

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT BLOCH
Randy and Jean-Marc Lofficier

RL: Who do you consider to be at the root of your inspiration for your writing of terror and horror fiction?

RB: Well, I spent eleven years in an advertising agency! Actually, as a child I was interested in reading that sort of thing. But, I was more interested, and I think most imaginative children are, in the mysteries of death, age and cruelty. Why do these things happen? Why do people do these things to one another? An innocent child believes in the protection and security of his daddy and mama, his friends and his safe home environment. Then to read and learn about these things is a great shock.

I've done a good deal of talking with many other contemporary writers of this sort of fiction, people like Stephen King, Peter Straub, Richard Matheson and half-a-dozen others. They all had the same experience; they all feel this was their motivation. Some kids don't think about these things particularly, but I did. Particularly when I was hiding under the bed or in the closet after seeing something like Lon Chaney in *The Phantom of the Opera* for the first time at the age of 8 or 9. I decided, as I guess most of these people did, if you can't lick 'em, join 'em. So, I learned the method of what it is that terrifies other people as well. Yet, I tried to do it in a way that is safe.

There is a safety in writing about this sort of material. The reader has the option, if he or she is too frightened, of just closing the book. And, as a viewer, they can turn the dial on the television or get up and leave the theater. But in any case, when it's all over, when the book is finished or the television show is done, or the motion picture is completed, they can walk out without having been harmed in any way. It's like taking a rollercoaster ride. You can have your thrills, letting all the screams out of your system and feeling a good cathartic effect, and you return safely to your place that you started. That's where the entertainment angle comes in. Because, I think that all of us have in the backs of our minds, whether we're really imaginative or not, a wonderment about death, pain, cruelty, the unknown mysterious forces that not only govern the supernatural, but govern you and me.

RL: Can you tell us a little about your encounters with Lovecraft?

RB: When I was in my early teens I read *Weird Tales* regularly, and I was very much taken with the stories of H.P. Lovecraft. In the letter column, I would read about stories that had been printed before I started getting the magazine. In those days, there were no reprints of that sort of thing and once a story appeared and was off the stands, that was the end of it, unless you could find it in some second hand store. So, I wrote to *Weird Tales* and I wrote to Lovecraft in care of them to ask whether or not he knew where I could get some of these stories that I'd read about. He told me that he'd be glad to lend me any copies of any of his stories. So, we got into correspondence.

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In about the fourth letter he said, 'There's something about the way you write that makes me think that perhaps you'd be interested in doing the same thing. Would you like to write some stories? I'd be glad to comment on them.' So, naturally, how could I resist? I wrote several stories which were very bad, and he didn't criticize them, he praised them. Which was just the kind of encouragement I needed.

When I got out of high school at seventeen, I bought a second hand typewriter, I sat down and I began to work. Six weeks later I sold my first story to *Weird Tales*.

Lovecraft and I remained in close contact until the day he died in 1937.

RL: The Lovecraft Circle contained some other names that are considered greats in the field... Robert E. Howard, C.L. Moore, Manly Wade Wellman, Clark Ashton Smith, Frank Belknap Long, Donald Wandrei, Henry Kuttner... they were all members of the group. What do you think made Lovecraft decide to enter into a correspondence with a young boy?

RB: Lovecraft had, and I didn't know it at the time, a whole circle of correspondents that were later known as the Lovecraft Circle. They were young writers who he encouraged, some of whom he developed as he did with me. He was more or less reclusive. Not because he hated people, but because he didn't have the funds to travel in the depression. He was also an insomniac, so he spent much of his nights writing letters. Encyclopedic, voluminous letters, to many, many people. Five volumes of those have been collected, but they're only the tip of the iceberg. He wrote thousands of thousands of letters. That was his contact with the world by and large. So, it was just lucky for me, that I had an acquaintance with somebody who had that particular avocation.

RL: Would you say that you owe your career to him?

RB: I most certainly do! And I've never ceased to be grateful to him for it

RL: Did you ever actually get to meet him?

RB: I never did, because as I pointed out, this was the Depression. Nobody traveled, you couldn't afford to travel unless you went by freight car. He was to have come out to Wisconsin where I lived, in 1937, but that was the year of his death. So, unfortunately I never got to meet him. I never got to his home town, Providence, until 1945 when I was guest of honor at the first World Fantasy Convention. I got a chance to visit his grave, to walk the streets he walked, to see all of the places that he named in his stories. Including the church in which he had killed me off as a character in a story he dedicated to me.

