

WELCOME TO THE CARNIVAL

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARTIN LIVINGS
BY LEE AND LYN BATTERSBY

Perth writer Martin Livings is the author of the new horror novel *Carnies*, a contemporary Australian supernatural thriller. The small south-west Australian town of Tillbrook has a secret, one that has been kept for over a hundred years. The Dervish Carnival is run by people who are neither human nor animal, but live in the woods and howl at night. Now two brothers from the city have been drawn into their world, a world from which they might never escape... alive.

Carnies will be released on June 6th 2006 by Lothian Books, an imprint of Hachette Livre Australia, and will be available in all good bookstores.

Martin Livings talks to fellow Perth dark fiction authors Lee and Lyn Battersby about the book.

Getting *Carnies* to a publisher and into print has been a long process. What was the book's evolution?

Actually, getting *Carnies* to a publisher and into print has been a very short process. I submitted it in June last year, was accepted in January, and the book will be out in June this year. Twelve months from submission to publication is an incredibly short turnaround, but I hope some of the panic and enthusiasm of the process might have infused the book, giving it a rawness and energy that a longer period of production might have smoothed out.

Now, the process of actually *writing* the book, that's another matter entirely. Although the first draft only took around six months to write, it took me fifteen years or so to gather up the courage to even start. The plot had been evolving in my head for all that time, starting its life as *The Pack*, which was going to be about werewolf bikers, until I discovered it had already been done to death, and slowly it became *Carnies*. It was Stephen King's book, *On Writing*, that gave me the courage and inspiration to put it all down, to see if I could do it. *Carnies* was my novel-writing classroom. I learned more in the time it took to finish it than I'd learned in all my previous years of writing.

Tell us about the beginnings of the Martin Livings story: who are you, and where do you fall into the SF publishing scene?

I guess I came out of that period in the early nineties, the *Eidolon* and *Aurealis* days. I had the good fortune to make friends with the editors of *Eidolon*, after meeting them at my first Swancon SF convention in 1990, so that made submitting to them much less intimidating. I had my first two stories published almost simultaneously, one in *Aurealis* and one in *Eidolon*, and plugged away ever since.

So, my place in the SF publishing scene seems to be following in the wake of the authors of those days who inspired me; Terry Dowling, Sean Williams, Greg Egan, Simon Brown, Stephen Dedman, and so on. I'm a long way behind them all, of course, but I don't mind, I'm just chugging along at my own pace, doing what I love to do.

***Carnies* is a dark novel. Are there any places inside you that you had to get in touch with in order to bring events in the novel to life?**

Actually, *Carnies* really isn't as dark as all that. My main inspiration for the book was a certain style of horror novel that seemed to be quite common in the seventies and eighties. These were books that usually ended up in delis and newsagents on revolving racks, and sold for fifty cents or so. They had titles like *Snowman*, *Cannibal* and *Fungus*. They were down and dirty, unpretentious, fast-moving, and a tremendous amount of fun to read. Lately it seems most horror has to have some deep meaning, some serious underlying theme that the whole story is based on. I believe that the story should come first, and the theme should evolve from that, not vice versa. So *Carnies* was entirely plot and character driven. There were some issues close to my heart that I examined in it (unrequited love, stupid obsessions and alienation, to name three), but really, it's a ghost train of a novel, not a journey into the heart of darkness. That will come later, with any luck!

You write primarily dark fiction. Does that arise from a fascination with anything in particular, or is it more a catharsis of things within you?

Again I have to say, I don't choose what I write, it chooses me. My most successful short story to date, "Sigmund Freud and the Feral Freeway", was light-hearted SF, and I wish I had more ideas in that vein, as it was great fun to write and got me a lot of attention. But my brain doesn't work like that. Instead it mainly conjures up monsters, both human and inhuman. There is probably a cathartic nature to it, and a kind of escapism, one which to me makes a lot more sense than, say, romance readers, who read about beautiful love affairs then return to their own mundane lives. I'd hate that. Instead, I imagine the most horrible things I can, which makes life so much sweeter to return to afterwards, knowing it's all just in my head.

Would you say there is a defining 'theme' that makes a Martin Livings story? If so, what is it? Do you feel you have a voice that is purely your own?

If there's a defining theme to my stories, I'm not really certain what it is. For a long time, almost every one of my stories involved suicide, often as the denouement, but I seem to have finally broken out of that vicious little cycle. Alienation and loneliness crop up very regularly too. But, as I said earlier, for me it's story that reigns supreme, and theme follows quite far behind it. I don't choose what I write, it chooses me.

As for a voice that is my own, I think the lack of a voice defines my own voice. My goal would be for someone to put down one of my stories and feel as if it had transferred straight from the page to their brain without ever having been aware of the words. Once you become conscious of the writing, of reading sentences and punctuation, that takes you one step away from true suspension of disbelief. Not that I have a problem with stylists; writers like Terry Dowling, KJ Bishop and Deborah Biancotti always astound me with the way they write, it's more poetry than prose, utterly beautiful construction of words and phrases. But it's not me, and I know if I tried I'd just make a dog's breakfast of it. So instead I try to keep it simple and fast, and let the story tell itself. It might be the difference between an artist and a craftsman, and I definitely consider myself a craftsman, not an artist.

At this stage in your life, what do you see as your ultimate goal as a writer?

My ultimate goal is very simple. I want to make a living from this. I want to wake up in the morning and not have to go to an office job. I want to stay at home and write. Or go out and write. Or go travelling and write. And while I love writing short stories, novels are really the only way a writer can make a living from it. So the goal is to keep writing novels, and keep selling novels.

This year I'm achieving that goal here in London, thanks to a grant from the Australia Council and a very understanding partner who's willing to go out and work while I stay home and write. Once we get back to Australia in 2007, I'll most likely have to go back to work myself, but it's great to have this experience, to know what could one day be my everyday life, if I'm very lucky!

What comes next, now that Carnies is released into the wild?

Well, I'm in London, as I mentioned earlier, working on a new novel, a science fiction book currently titled *Skinsongs*. I also want to write a follow-up to *Carnies*, as there's a lot more to tell in that particular tale. I have maybe a dozen novels lined up behind them, plus, weirdly enough, a few children's books. So there should be plenty to keep me busy writing for the foreseeable future!

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, VISIT THE *CARNIES* WEBSITE:

<http://carnies.martinlivings.com>