed with my work in his Advanced Biology class. (I think it was because I could draw some really cool pictures of what I was seeing through the microscope.) He was a graduate of the University of Maine, and he encouraged me to apply there to study Biology. Since the father of my girlfriend at the time (Geneva Parker) was also a graduate of U.M.O. and her brother Russ was currently a student there, I decided to apply. I also applied to the University of Massachusetts as a “safety” school.

Then the crisis of confidence (remember my bugbear of “low self-esteem”) and a bureaucratic slipup sealed my fate.

I was scheduled to show my portfolio at the art schools where I had applied, and I didn't have what I thought was “admission quality” work. There were two other “artists” in my class — the previous ones mentioned Frank Sheldon and Alan Crane. Simply put — these guys were *way* better than I was. I couldn't compete, and thinking — knowing that I would be up against people even better than Frank and Alan, I chickened out. I blew off my portfolio interviews. Just didn't show up.

When I hadn't heard from my safety school, UMass, I contacted the admissions office and was informed that they never got my application. So the autumn after my high school graduation in 1966, by default, I was off to the University of Maine in Orono...the only college into which I had been accepted.



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