RL: *The Haunter of the Dark* contains a character named Robert Blake who is killed by an alien abomination. This was a sequel of sorts to [your] own *Shambler from the*

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Stars in which Lovecraft was a central character, who also died at the hands of a monster. How did you feel about being a character in a Lovecraft story?

RB: I was flattered. It was the only story he ever dedicated to anyone. When I went there, I sat in the Brown University auditorium a few blocks away from the house in which Lovecraft had lived, and which he described as my residence in Providence. Fritz Leiber read that story aloud at midnight. Thirty years later, I was listening to myself being killed off. It was a very strange feeling.

RL: Have you carried through Lovecraft's love of letter writing, and have you in turn encouraged young writers?

RB: I'm afraid I have, over the years. I get quite a few inquiries and I try to do what I can, sort of to pay off a debt. I've been paying off that debt now for forty-nine years. Unfortunately I don't have the time that Lovecraft did to do this sort of thing. I'm not an insomniac and I'm considerably older than he was when he was doing this sort of thing. It takes a little bit more out of me, but I try to do what I can. When I find somebody that I think is promising I try to encourage him or her and answer whatever questions I can.

RL: Did you write *Strange Eons* as an homage to Lovecraft?

RB: Yes. It was a book that I wanted to do for a long time. You see, when I started, I wrote things in Lovecraft's style. Most writers imitate a style to begin with, while they develop their own. So, I wondered, since I read so many other imitations of Lovecraft, what would happen if I could write a book in the Lovecraftian tradition, using my own style. Nobody had done that before. I'm afraid I'm not always that commercial, but I felt it was something that I had to do.

RL: The Jack the Ripper theme seems to have followed you over the years....

RB: Up until *Psycho*, I suppose that *Yours Truly Jack the Ripper* is the story that I was associated with. I wrote that back in 1943, because I was interested in what I'd read about the Ripper. Not too much had been written at that time. I did it and it was printed in *Weird Tales*.

At that time, 20th Century Fox was going to make *The Lodger*, starring Laird Cregar, and a very big radio program of the day, *The Kate Smith Hour*, dramatized my story and put him in the lead. After that, strangely enough, it was reprinted in one of the first anthologies -- the first one that Hitchcock did, called *Fireside Book of Suspense*. Then it was picked up all over. It was done on other radio programs, and when I did my own radio show in 1945 I did my own adaptation of it.

When I came out here I was very busy doing film and television, and somebody else, because I didn't have the time, did a teleplay of it for *Thriller*. But it's still

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going around. It must have had thirty-five reprintings over the years, all over the world.

When I did the *Star Trek* script they had asked me to do a story putting Jack The Ripper in the future, then Harlan Ellison doing *Dangerous Visions* said to do a Jack The Ripper story in the future, and Ellery Queen magazine wanted one, so I did one for them. So, I've used Jack a number of times. Since that time, a great deal of information has been printed about him in books, particularly in England. There is a whole group of researchers called Ripperologists. I consider him one of the great mystery figures of all times. He captured the imagination of the

RL: Are you familiar of some of the French authors of fantasy, such as Gaston Leroux?

RB: Oh yes! In fact my favorite horror film of all time is *Diabolique*. I think that is the epitome of what the horror film should be. You'll note that there is very little bloodshed.

RL: Talking about earlier films, has your own experience with the Hollywood community had anything to do with your attitude towards filmmakers in *Psycho II*?

RB: No. My only experience that would motivate me was as a member of the audience! I always loved the classic horror films, and for that matter, the classic horror stories. All of them had one thing in common, their strength. They left a great deal to the viewer's or the reader's imagination. I've talked about this frequently with the late Boris Karloff, directors like Fritz Lang, whom I had the pleasure of knowing, people like Christopher Lee. All of them deplore excessive gore and shock on screen. They feel this is a cop out. Anybody can provide something that is nauseating and disgusting. But this is not real terror. Real terror consists of acquainting the audience with a character that will be cared about, and then putting that character in jeopardy. The suspense comes from whether or not that character will escape or be done in. This requires plots and characterization. Not just a series of violent incidents in which the entire emphasis is on special effects. You know, it's strange, isn't it? In horror films, the great films of the past made stars out of Lon Chaney, Sr., out of Bela Lugosi, out of Boris Karloff, out of Peter Lorre and several others, until the fifties, Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing. But, there are no stars today! You have the multi-billion dollar budgets for those films, but there are no known stars. The stars are the special effects.

