

SEASON OF THE WITCH: AN INTERVIEW WITH DONNA LYNCH

WITH DAVID E. COWEN, BRAM STOKER NOMINEE FOR BLEEDING SAFFRON

Donna Lynch's previous volume of poems, *Witches* (*Raw Dog Screaming Press* 2018) was honored by her peers with a Bram Stoker Nomination for Superior Achievement in Poetry. This summer Donna's latest volume of dark verse, *Choking Back the Devil* was released by Raw Dog Screaming Press and is likely to follow with another nomination. Up front I will disclose that I was given the privilege of writing the Forward for this very solid collection of dark poems. I gladly profess my bias. I had the pleasure of meeting Donna at this years' Stokercon in Grand Rapids. I first came across her at the registration desk volunteering to meet and greet the registrants. During the time I saw Donna in several panels and she even participated in one I moderated on Weird Poetry. She made herself accessible to the many dark poets attending never shied away from any question. Her poetry is something you need to read.



Donna's work traverses the line between mental illness and horror. Are the demons she describe real or in the mind? This question is as old as dark poetry. Donna brings it forward the asphalt of pain endured by the contemporary woman and the demons resulting from this pain. Donna agreed to be interviewed about her new book and about writing poetry.

Q: First, congratulations on your Stoker nomination for *Witches*. That volume was unique in that the poems corresponded very directly with the brilliant artwork by your husband Steven Archer. The work was almost a graphical ekphrastic poetry collection. In the collaborative process of creating this book did the art or the poems come first? Did you collaborate on both jointly — Archer creating the art as you worked on the poem? Did you and he ever disagree on the matching of the art to the poems?

A: Thank you so much. Getting that nomination was such a wild ride, and truly belonged to both Steven and myself. The art existed before the poems, so each image and its title served as a writing prompt. We don't tend to disagree when we collaborate this way (as we've done with Twenty-Six, The Book of Keys, and Daughters of Lilith). He often says that the art already exists and it's his job to pull it out of the ether as intact as possible, so with something like this, my part of that process is to correctly interpret the story. It's all

there, we just have to look and listen. If we do that, there's not much to contest.

Q: Ekphrastic poetry is sometimes tricky. Sometimes the poem cannot stand on its own without the reader also experiencing the artwork. Do you think you were able to go beyond that in *Witches*?

A: For the most part. There were one or two that really depended on their visual companions to work, and I couldn't force it to be any other way. The art for those pieces was so striking and, in one instance, brutal that too many words would've cluttered it and softened the blow.

But I think they largely stood on their own, possibly seeming a little more abstract without context.

Q: *Choking Back the Devil* is different from your previous book in the only artwork in the volume is the cover (also by Archer). There is also a very strong element of working through mental illness in these poems. The book begins with an anthem called *Legend* proclaiming

*Take every bit of pain they gave you
...
and build your demon/ your urban legend.*

There is what may be a dangerous celebration of pain here. Growing up in the Catholic Church I was told repeatedly to “offer up” my pains and tribulations as some sort of sacrifice. Here you seem to be saying something different. Pain can become what molds you and creates a strength. Yet in the title poem you write

You cannot know

...

*What it is to be consumed
By something so inviting.*

I get the sense of addiction to pain; to the turmoil of darkness invading the mind. Every poet I know seems to have this odd relish at the melancholia that can help generate verse. These words go beyond that. Is there a theme to this collection beyond just being “dark?”

A: Almost every poem or song lyric I write has one of two elements: either a double meaning by way of literary allusion, or a paradoxical message. In this particular collection I am using many of the tropes you find in horror to express my one greatest fear. I am no stranger to mental illness, and am a huge advocate of treatment, but there’s always this sense of “Fuck...all the pills and therapy in the world isn’t going to change the fact that one day I everything I love will be gone and I will be gone.” I think I use pain and horror as an offering—maybe a bargaining

chip, and as a comfortable addiction, and as a cover for a sometimes unmanageable fear. My whole life, I wanted feel everything and at the same time, I have been terrified of the cost.

Q: Despite this invitation you mention in your poem *You, Alone* I also see a narrator who faced demons and

*The most terrifying thing
is when you come to understand
There is no curse upon your bloodline
...
you alone are responsible/for the damages incurred.*

The reality of this statement is so harsh. Yet mental illness is not something that can be cured by wishing it away. With every program for overcoming addiction acceptance of responsibility is the first tenant. You must accept being an addict and accept responsibility for the damage caused. Is this poem about this rehabilitation process? I ask because someone facing this reality without also seeking help for the demons torturing them could be an invitation to despair and hopelessness.

A: I hope my message with this one was clear. It seems to be to you, but I recognize how it could be misconstrued. I will never blame someone for an illness (including addiction, in case there's any question about my stance).

