

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT MCCAMMON

Conducted by Hunter Goatley

Robert McCammon is the award-winning, best-selling author of more than 16 novels. Throughout the 1980s, he wrote a string of horror novels that included such well-known titles as *Swan Song*, *Stinger*, and *The Wolf's Hour*. In 1990, his work turned more mainstream with the release of his psychological thriller *Mine*, his now-classic, coming-of-age tale *Boy's Life*, and *Gone South*.

After a 10-year absence from the publishing world, McCammon returned in 2002 with *Speaks the Nightbird*, an historical novel set in the Carolina Colony in 1699 and centered on a woman accused of witchcraft and a young magistrate's assistant, Matthew Corbett, who begins to doubt the charges. *Speaks the Nightbird* was very successful, winning several awards, and in 2007, McCammon released *The Queen of Bedlam*, a second novel featuring Matthew Corbett and set in New York City in 1702. A character briefly introduced in that book

is the focus of the third novel, *Mister Slaughter*, which will be published later this year by Subterranean Press.

Hunter Goatley: I'd like to start with an introduction for anyone who is not familiar with the Matthew Corbett series....

Robert McCammon: When I finished *Boy's Life* and *Gone South*, I wanted to do something that was really, really different, and something I hadn't done before. I wanted it to be a challenge, because I felt at a certain point that I wasn't being challenged that much in what I was doing. So, I thought, what do I not know a whole lot about? What am I interested in? I didn't know a whole lot about history—I knew a little about the Colonial era—but what would I be interested in reading? And I thought, Let me do this book about a witchcraft trial in the Carolina colony, with this young man—Matthew Corbett, this magistrate's assistant—who is beginning to doubt that there are witches. Yet his magistrate is firmly convinced that there are witches, this young woman is accused of being a witch in this town, and the town survival may hinge on the supposition that she needs to be put to death—burned quickly at the stake or hanged or whatever—or the town will collapse. Matthew slows everything down because he suspects the woman is being framed for murder. That's basically that story in a nutshell, but there's a lot more to it, there are a lot of characters and a lot more going on. But Matthew Corbett....

I thought, I just want to try this and see what it's like. So I did it, and I thought, well, this is something really, really different that I enjoy doing, and....

HG: You finished *Speaks the Nightbird* in 1996, but it

wasn't published until 2002. What happened?

RM: I don't think people knew what to do with that book. I'd been a certain type of writer for Pocket—a horror writer.... Pocket didn't know what to do with it; it didn't fit there. But they were going to publish it. They were going to give me a lot of money for it, but they didn't know what to do with it.

So I decided to leave Pocket, and Viking expressed an interest in the book. *Speaks the Nightbird* went to an editor at Viking who was known as one of the top women's fiction editors in the country. And I think she didn't know what to do with it. It's not, strictly speaking, a women's fiction book. I think it was given to her, and that's how she reacted to it, that it should be women's fiction. What does that mean? Well, it means that it appeals primarily to women, and that, basically, she wanted there to be a happy ending—that Matthew would stay with Rachel at the end, and they would be married, and that would be the happy ending. She was firmly against the ending I had written—it would be a downer ending if he was just to leave her there. At that point, I wasn't thinking about doing a series. I just thought, he has a life beyond where he is. He has a life beyond this town—he's an intelligent young man, he has a life in the world. So I was really against changing it. We went around and around about that.

I don't think the Viking editor knew what to do with it, and the whole thing collapsed.

HG: How did you go from collapsed to a series?

RM: I basically retired for a few years, and then *Speaks the Nightbird* was picked up by a local publisher, and then by Pocket in paperback. I didn't think I was going to

do any more. I thought I was done. But then Frank Darabont was trying to get a movie version of *Mine* going, and I thought, I'm just sitting here doing nothing, and really, this may happen. So let me come up with another idea, and I'll get back to work.