RL: As a writer, do you find it frustrating that the characters take a back-seat to the technical achievements?

RB: I think I find it very frustrating. I'd much rather give directions to a player than to a camera and some kind of electronic device.

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RL: Being both a novelist and a screenwriter, do you feel that you have to attack horror in a different way for the different media?

RB: Very definitely. For example, Hitchcock's most brilliant achievement in *Psycho* and probably in his career, is that shower sequence. That's the most memorable thing. It's brilliant because of the way in which he cuts, so that you never actually see the knife entering the flesh, the imagination does it all. Now, if I were to describe that on paper, it would just be a clinical, flat-out verbal translation, it would mean nothing. So, in the book, the shower curtain goes back, the weapon comes down cuts off her screams and her head...bang...end of chapter. The reader doesn't expect that, and the reader gets a comparable shock. But it has to be approached in an entirely different way. And again, leave it to the imagination of the reader or the member of the audience.

RL: Wasn't the original *Psycho* novel based on the real-life story of Ed Gein?

RB: It was based on the situation. I didn't know much about Mr. Gein personally at that time. I did know that he lived in a small town of seven hundred people. I was living about fifty miles away in a small town of twelve hundred people. I realized that the kind of situation where if you sneezed on the north side of town, on the south side they said "Gesundheit!" So, all I knew was that a man had committed several murders of a shocking nature in a very small community. He had lived there all his life and nobody ever suspected him. It was that situation which made me think there was a story there. So, I based the novel on the situation. It wasn't until later, after inventing the character of Norman Bates, that I discovered how close he was to the real-life Ed Gein.

RL: Were there any members of the Gein family alive that questioned where your information had come from?

RB: As far as I know there were no members of the Gein family left. As is the case with *Psycho*, his mother had died some years before and he had no known relatives at all. So, nobody questioned where that information came from. Where it came from was my own diseased imagination! I thought!

RL: How did the novel get to Alfred Hitchcock?

RB: It had been published by Simon & Schuster and had had a very laudatory review in *The New York Times*, which Hitchcock read. He immediately decided to buy it, it was that simple.

RL: Did you work on the screenplay at all?

RB: I had nothing to do with the screenplay. I was living in a small town in Wisconsin. I was told that Hitchcock had asked if I was available for the screenplay. The gentleman that he asked was an MCA agent who said that I wasn't. I didn't come

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out until midway through the screening, and that was for another matter entirely, to do some television. I was not invited out because of *Psycho*, and nobody expected the film to be a success.

Actually, every obstacle was put in Hitchcock's way so that he wouldn't make the film. He was to do it for Paramount. He had all the autonomy to choose the subject matter. But Paramount didn't like the idea, they didn't like the title, they didn't care for the story... so, they decided to tell Hitch that instead of making a multi-million dollar production with Cary Grant and Jimmy Stewart in technicolor with widescreen, he would have a small budget. He said, "All right, I'll do it in black-and-white and I'll use my own television camera crew from *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*." Then they said, "Well, that's fine Hitch, but we're very busy over here. We don't have any soundstages free for you." He said, "That's no problem. I'll use one of the soundstages at Universal." So, the Paramount film was made at Universal.

RL: Why didn't they want him to make the film?

RB: They were so sure that it was going to be a failure. And, when the critics got hold of it, they confirmed this. They hated the film. It got very bad reviews. It was supposed to be very inferior Hitchcock and not at all what they expected from him. It's very strange that the same critics, seven or eight years later, commented on Hitchcock's greatest films will say, "This is not as good as his classic *Psycho*!" But, that's the strange world of film criticism for you.

RL: How did you feel about the adaptation?

