

Interview

with **C.M. Saunders**

1. Please provide a brief introduction, including your name, the genre(s) you write in, previous work and where you are based.

My 'real' name is Chris(tian) Saunders. I am a freelance writer and editor. I was born and bred in south Wales, but I move a lot for work. Most recently I lived in Changsha (China), Teddington, and north London. Professionally, I work mainly for sport and lifestyle magazines, but I also do a lot of reviewing, copywriting and ghost writing. In recent years I have been focusing more on fiction, where I use the name C.M. Saunders. I market it as dark fiction, but recently I have been moving more toward splatterpunk. I like the humour element. In the past few years I have released the novel *Sker House*, the novellas *Apartment 14F*, *No Man's Land*, *Out of Time* and *Human Waste*, and several collections of short fiction, which I call the X series.

2. Which of your books / pieces of writing are you most proud of, and why?

Up until recently, the answer would have been *Sker House*, because it took so long to write and research and incorporates so much local history and folklore. I am very proud of my roots. Now, though, I'm afraid I would have to change my answer to X3. The X books chart my path as a writer. The first volume, released back in 2014, collected together some of the stories I had published in small press magazines in the late nineties and early noughties. The second volume released a year later included material that came out when I returned to fiction after a long break. The latest volume, X3, features more recent stories, most of which have been previously published in the likes of *Siren's Call*, *Literary Hatchet* and *Morpheus Tales*. It's interesting to take a step back, compare my older stories with my later ones, and see how I have progressed and evolved. I'm pleased to say I'm a much better writer than I was twenty years ago!

3. How long on average does it take you to write a book?

That's hard to say. My preference is for novella-length works. I like the medium. They tend to be 20-30,000 words, so they don't take much longer than a couple of months from start to publication time. One of the great things about the self-publishing revolution is that it has sped the whole process up. With longer works, it's easy for me to get bogged down. *Sker House* took a couple of years to write and research, and I've done two non-fiction books (*Into the Dragon's Lair: A Supernatural History of Wales* and *From the Ashes: The REAL Story of Cardiff City FC*) which both took a lot longer than that. I aim for between 1000-2000

words a day, across projects, which works out at up to 700,000 words a year. I know a lot of people write more, but I'm happy with that. I aim for quality over quantity. I'd much rather have 500 words I can use than 6000 words of rubbish.

4. What is the most difficult part of your artistic process?

I really want to say marketing. Does that count? There isn't really anything about the actual artistic process that I find difficult, apart from obvious things like being original and successful. Perhaps the difficult aspect is the fact that being an indie writer isn't just about writing. Writing is the easy part. As well as a capable writer, you also have to be your own researcher, publicist, manager, accountant, and all-round businessman. In addition to all that, you have to broker deals with other professionals for things like cover art, formatting, editing and advertising. There is some crossover, but all these things require a different skill set. Younger writers seem to think they can burst onto the scene, write a book, and instantly sell 2000 copies. Nope, it doesn't work that way. It takes years of effort to reach that level, and most don't manage it then.

5. What was your hardest scene to write?

Several years ago I wrote a short story called Date Night (available as Treat Night in X2, X Sample and an anthology called Denizens of the Dark). It's about a young married couple who go to a restaurant. The lady visits the bathroom, and never comes back out. The story is told through the POV of her husband, who has to sit and wait for her playing these progressively worse scenarios in his head. The big reveal at the end is designed to get the reader in the feels, and it does. Or so I've been told. It definitely wasn't easy to write.

6. Do you read your book reviews? How do you deal with bad or good ones?

Yes, I read every one. I think most writers do, whether they admit it or not. It's always great to receive a good review. There is no better feeling than knowing that someone invested some of their hard-earned money in you, and didn't regret it.

There are two kinds of bad review. There are the ones which you can take some constructive criticism from, and then there are some that are just nonsensical. For example, I once copped a two-star review and got labelled a misogynist because one of my characters, a 20-year old college kid, used the phrase 'friend zone.' I tried to explain to the reviewer that the views of a character do not necessarily reflect my own, but it was a futile exercise.

Other people are just malicious, or have some kind of agenda. I write a lot of reviews for various outlets like Morpheus Tales and Hellnotes. Once, I gave a book a one-star review because, frankly, it was terrible. The author was also trying to charge £2.99 for 6 pages, which I thought was taking liberties. Anyway, when he saw my review, he looked up all my books on Amazon and gave them all one-star reviews. It's clear Amazon's review policy needs to be revised. As it stands, someone you are connected to through social media can't review your books, because Amazon says the reviews are biased, even if they are verified purchases. Yet they don't seem to mind some random with an axe to grind leaving fake reviews on books they haven't even read.

7. What kind of research do you do, and how long do you spend researching before beginning a book?

It depends on the book. One of my projects in development is a YA adventure series concerning time travel. So far I've had to learn a lot about Celtic Britain, the life of a 17th Century sailor, and the French Resistance during World War Two. Next up will be the Witch Trials in medieval England. The more research you do, the more authentic the book will be.

Skер House was based on local history which was not only multi-layered, but extremely complex. To fully appreciate history you have to look at the wider picture, rather than just focusing on isolated sequences of events, put everything into context, and try to understand WHY these things happened. I love the research. It's one of my favourite parts of the writing process. Call me sad, but it's a buzz when you find that little nugget of information that you know will bring a story to life. Even if you don't find what you are looking for, you're still educating yourself so time spent researching is never really time wasted. All I can say is thank God for the internet, because I had to research my first couple of books the old-fashioned way, trawling through libraries and endless spools of microfilm. The internet has made everything much easier.