So I thought, what do I want to do? I don't really want to go back to just straight horror. Well, I can come up with a storyline that will carry Matthew Corbett forward. It would be a long-term story that I could do in about ten books. So that's how that came about. I started working on *The Queen of Bedlam*. That book has gotten a really, really good response. Well, *Speaks the Nightbird* got a great response. People who've read it have loved it. I've seen a tremendous number of those 5-star reviews on Amazon, which is great. And they keep coming in. I think because it is different.

HG: Did the success of *Speaks the Nightbird* encourage you to start writing *The Queen of Bedlam*?

RM: I didn't know how successful *Speaks the Nightbird* was until later. I never saw a lot of the good reviews of the book until later. I didn't know what the response was. It's only been recently that I really realized how much people enjoyed it. It's a long book, of course, and I think that has scared some people off, probably many people, but the people who have read it have really, really enjoyed it. And they really like the character and like the idea that this young man is a detective, and he's going to have adventures, it's going to propel him forward into a story arc.

When I started out, it was just for me. It was something I wanted to read.

HG: There's a ton of historical detail in the books, which

has to require a lot of research?

RM: It's taken a lot of research. I found some things that I thought were true were not true. Since I wrote the book, I've realized there are some things I messed up on. Not big things, but small things, and I realized that some of those things you're never going to get 100% right. I'm sure there are going to be things in *Mister Slaughter* that aren't going to be 100% right.

I got a review not very long ago that said, "You know, the book is just fun." That's really what it was meant to be. It was not meant to be strictly-speaking an historical tome or a book about history. It was supposed to be an entertaining, fun story about a young man in the Colonial era. With nefarious villains, damsels in distress, daring-do, swordplay, a sort of Hammer film-esque creepiness about it, mystery.... Fun. It wasn't meant to be anything but that.

HG: The books are a lot of fun, and while there's a lot of historical detail, the books aren't weighed down by it or the language. Was that hard to do?

RM: I wanted to lift my style of writing, and I wanted to be able to write in a style that was of that era, but was not so overbearing of that era that it would be difficult to read. You could easily do it—you could do it, but you wouldn't want to read it. And also the language—well, it sounds like it could be from that era, it's different from the language of this era, but it's not so that you can't understand it and can't relate to it. The language in *Speaks the Nightbird* is probably stiffer and more formal than it is in *The Queen of Bedlam*, and then the language in *The Queen of Bedlam* is probably more stiff and formal than it is in *Mister Slaughter*. And that's on purpose. I

want you to get used to the language, the flow of the language, and feel like even though the language is a little more modern, still it sounds of that era but is not over-powering. It's like you're getting used to the language, getting used to hearing it as someone of that era would. So it sounds more modern. So if you see a review that says, "Well, this language sure sounds modern," it's absolutely more modern than what they spoke. Just because it's easier to get into and easier to understand. If it wasn't, it would be a chore to read, and I don't want it to be a chore.

I decided to do the mystery of the Queen of Bedlam, and it fit into my story arc idea. It was difficult to write, but it turned out well. *Mister Slaughter* is about a serial killer of that era. He's sort of the Michael Myers or Jason of that era—he keeps coming back after you think you've gotten rid of him. He's based on the British actor Tod Slaughter from the '30s, who was a melodramatic villain. The description is based on him, and some of his mannerisms are based on Tod Slaughter, who I think originated—and if he didn't originate it, he might as well have—the Mad Barber of Fleet Street, Sweeney Todd. He did thousands of productions of "Sweeney Todd," not only in London, but all around England. That was really his character. I wanted to kind of do a little bit of Sweeney Todd and Tod Slaughter, and I have a kind of James Bond thing going on there, too. But I wanted it to be fun. The bottom line is that I want you to learn something about that era and maybe get interested in the era and read a little more about it. I want you to like the character, I want the character to grow, and I want the reader to have fun with it.

HG: I think *The Queen of Bedlam* is more fun than

Speaks the Nightbird, meaning that there's more humor in it.

RM: I think *Mister Slaughter* is probably a darker book than *The Queen of Bedlam*, just because of the subject matter. But one thing I've been able to use pretty well is humor in the series. It's funny; I think when you're writing horror or a contemporary work, it's harder to use humor. I do. But I've been able to use humor pretty successfully.