But I do hold people responsible for their acceptance and admission and treatment. There's a sense of ableism that comes with that statement, because there's no one single formula for everyone. If you can't afford treatment, you can't afford treatment. If you're so far down an untreated road that you can't see who you are anymore, there's really no way of finding a true mirror, especially if you don't have people around you to hold one up. For many people this is an awful reality, so this message isn't for them. I wish I had one for them. I wish society did. But if you can see or are shown the damage you are causing and you have the means to get help, yet still do nothing...you are liable for that disaster. And what a complicated process it is. You have to treat the illness, the symptoms, the root, all while trying not to ruin lives. I have never had a substance addiction, but I have absolutely been sick and stuck in an impulsive, self-destructive cycle. The clean-up and rebuilding can be more exhausting than the illness.

Q: In another poem in your new collection called *All the Things They Never Tell You* you acknowledge the pain of a mother blaming herself for a “bad seed” child but shifting the reality of the pain. There is no blame, only the fact of what happened

*The Devil doesn't possess children
He just takes the blame
So no one has to face the fact*

that some children are broken for no reason

This is a very strong affirmation. What inspired this piece and that last powerful verse.

A: One of my least favorite ideas and platitudes in the world is “everything happens for a reason”. I believe in action and consequence, but the quickest way to ward me off is to tell me something was “God’s plan” or something “the universe had in store”. I understand the brain’s need to make sense of things, to alleviate that ultimate fear—obviously, as I just wrote this whole collection about it—but I have no time or patience for it in real life application. Like we discussed above, some people don’t havethe means to get help. Sometimes treatments don’t work. And people don’t get to be born tabula rasa, unless you want to believe that genetics mean nothing and that your environment only impacts you once you’re old enough to understand it. I don’t believe these things. I believe sometimes awful shit happens to us, awful things can take root inside of you from day one, and there’s not always anyone or any one thing to blame.

Q: I find it interesting how archetypes emerge in our culture. In your poem *The Horse, the Home* the narrator describes what could be a possession or something even deeper involving a woman facing a change in life through sex and death. The narrator describes herself as a dark

horse being ridden by some overwhelming dark force then accepting that intruder. At first the setting could be as simple as a horse being tamed by a rider. But it goes further describing an act of intercourse, not necessarily consensual,

*So it climbed inside of me
and I did not resist*

In the end the narrator accepts the penetration of this force even stating

there's nothing like the feeling of being held from the inside

As I noted in my Forward to your book “I also see a hint of Celtic mythology in this piece. The Black Horse in Celtic myths represented both death and dark forces as well as a messenger of esoteric knowledge. The Celtic Black Horse was a keeper of secrets and mysteries. Here too the narrator adopts this interloper of her sex and life and becomes part of the keeper of the secret and mysterious; finding solace in this knowledge”. The last full stanza reads

*I am more than a thing that it haunts
I am more than a horse that it rides
I am its home
and I know the things its seen*

*I know the darkness and dream-like void it
inhabited before me
the terror and calm of a world without time
but I am not afraid
because I am not alone
and there's nothing quite like the feeling of being
held from the inside.*

Did you have the mythic imagery of the dark horse in mind when you wrote this piece? Or is this image something ingrained in you (Jung would be proud). The imagery here has the narrator taken over, ridden and then penetrated by this force. Is this an allegory to mental illness or something darker even? What is the solace that this narrator finds in succumbing to this invader?

A: When I read your foreword I was really pleased that you mentioned that, because it was a mythology I had forgotten, yet it's still applicable. My reference is to a Voodoo belief that when possession occurs, usually during a ritual, it is because a Loa is riding you like a horse. They own you and guide you. My understanding is that it's both an honor and a terror, as you have no control. Almost everything I write that is rooted in myth, legend, or spiritual belief and symbolism is an allegory for illness or fear, not with malice or to be disrespectful or diminishing of those traditions, but because of the common denominator of loss

of control. We pray and summon to feel protected. We tell stories to make sense of the world. It's really all we have.

Q: I was told by your publisher that you were hoping to have the opportunity to write about mental illness and writing during Mental Illness Awareness Week this past May. Your new collection seems directed at this topic. What thoughts (if any) do you want to share on this subject?

A: We've talked a lot about that above, because it would be impossible not to. I have combated depression and anxiety since early childhood, when it was chalked up to chronic stomach aches, sore throats, irritability, nerves, and laziness. As a teenager, I went into the hospital for a time and went on meds, which got me through, although I had become extremely—detrimentally—obsessive and polarized in my thinking. I started having long spells of downward spirals and alternating periods of impulsivity and recklessness in my late twenties/ early thirties and eventually got a Bipolar II diagnosis, which I've been managing through treatment for the past few years. I've slipped pretty hard a few times, but I'm probably more stable now than I have been in the past, in part because of a supportive partner and family. I also deal with chronic illness, physical pain, and diminished cognitive abilities due to “post-treatment” (aka chronic) Lyme Disease and Fibromyalgia. I've had some autoimmune problems since

childhood, so I can easily imagine it all being intertwined with trauma and faulty wiring. I can't dive too deeply into that though, because I fear I'd drown in pseudoscientific theory and desperation. So I do my best to tread water. Some days I even swim.