RB: I was absolutely delighted. You know, it's generally the case that they take a title and the book and change it radically. But, in this case, it was about ninety percent from my book. He made only two drastic changes. He downgraded the age of Norman Bates, which was necessary visually. If they had presented a middle-aged man on the screen at that time, you'd automatically suspect that he must be the villain. So, that was a brilliant stroke on his part. The other thing he did was take a large segment of scenes that were in the book, but didn't describe fully. But the rest of it, the characters, the setting, various devices, all came from the book, right down to the last line.

RL: Were the actors that were chosen just as you had visualized the characters, with the exception of Norman, who was younger?

RB: Very much so. He did a marvelous job.

RL: How do you feel about people qualifying you as Robert "Psycho" Bloch?

RB: It's something that one can hardly avoid. After all, God is identified with the Bible, whether he likes it or not. That's the sort of thing people do, and I've learned to live with that particular label.

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RL: What brought you to the decision to do *Psycho II* so many years after the original book?

RB: A change in the world! At the time that I wrote *Psycho* the mass murderer was a unique phenomenon. It was very bizarre, exotic you might say. But today, mass murderers are common place. You open up the paper, turn on the television news and there's another incident of multiple slayings. All over. All over the country, all over the world, in the streets, in the schools. I got to thinking, what would happen if Norman Bates came out into the violent world of today. What would he think of it and what would it think of him?

Then, I hit upon the notion that he would be particularly interested if he learned that they were making the story of his life as a film in Hollywood. That gave me a chance to express my opinion on today's crop of splatter films and excessively violent and gory motion pictures.

RL: Did you know that Universal was interested in doing a *Psycho II* film?

RB: I was aware that Universal was *not* interested. Universal had bought the rights for the original *Psycho* from Paramount when they made up a package for television rights. When I sold the rights for the original book, my agent, who shall remain nameless, sold the sequel rights along with it. So, while I can't blame my agent, I nonetheless had no stake in the matter. But, my agent said to let Universal know what I was doing, and I did. They came back with the response that they had no intention of making a sequel to *Psycho*.

Then publicity began to roll for the book. Suddenly there was an announcement in the paper to the effect that Universal was going to make the film for cable television but without Tony Perkins. Again, more publicity. Then came the word that they were actually going to make a film, and by heavens, Tony Perkins was going to be in it. That was the last I heard and the only think I heard. They went ahead and did it.

They didn't like the idea of setting the story in Hollywood, or depicting film companies, such as their own, putting out these splatter films for what I might call "blood money."

RL: So, there had never been any inclination on their part to use your novel as the basis for their script?

RB: I think that's the understatement of the year!

RL: Were you aware of a project going around called "The Return of Norman?"

RB: I had read about that. That is very interesting too. Because a large part of the publicity began with that. It was a big story, and I think one of the trade papers,

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which was picked up by the *New York Times*, then it appeared in London papers...I've got clippings from all over. Universal got wind of this and sent word to these gentlemen that they didn't own the rights to *Psycho* or to the character, and they had better desist. Which I gather they did. But then was the time that Universal decided to get into the act themselves. Now I know that they genuinely were not interested, because the *Psycho* house on the lot had been part of the Universal Tour, and I gather, that about two years ago they tore it down and then had to rebuild it for the film. So, they were very sincere in their determination not to make the film, until they realized that there apparently was some interest.

RL: Have you seen the film?

RB: No, I have not, and for very definite reasons. My fans, correspondents and friends would, of course, question me about it. They are already. Now, if I were to see that film, and to say that I liked it, some of them would say, "Oh yes. He's buttering up to Universal." If I said I didn't like it, they'd think it was sour grapes. So, it's a no win proposition. I'll see it eventually, but I think I'll wait a while. I don't want to get into any situation where my remarks can be misconstrued.

RL: Have you heard any hints about what the story is, and do you have any comments on what they have done with Norman Bates?

RB: I know nothing except that Norman is released from the asylum and goes back to his hometown. Which struck me as rather strange. If I were a psychiatrist I certainly wouldn't put a mass murderer in the setting in which he had committed all these crimes. Then the killings start again. From what little I've heard, it sounds very much as though it might resemble the plot of a film that I did in 1964 with Joan Crawford, called *Strait-Jacket*. In which an attempt is made to drive a former murderer insane. She's released from an asylum and somebody starts to drive her crazy again by convincing her that the new murders that have been committed are her work. But that's as much as I know about it.

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