

1 of 9 DOCUMENTS

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FOREWORDS The horror of it all

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"I never dreamed I'd be able to make money as a novelist," says Robert R. McCammon, whose friends and family back in Birmingham, Alabama, all call him Rick. "It feels like another person doing it. I'm still Rick. Robert is the guy who does all the writing."

Such split-level arrangements seem to suit McCammon, who once said that "a writer is somewhat like a method actor. You have to put yourself into so many different characters."

A tall, youthful-looking 38-year-old, McCammon was in Toronto to promote his latest psychological horror-thriller, *Mine* (distributed in Canada by Distican), clearly enjoying himself.

McCammon, the writer, has produced 10 novels, including the recently published *Mine*, and a collection of short stories. He worked as an ad-copy writer after graduating from the University of Alabama, until he could get into journalism. "I finished college the year *All the President's Men* came out," he said. "Everybody wanted to be a reporter, and I couldn't find a job."

What McCammon really wanted, he had always wanted. "I wrote short stories when I was a kid, banging them out on my trusty Royal typewriter, cowboy stories, detective stories."

He had to get older, and change to the horror-thriller genre, but his first novel, *Baal*, got him out of journalism in 1976, and into writing full time. Subsequent novels - *Swan Song*, *Stinger* and *The Wolf's Hour* - got him on *The New York Times* bestseller list; more than five million copies of his books have been sold, in several languages, including Japanese.

McCammon says there was a downside to his relatively early and easy success. "I learned how to write in public," he said, "in front of this enormous audience. Up until *Swan Song*, I hated to look at my books again. I was always thinking, 'Oh God, why'd I do that?' I didn't know a thing about writing."

He seems to have learned. *Mine*, in which a mad, burned-out survivor of the radical sixties, Mary Terrell (known as Mary Terror), kidnaps a baby to replace the one she had lost years before. It is an extremely well-built thriller, with horrific hallucinatory interludes and tightly wound suspense.

Although he readily admits he "probably couldn't write a literary

novel," McCammon's writing is good enough to earn some sympathy for his disinclination to accept the "horror-novel" designation. "Horror novelist, psychological thriller. . . . Once you're in a category, everybody thinks they know what to expect. How about 'storyteller'? I like that."

McCammon says he wrote *Mine* in four months, although that's fast for him. He usually takes twice that, but this one came easily. He was also anxious to see how it came out. "I like to approach a book like a reader," he said. "I don't know how it's going to end. I do have 'signpost scenes,' but I want to be surprised. I did try to do an outline once, but when I finished it, I felt like I'd already read the book."

McCammon doesn't want to write poetry, short stories or literary novels. Although his books seem suited for movies - and most writers can't wait to tap into the Hollywood goldmine - he displays no interest in writing screenplays. "My thing is writing novels," he says. "I really don't want to do the same thing over and over."

McCammon's drive seems to come primarily from a simple love of the printed word. "I prefer books as a medium," he says. "Most films are not worth warm spit, especially in the horror field. Horror literature is classical, in a sense. It really began with *Beowulf*. But the genre has been ruined by films that are heavy on blood but have no character development worth mentioning."

Meanwhile, work goes forward on his next novel, something typically different, tentatively titled *Boy's Life*.

"It's not really any kind of horror novel," he says. "It doesn't have a lot of violence. It's more in the line of the Grimms, or Hans Christian Andersen, a fantasy, only gritty."

McCammon counts himself "richly blessed."

"I am constantly surprised that I'm doing this, and that I can continue to do it. But I think my writing's getting better."

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