

New master of the macabre ** The shivery stuff just oozes from Bucks writer Jonathan Maberry

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Award-winning horror novelist Jonathan Maberry of Warrington, Bucks County, was already living a fairly unconventional life as a martial arts expert/writer when his life "made a weird left turn" one night in 2002 at a dinner with his wife and friends at, ironically, The Raven Inn, named for the Edgar Allan Poe poem.

"Somebody just made some joke about vampires," Maberry says. "They held up a knife and fork and pretended it was a cross and said, "Back! Back!" At this point, Maberry says he "threw out a comment" that a cross wouldn't actually stop a vampire. Pressed to explain, Maberry said that crosses were a literary device used in the novel "Dracula," and that the cross was never mentioned anywhere in the global vampire folklore that pre-dates Bram Stoker's novel.

Then his friend asked another question about vampires and then another. The better part of an hour was spent discussing the folklore of vampires.

At this point, a light bulb, or several light bulbs, went off for Maberry. "I really hadn't been consciously aware of how much folklore I had digested over the years," he says, adding that much of it was learned from his "old, spooky grandmother."

"And secondly, I was surprised at the fascination that ordinary folks had. These aren't people you would ever identify as horror fans."

That night on the car ride home, Maberry said to his wife, Sara Jo West, "I think there's possibly a book here."

Actually, there were two books about vampires, followed by two paranormal thrillers set in Bucks County. His first thriller, "Ghost Road Blues," has earned him comparisons to best-selling novelist Stephen King and nominations for Superior Achievement in a Novel and Superior Achievement for First Novel by the Horror Writers Association. In March at the World Horror Convention,

Maberry won the Bram Stoker Award for First Novel. He lost for Best Novel, but considering the competition, he wasn't too upset. The winner was King, who earned the accolade for "Lisey's Story."

Maberry did not talk to King that night, but saw him later at the Edgar Awards, a ceremony hosted by the Mystery Writers of America, where King was receiving the "Grand Master Award." Maberry said King asked for a copy of "Ghost Road Blues" and the two talked shop.

"He's a heck of a nice guy. He gave me some nice career advice and wished me well." Maberry says King couldn't resist teasing him about the Stoker Award. "He did have to rub my nose in it that he did beat me for Novel of the Year," Maberry says. "He also pointed out that he has two sons who are voting members and that I lost by two votes."

Now Maberry has a new novel, "Dead Man's Song," scheduled for release on Tuesday. He's headed out on a book tour of the East Coast that begins with a book release party Friday at the Doylestown Bookshop.

While going spooky was a major change for Maberry, he has long written in a variety of styles. "I'm a writer. If it has words on it, I've probably taken a crack at it," he says.

Maberry has written textbooks, poems, greeting cards, essays, even heavy metal lyrics in the '80s. "These are not what you would call enduring rock classics," he says. "We all have to have something we can look back on and cringe at."

Maberry is business-savvy and often lectures on the business side of writing. He co-founded a Doylestown business called Writers Corner USA, which offers workshops on the business and craft of writing.

Maberry wrote his first spooky books under the pen name Shane MacDougall in order to avoid confusion for readers who knew him as a writer on martial arts topics.

"If my martial arts readers found out that I was suddenly writing about vampires, they would think I needed a straitjacket," he says.

His first, "The Vampire Slayers Field Guide to the Undead," was a success. "It was 10 times, maybe 30 times more popular than my martial arts books," Maberry says. Before long, Maberry was receiving invitations to lecture, and

had no choice but to "come out" as his alter ego. He published his next folklore book, "Vampire Universe: The Dark World of Supernatural Beings That Haunt Us, Hunt Us, and Hunger for Us" under his own name.

Maberry says it wasn't a big leap to go from vampire stories to ghost stories. "The folklore of vampires is so different from what people know," he says. "Vampires were in fact considered a type of ghost."

"Ghost Road Blues" was published by Pinnacle Books in 2006. It's the first in what Maberry calls the Pine Deep Trilogy. Local people will recognize much in the fictional city of Pine Deep.

"Even though I'm a Philly boy, I have a strong Bucks County connection," Maberry says. "When I was young I came to Bucks County. Back then it was vast and spooky and wonderful. We called that 'being out in the country,' and I fell in love with it then."

As part of his research for the book, Maberry found out that New Hope has long been considered one of the most haunted places in America. He changed the name, but says, "If you know New Hope, especially as it used to be, you will recognize that Pine Deep really is New Hope."

A scary hayride in Upper Black Eddy Township figures into the first book, as do other haunted attractions in New Hope. "In the book, the city builds its tourism reputation around being the most haunted place in America. The problem is, it really is the most haunted place in America," he says. Police investigations, ghosts, a serial killer and vampires all figure in to the plot. "It turns out not to be very good for the residents or the tourists," Maberry says.

The book combines supernatural thrills with reality-based terror. A serial killer named Karl Ruger is keeping the police busy, while ghosts and vampires are also running loose in Pine Deep. Malcolm Crow, an ex-cop turned expert on all things haunted, serves as the protagonist, watching the horror unfold.

"The book reads like a ghost story/serial killer story," Maberry says. "It's built along the lines of a police procedural where the cops are looking for that serial killer, but that serial killer was drawn to the town because of ... the ghosts."

The "blues" of the book's title refers to the ghost of a murdered blues musician who also figures in the plot.

Of Maberry's debut, Publishers Weekly called it "horror on a grand scale,

reminiscent of Stephen King's heftier works." Fellow horror authors also bestowed accolades. Best-seller Stuart Kaminsky, 2005 recipient of the Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America, said, "Maberry belongs with the big names, including King and Koontz."

Maberry says he has heard from fans all over the world about "Ghost Road Blues." A reader in Poland found a copy on a train and sent an e-mail saying he loved it. A soldier from Bucks County read it when he was feeling homesick in Iraq. Television executives are reportedly fans, as well. Maberry says he met in June with "a very major" television network possibly interested in filming a series based on Pine Deep.

"Dead Man's Song" tells the next chapter in the Pine Deep story. Whereas "Ghost Road Blues" combined elements of crime fiction and with supernatural elements, "Dead Man's Song" is "more of a mystery," Maberry says.

Maberry says he has finished the final book in the trilogy, "Bad Moon Rising," and calls it a "big, sprawling action story." He says it's scheduled for release in June, 2008.

After the book release party at the Doylestown Bookshop, Maberry will tour the East Coast, although part of his tour has been pushed back to August.

Now he finds himself in competition with J.K. Rowling.

"We've all been warned off by the booksellers that Harry Potter Seven is coming out in July," Maberry says. "I really don't feel like competing with J.K. Rowling."