

INTERVIEW: JOE R. LANSDALE

By Amy Minton

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The three Drive-in books have everything you expect when you pick up a book with Joe R. Lansdale on the cover—sex, death, humor, violence, and a thick layer of Texas drawl. Individually, the books are wild, romping rides. Collectively, they’re some of the weirdest, most unique, most American novels to come out in the last twenty years.

The first book was published in 1989. The last book, released only in limited edition, came out in 2005. In between, Lansdale spent his time writing dozens of novels, including the nine that make up the best-selling Hap and Leonard series.

In May, Underland Press will put out the three Drive-in novels together in one monster omnibus. Writer, fan, and fellow Texan Amy Minton cornered Lansdale for an interview, starting by asking what kept him coming back to the Drive-in for more:

JOE R. LANSDALE:

I was supposed to write the third novel for a specialty publisher many years ago, but the first two, though they were written quickly, were very difficult to write. They were both written in a short time, but to make them feel breezy and simple was very hard. I hated them both when I was writing them, which is rare for me. The third was different. I wrote it quickly, and it was easy to write. I forgot a character, Bob, in the first edition of the book. Just plain forgot him. I replaced him in the special edition and killed him off early to take the easy way out, because the book was not about Bob; it was about the things I had on my mind, about how imagination works, and, of course social criticism without it eclipsing the entertainment factor.

AMY MINTON:

Looking at the spacing of the publications, I see that the US had different presidents at each publication date, and not just “presidents”—but big shifts in social/economic/political eras (Bush I, Clinton, Bush II, and Obama). Knowing your propensity to use current events as your guide, did this have anything to do with your decision to revisit the series?

JRL:

The political situation always affects my writing. When things are dark, my work may in fact be more humorous, at least on the surface, but underneath it all is a tremendous amount of darkness. I’m pleased when people read these novels and laugh and have a good time, but I’m more pleased with the readers who see what’s underneath, and not to be immodest, but I think there’s a lot. I consider all three novels serious in their own way. But, if you just get a laugh, or a thrill, I’m happy with that. But it’s nice when readers get more.

AM:

Early in book one, there’s a spectacular action sequence where Willard fights a bar goon to defend Randy. In books two and three 3, Grace uses martial arts expertise to kick ass, but also uses martial arts philosophy and discipline to guide her. In your non-writing life, you’re a founding member of Shen Chuan Martial Science. Can you talk a little about the role of martial arts in your life, and in the novels?

JRL:

Martial arts is important to me. Grace, in book two, uses a more theatrical, movie version of martial arts to stay in the theme of being somewhat inside a movie. I’ve used it more realistically in the Hap and Leonard novels. Though I’m not afraid to go over the top there, the techniques they use are real and practical, and like a lot of real fights, they’re more like brawls. The philosophy is very important to me, and I apply it to my writing. Discipline. Focus. Purpose. Economy of motion. And so on.

AM:

The three books have very different tones. The first book reads like outright splatterpunk with social commentary layered under buckets of blood. The second book pushes social commentary to the foreground, leaving the gore in the background.

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The final book shifts to a Texas-tall-tale/fabulist style in which mysticism takes the stage instead of gore—and, as always, social commentary is layered in. Are we witnessing the evolution of the trademark Joe Lansdale style, or a sort of journey of your finding your comfortable spot as a writer? Or is that oversimplifying it?

JRL:

That's a tough one. There was always for me a sense of parody—loving parody—in the manner of a Roger Corman movie meets Camus lite, with a bit of William Golding and *Lord of the Flies* tossed in. The gore was quite in fashion then, and I had made it somewhat fashionable, along with a number of writers, at least to a small core group that sort of laid the backbeat for when Clive Barker arrived. He wasn't first, but he got the push. No criticism in that, I'm just saying a variety of short stories laid the groundwork, along with movies, more than novels. I thought too many writers were embracing it as an end-all, and not a component, so that's why it's so over the top. For book two, the gore thing was important, but the satire and parody took center stage. I like changing it up, and that's been both a blessing and a curse for me as a career writer. I also tried to keep the B-movie absurdity there. By book three, it was a Texas tall-tale. The mysticism was symbolic, not meant to be any kind of statement on the metaphysical, but more on the psychological. Freudian, Jungian, Pecos Billian, Swiftian, Twainian.

AM:

Is it safe to say, then, that the style in book three is where you are most comfortable as a writer? That seems to be the style in which the Hap and Leonard novels reside.

JRL:

I think I've been writing long enough now that the style is better developed. When I started writing the third novel, I felt as if I fell in with Jack and that world as if I had never left it. That said, the things I wanted to write about in book three were different. It was, unlike the other two, a comfortable book to write. I like all three books, and as a whole they are one large, strange novel. By book three, I also felt that Jack had changed somewhat, which seemed reasonable. Early experiences, in symbolic form sometimes, are dotted throughout the novels. The first novel is actually closer in experience to reality, minus comet and black goo and Popcorn King.

AM:

Lightning Round! The book or author who most influenced you?

JRL:

Impossible to answer with one. Edgar Rice Burroughs is my sentimental favorite, and assured me I wanted to be an author. As an adult, Flannery O'Connor, and Harper Lee's one beautiful novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I know. I cheated.

AM:

Drive-in three-book omnibus: why now?

JRL:

Why not? It was something I wanted to happen all along, and when Underland asked, I went for it.

AM:

Favorite horror movie?

JRL:

The Haunting, original.

AM:

Favorite drive-in?

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JRL:

River Road in Longview [Texas]. Long gone.

AM:

Raisinettes or Jujubes?

JL:

Neither. I'm a popcorn kind of guy. But a chocolate almond is nice.

AM:

What's next from Joe Lansdale? Novels or stories forthcoming? A current obsession you're working out on the page?

JRL:

I'm working on a new Hap and Leonard novel for Knopf, and soon as I finish that I'll be doing a Depression-era Young Adult for Delacorte. Also, I'll be working on a screenplay of one of my novels, and a bit of comic work. My obsession is an unwritten novel that's pushing at me, but I can't get to it for a while.

AM:

Is there anything you'd like to add?

JRL:

Only that I hope readers enjoy the new *Drive-in* collection. Over and out.

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