

# INTERVIEW: JOHN SHIRLEY

By Kara Donahue

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John Shirley is a man of many talents. He will make you feel comfortable and laugh heartily mere moments before turning your stomach inside out *while* unearthing your inner misanthropist; and when you think you see mercy on the horizon, he performs the coup de grace by bringing all of your most basic bodily fears to life in graphic detail—all with a mere nine page story. But after you read *In Extremis*, you will see that he wields his power responsibly, though I may think twice about taking a BART train ever again. Thanks John.

**Kara Donahue:**

Themes in this collection run the taboo gamut: hookers, phantoms, suicide, misanthropy, dystopian future, and annihilation of Earth. But the most common theme seems to be **evil**. The nature of evil, it's unique manifestations, a dimension that lurks in all of us. When did you first find yourself interested in the despicable?

**John Shirley:**

I don't think of it as the despicable, it's just the world. Some people, who live in carefully constructed psychological shelters, don't see it so much. I do write about evil, but (except for one story,) I don't actually think of it as a thing-in-itself, but a materialization of the lowest aspect of our animal nature, like the madness of a starved animal trapped against a wall—a state showing up almost epidemically in life. It's as if we're trapped in an existential maze and going feral in it. Some find a way out. But our dark side—the primeval in us—is lurking just under the surface. It rules us unless we rule it; to rule it we must know it's there.

**KD:**

In the introduction to *In Extremis*, you liken extreme storytelling to punk rock: extremely abrasive and uncomfortably close. Not to force you to choose your favorite child, but which story in this collection do you find to be the most (in keeping with the theme,) extreme? Which story were you most uneasy about publishing in a more permanent form than your works in magazines?

**JS:**

You assume I was uneasy about publishing any of them. There are stories that made me uneasy in the actual act of writing (like my novel *Wetbones* . . . which however is one of my best novels). I was uneasy writing *Faces In Walls*; the horror of his situation and the extreme mental state overwhelming him was hard to bear during the writing process. *Ten Things to be Grateful For* is, well, rather overwhelming for people. The *You Blundering Idiot* piece is rather extreme, though its extremity is leavened with dark humor. *Cram* has made people I've met afraid of riding subways. My current favorite story in the book is *Raise Your Hand if You're Dead*, which I think is particularly timely, and particularly meaningful for the world today; its symbols are fiercely intense. The BUDDY AND RAY piece is pretty damn extreme and it draws from people and places I've seen, while not being literally true to life—and I do think it's a memorable story; I've gotten a lot of reaction to that story from readers since it was first published, a lot of people were quite shaken by it and they're still talking about it long after. I actually cut some of the seamier stuff from it because I didn't want people to think it was merely prurient . . . but it still kicks ass.

**KD:**

Speaking of kick-ass, you are a musician. And not we're not talking folk music or experimental jazz, we're talking *rock*, punk rock, melt-your-face-off music. How has your musical side influenced your writing? How do readers benefit from your multitude of dimensions?

**JS:**

I listen to music while writing—music by various artists, songs specifically chosen to be “writing friendly”—and the energy, the rhythm of it seeps into the prose. As a lead singer I was sometimes able to reach out into the audience, right into people, and it's a transcendent thing that makes the whole experience a whole that's more than the sum of the parts. I try to get there in writing, to reach through that membrane, between the writer and the reader, without being “intrusive”—it's more like reaching for imagery that strikes chords in people in a way that's a touch shamanistic. That sounds terribly pretentious but it's really what I try for, and in a book like this, a book that tries to shatter limits in a meaningful way, I'm doing my best to reach that level of intimacy and release.

**KD:**

Some of your stories like *Screw, Faces in Walls*, and *Raise Your Hand if You're Dead* unfold in complex worlds that feel like they could pass seamlessly into the film genre. Have you considered turning any of your pieces into screenplays?

**JS:**

I've written screenplays of my novels *Crawlers* and *The Brigade*, which have been optioned but not yet produced. My novella *Her Hunger* is a screenplay waiting to be a movie. Somewhere there's a script for my story *Jody and Annie on TV*; my story *The Rubber Smile* is in development as an independent film. We'll see if it goes to the next level. I might indeed spec out a script of *Raise Your Hand if You're Dead*.

**KD:**

In your piece *The Gun as an Aid to Poetry*, your protagonist cures his writer's block only with the aid of an obsessed fan. Having suffered ‘the block’ myself, I can sympathize with this situation. This was also your only piece prominently featuring a career writer. Have you experienced a crazed fan before? Why did you choose this as your one new exclusive piece for *In Extremis*?

**JS:**

It's simply my newest short story that fit into the book—and maybe there's a little bit of personal identification with the artist struggling to get his art out of himself. Some of the stories in *In Extremis* are extreme in their own peculiar ways—*Gotterdammergun* is about an awful transformation of the world from an extremely absurd cause—it doesn't show its extremity till the end. *The Gun as an Aid to Poetry* is mostly about how creativity can require a commitment as powerful as a soldier's—running across No Man's Land in the teeth of withering enemy fire. Creativity at its most powerful extracts a cost from the creator. The artist has to go right up to the edge of the abyss, sometimes, to get at the truth . . . The gun at his head symbolizes that—and it's also a situation that could arise, and could payoff artistically and tragically at once. All this sounds melodramatic but look at the cost that writers often pay in their lives: many of them are alcoholics, they struggle with addiction, they can't keep marriages together, they are harsh edged, eccentric people . . .

**KD:**

A few of your stories in this collection dance the line between satire and nausea, (“*Just Like Suzie*” comes to mind,) do you worry that some readers won't grasp the absurdism of it all? What would you say to those readers?

**JS:**

I can't worry about that. There's not a chance in Hell that all readers are going to get through a story like that. But I do believe there's a substantial audience for this book, there are a lot of people who like, say, Chuck Palahniuk, Charles Bukowski, perhaps Baudelaire and William Burroughs, and composers like Lou Reed, who will appreciate this book—and those people are going to understand. They'll be 'on the bus.' Like, my audience will 'get' that the *Vreedeez* piece is clearly satirical, and they'll 'get' that a story like *Just Like Suzie* is absurdist, but they'll also 'get' that it's describing people I've met, (haven't seen them in THAT situation though!) and it has baseline of truth in it. It's a case of over-the-top symbolism, that particular story. *Suzie* is about how some of us dehumanize people for the sake of our appetites, turn people into their little toys . . . and then they break the toys. If you think it goes too far, well, look at the casualties on our urban battlefield again . . .

**KD:**

Favorite piece in the collection? Why?

**JS:**

I like the way *Raise Your Hand if You're Dead* brings together all the different kinds of writing I explored in my career—it's cyberpunk, fantasy, horror, and noir all at once. To me it's as if I'm playing hard rock, folk rock, goth, electronica, and urban music all at once, fused into one piece of fiction, and that's deeply satisfying to me—it's in my nature to try to create my own genre.

**KD:**

Why a short story collection right *now*?

**JS:**

It's not just any story collection. It's an extraordinary notion, a risk, a dangerous thing to try—it's a theme book that heats up, as it goes, and ideally it becomes one single multifaceted experience.

**KD:**

What's next for John Shirley?

**JS:**

A near future novel of suspense and political allegory, currently called *Welcome to Freedom*. It's a kind of fusion of disaster novel and crime novel. Very dark—but there's light at the end of the tunnel.

**KD:**

Anything you'd like to add?

**JS:**

Add 3 plus 3 plus 3 plus 3 plus 3 plus 3 plus 3 plus 3 = 24. 24 plus the reader equals *In Extremis*.