HG: Were there any particular challenges to writing *Mister Slaughter*?

RM: Sometimes when you write a contemporary book, what do you do about instant communications? Instant communications can sometimes mess up the plot, because sometimes you need people to get in that place where nothing works—the laptop, the cell phone, doesn't work. You've got to do that, or your plot falls to pieces. So I enjoy writing in an era where you don't have any of that. Then again, you've got the opposite: it takes a long time to get from one place to another, and if you have a letter coming across the Atlantic, it's going to take months to get where it needs to get to. So you've got *that* to deal with. But you can work that out, and I enjoy doing that, though it takes a lot.

Mister Slaughter took a lot in terms of plotting and getting people where they needed to be. The timeframe—when did *Mister Slaughter* come across the Atlantic from England to America, what year? What year was he involved in those murders in London? That kind of thing.

It's an involved process, and as I'm working on this new book, I'm thinking about the next Matthew book, which

is called *The Providence Rider*. I mention the title of the book in *Mister Slaughter*, when the inventor, Oliver Quisenhunt, looks at Matthew at the door and he's frightened by Matthew at the door, because Matthew's gone through so much. He looks like one of the hard-edged Indian scouts that Oliver has heard about, and he says he thinks those kinds of men are called providence riders—they scout ahead. And that's the name of the next book. I'll be starting that when I finish my contemporary novel. I have the bare bones of the story, but it'll come together. And I'm looking forward to it. These are fun for me to write, too.

It's hard work, but it's fun, because you can really let your imagination go so wild, and I enjoy that.

HG: I really enjoyed the humorous scenes in *The Queen of Bedlam*, like the “bull in the pottery shop” scene. After reading it, I thought, “Maybe that is how that saying came about.”

RM: My editor at the end of *The Queen of Bedlam* said, “I can't believe you're going to let it.... Those people lost everything. You're just going to let it sit like that?” Well, you find out in *Mister Slaughter* that they didn't lose everything, and as a matter of fact, they benefited from that happening, because they moved to a different place, and they began to experiment with a different clay and kind of came up with a different color pottery—Indian Blood Pottery—that becomes the rage of the town. So they actually benefited from what appeared to be a disaster. You can't wrap up everything—I don't want to wrap up everything in each book. I want to leave some things for the next book to wrap up.

I'm not in a hurry. They're fine. Everything's going to

work out, but it's going to take some time.

HG: Given the amount of time between *Speaks the Nightbird* and *The Queen of Bedlam*, was it hard for you to get back into the setting?

RM: No, no, it was easy. I think what's going to be a real challenge is—now that I've been doing a contemporary—is going back, getting back into that flow. Once you get into that flow, you're there. I've never done a contemporary book and then gone back to a sustained language.

The tone of every book I've done has been a little bit different. I expect that when I go back and do *The Providence Rider*, the tone will be a little different. I believe you never step in the same river twice. There will be something a little bit different, but I will try my very best to make the language and the feel of the book the same, knowing that it probably won't be exactly. I will try my very best to recapture the language.

HG: Is the contemporary writing harder to do than the period writing?

RM: To be perfectly honest, the writing in the contemporary era.... My feeling is that the more flowery language, and the more descriptive language, does not have as much a place in the contemporary as it does in the series. There's good writing and bad writing, and you have to have your standards—everything you're trying to do, you're trying to do the best you can do. But what I'm saying is, I have more opportunity to write at a higher standard for my historical work than I do for more contemporary work. Particularly my characters that I'm writing about in the contemporary work don't talk or think in that higher standard of language. Whereas the

Colonial characters would—Matthew would—talk in a higher standard of language. The contemporary characters would not.

If you were of a certain education, you thought and spoke in a higher standard of language. Now we might consider that archaic. We might say, “Aw, just get to the point.”