8. What does literary success look like to you?

Like most things in life, success is relative. It's not tangible, so it's not something you can measure with any degree of legitimacy. When I was growing up, I always wanted to be a writer. After flunking my exams I spent eight years or so in a factory, and dreamed of doing something else. I used to rush home at the end of my shift and put two hours writing time in every night. I couldn't even type when I started, but I was too stubborn to give up. Since then, I've been lucky enough to have forged a decent career. I've been traditionally and independently published, worked on top magazines, travelled extensively, met some of my idols. I'm nowhere near famous, or rich, but every day I wake up and do what I love doing. To me, that is success.

9. How many unpublished and half-finished books do you have?

I think for most modern writers, the idea of having stacks of unpublished books sitting around, what Stephen King calls 'trunk novels,' is a thing of the past. When you write a book, you invest a lot of time and energy into it, and you want to see the pay-off. If you can't sell the book to a publisher, the sensible thing to do is just put it out yourself. These days, even authors with huge contracts at the big publishing houses also self-publish. The tables have turned, and authors have more control now. Half-finished, that's different. I do have a couple of those. Sometimes, other things creep up on you and projects get put aside. On the other hand, sometimes, you just lose interest. I'll finish them one day. Maybe.

10. What's your favorite under-appreciated novel?

That's a toughie. Reading *The Dice Man* by Luke Rhinehart when I was a student was a pivotal moment. It opened up a world of possibilities. Like most horror readers, I started with the mainstream stuff. Stephen King, Dean Koontz, James Herbert, Richard Laymon, et al. But as I got older I strayed off the beaten track and started getting into slightly more obscure authors. Current favourites are Amy Cross, Darcy Coates, Joe Hill, and Renee Miller. I don't know how it happened, but these days I find myself favouring women writers more. In my opinion, they often write with a kind of warmth, depth and sensitivity that you don't often find in men's fiction. They also know how to toy with your emotions, then really twist the knife. I think what turned the tide was *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn. I learned more about the mind of a woman from reading that one book than I did from half a dozen failed relationships.

11. What was the best money you ever spent as a writer? (E.g. software, self-help books, marketing books etc.)

I'm a tight bastard, so I tend not to buy into the whole cottage industry that has sprung up around writing. If it works for other people, go for it, but I don't think it's necessary to spend a fortune on how-to books and expensive software. A decent laptop or MacBook, some word processing software (I use Word or OpenOffice, which is virtually identical to Word but free) and an internet connection is all you need. There are lots of good resources online to guide you on your journey. I did invest in a correspondence course on freelance writing with The Writer's Bureau in my early twenties. That was helpful in that it taught me how to find markets, approach editors, pitch articles and win assignments.

12. Do you want each book to stand on its own, or are you trying to build a body of work with connections between each book?

I always preferred stand-alone books. It's a big commitment tying yourself to a series. But I have written several short stories set in the same village, called Wood Forge, and every book in my YA time travel series has the same protagonist. The idea is that the reader evolves with him as he grows up and faces the same challenges every teenager does, whilst he rampages through history solving crimes and getting involved in wars. From a commercial perspective, it does make sense to write an inter-connected series of books, rather than one-off's. In theory, they market each other.

13. What are common traps for aspiring writers?

So many! The first is hubris. Thinking you are the best writer to ever walk the earth. Sorry to put a damper on things, but you're not. It's fine to have confidence in your own ability, but there is a fine line between confidence and arrogance. Even the most experienced writers are still learning.

Another danger is verbosity. Inexperienced writers often come up with long, flowery, complex passages, because they think that's what will set them apart. Well, there's a very good reason why you don't see too many people trying to write like that. It's because it doesn't work. It just comes across as stuffy, dense and a bit nineteenth-century. The real skill lies in making your writing as accessible as you can, in order to reach the biggest possible audience. Some general advice would be to keep things simple, don't overwrite for the sake of it, and don't use ten words when one will do.

14. What's the most difficult thing about writing characters from the opposite sex?

*I shied away from doing that for ages. I had such a hard time with relationships and understanding women that I just didn't feel qualified to write from their POV with any conviction or authority. Then, one day I made a conscious effort to get past it, and was happy with the results. I think my novella *Dead of Night* (2010) was my first to feature a female lead. As for pinning down the most difficult aspect, it's difficult. People are people. We all have basically the same thoughts, feelings and motivations, whether we are male or female, black or white, young or old, gay or straight. There are, of course, subtle little differences in all these states of being, and these are the things you first have to recognise, and then understand, in order to portray the character well. It always helps to be empathetic, and try to put yourself in the position of other people. It can actually translate into some really good writing exercises. Instead of always looking at things from your own perspective, try challenging yourself and imagine how a wheelchair-bound 13-year old girl from rural China would see things. In what ways would her beliefs, values, attitudes and opinions differ from yours?*

THANK YOU

C.M. Saunders is a freelance journalist and editor. His fiction and non-fiction has appeared in over 60 magazines, ezines and anthologies worldwide, including *Loaded*, *Record Collector*, *Fantastic Horror*, *Trigger Warning*, *Gore*, *Liquid imagination*, and the *Literary Hatchet*. His books have been both traditionally and independently published, the most recent being *Apartment 14F: An Oriental Ghost Story (Uncut)*, *Human Waste*, and *X3*, all of which are available now on Deviant Dolls Publications.