HG: As a reader, I’m torn between relating to Matthew and wanting to know the answers that he’s trying to find out, but sometimes I feel like, “I can’t believe you’re about to do that. Let it go. Mind your own business!” Torn between understanding him and being afraid that he’s going to go too far, knowing that what he’s going to do now is going to come back to haunt him somehow. Do you feel that when you’re writing him?

RM: I’m basically a shy person, and I kind of like the idea of somebody who goes in and kicks down the door and says, “I’m not letting this go.” But I’m basically a person who would never dream of doing that. I don’t think he’s necessarily over the top in this, but he’s a person who is like, “You know, I’m going to keep on going until I find out what this is about.” Or, “I’m going to confront this.” I’m not a person who confronts things—I don’t like confrontations. He doesn’t go out and look for trouble, but if something piques his interest or attracts his attention, he will keep going until he finds the answer, and confronts whatever he needs to confront. I really admire that about him because I’m not that way at all.

HG: I’m not either, which may be why I sometimes cringe at what he does.

RM: Yeah, but I also like the idea of the person who is fearless for a cause. In *Speaks the Nightbird*, his cause

was Rachel; he was fearless for her cause. He was torn up about his situation with the headmaster in *Bedlam*, so he was dazed through the first course of that book until that was taken care of. After that was taken care of, he kind of woke up a little bit more and got on the trail of the Masker. He was tormented by this guy getting away with his crimes. But I like the idea of the confrontational and the kicking down of the doors....

I used to watch *Secret Agent* with Patrick McGoohan. His character in *Secret Agent* was like.... You couldn't stop him from kicking down the door. You couldn't stop him from going up to somebody and saying what he thought, and asking the questions that sane people might not ask to get an answer. And I think that's part of Matthew. He asks the questions and just keeps on and keeps on, past the point where you'd say, "Stop!" But I admire that.

HG: It's fun reading, even having that "I can't believe you're going to do that" feeling....

RM: It's really enjoyable to write, because, again, they're books that I want to read. And I'm approaching them.... I don't write with an outline. I just go. However it develops is how it's going to develop. And that's really fun for me. I think it makes it harder, because you don't really sometimes know where you going. You just have to trust in your instinct that you're going the right way. But it's so much fun to see it develop and to see it come together, and then you say, "Oh, that's what that's about." It just comes as a surprise sometimes.

HG: I find it interesting, as a non-writer, that I've heard authors say, "I didn't know this character was going to do that," or, "I didn't know that's where the story was going to go."

RM: That's right, and I think you have to trust in your character sometimes.... You've built them. You *kind of* know where they're going, but in a way, they do direct the story. It's kind of a mystic experience. You set up these little machines, and they kind of take over. It's not like you're just sitting back for the ride, because you're still in the director's chair—you're still doing the work—and if you don't work, they don't move. But there's something about the personality of your characters that begins to propel your story. The story must be true to the characters, and you can't change them after a certain point. That's who they are. And hopefully, if the characters are really real—you feel they're real—you won't feel the need to go back and change them. There won't be anything that isn't right. "Yeah, that's a real person, a person that I know." And they begin to direct the story in a way. They don't take the story away from *you*, but they're active participants in the way the book progresses.

I've been asked to help teach people to write, and it's very hard to do, because that in itself is hard to explain to people. How do you explain that the characters do come to life, unless you've experienced that? It's hard to do. It's strange and hard to imagine, but it is true.

HG: Thanks for talking with me. Is there anything else you want to say to someone who might not be very familiar with work?

RM: I think my work is hard to put in a box. And I never wanted to be in a box—I always wanted to be free to move and do what I wanted to do. I think it's coming true now, but it's going to become truer away from the big corporations, because they are uncomfortable with that.

You're a risk if you're not doing what you did before, when you were successful in terms of making a lot of money. It makes them uncomfortable. It's so nice to feel free to do what I want to do, and to write the books that I want to read. That's what I've always wanted to do. I'm really happy with the direction of the Matthew books. I'm excited about them and...I kind of know how they're going to end. I don't really know how we're going to get there, but we're going to get there, and it's going to be a good ride and a fun trip.