Q: You are also a lyricist and lead vocalist for a band called *ego likeness*. One website described the band as a “darkwave/industrial rock band from Baltimore, Maryland.” While there is certainly poetry in lyrics (see Bob Dylan and ‘nuff said), there are also lyrical forms that do not always translate into poetry. From a writing perspective do you compose lyrics differently from your poetry? When you compose a poem is there music in your head that you may directly or inadvertently be following with your verse? How do you decide that one piece of verse is better suited for performance in a song than to be included in a volume of poems?

A: Making that decision tends to happen organically. I come up with random phrases that I keep a record of and go to when it's time to write. If an album or a collection has a theme, I make the choices that way. Both mediums are about the distillation of greater ideas. You only have so many lines or measures to say what you need to say, so you have to choose wisely. One distinction, though, is that songs work best when they have a hook. That one line that's repeated with the intention of getting it stuck in

people's heads and driving the message home. Poetry can absolutely have that, although I like to run things off the rails or try to punch the reader in the face at the end. When it comes to structure and atmosphere, I want my songs to be parables like the ones about monks and rivers and non-attachment, and if my poems were jokes, I'd like them to be somewhere between "But Doctor, I AM Pagliacci" and "The Aristocrats!"

Q: I ask this of most of the poets I interview. Some poets make a point to write every day for a period of time regardless of whether anything inspires them. Others wait for an idea to strike them and then write. Some seem to only write poetry as part of a themed project. Which type are you and why do you choose that practice over the other?

A: I write when my brain allows it. It could be for a week straight. It could be one hour in a month. Sometimes I just can't think. Other times, I can't stop. Having a project with a deadline helps, but my deadlines can't be short.

Q: Do you think your membership in the HWA has fostered your career as a poet?

A: Oh, for sure. I've met so many good people through that channel, inspiring and prolific people. And being nominated for the Stoker last year has only driven me harder. I needed something like that. I shouldn't have, no

one should, we should just do this because we love it and because we have to. But when everything in my head tries to shut me down, that opportunity and honor was like an ECT jolt. I got in front of enough people that I don't want to fall flat, like I talked a big game and that was all. As I write this, these all sound like terrible reasons to create, haha! But if I'm honest...

Q: Another “stock” question, but one very relevant to how and why poets write. Do you ever write for “therapy?” That is, to simply get something off your chest or to help you filter a strong emotion or life event? If so, how long do you wait to do that normally? For myself, I do not like to write about things happening to me at the moment because my perspective may change or my emotions may taint the poem to the point it is just venting. What do you do?

A: Oddly enough, given my subject matter, no. I'm bored to death of my problems. I use experiences and things I've felt in my writing, of course, but it's not a release. I go to therapy for that. The closest I get to a catharsis is the feeling of accomplishment when I get something finished. Being productive means I'm doing more than just getting by.

Q: What are your upcoming projects we can look forward to reading?

A: Speaking of finishing things! I have a novel and a series of related short stories that's been sitting on my computer mocking me for quite a while. My goal this year is to get at least one of them finished, and another poetry collection. I have an EP to write for Ego Likeness, as well.

Donna shared some of her work with us

Everything You Love

I waited what I felt was an appropriate amount of time for
her ghost

I knew she would find her way back home
But maybe she wouldn't come back to me because I let her
go
I had to let her go

Maybe it was the concussion I got the next day
Maybe it closed a gate
Maybe it shattered the piece of me inside my skull that
believed
When I hit my head
And my stomach turned to poison
And everything went black

Maybe I slipped into the void
Because I think I live there now

But not with her

I moved into her house
in case she changed her mind
I kept her ring on my finger
so she could see the light reflecting
I watched so hard
Then I stopped watching
because that's the wiser thing to do

Maybe I can only know the void
Because I think it lives here now

But not with her

You will someday lose everything you love
but nothing so quick as your belief
that the things you love will come back.

-from Choking Back the Devil

It Just Wasn't Your Night

It wasn't your face or your hair
or your legs

It wasn't that you reminded me of anyone
Not my mother
Not a lover or sister
It wasn't that you ever spurned me
nor the way that you carelessly let your cigarette burn
down
all the way into crumbling ashes and embers
It wasn't any small detail

or anything tangible
It wasn't a look you gave me
or anyone
It wasn't the phase of the moon
or a terrible voice
You were just there
When the gnawing inside me turned into vicious biting
When the switch flipped and all my lights went out
When I had no choice but to seize the moment
You were there
You were there and it just wasn't your night.

- from Choking Back the Devil

Woman

I hate the woman who stands at the edge of my woods

For many reasons

Not the least being that she doesn't really stand

She hangs

not by a rope

not by her neck

but like a tree limb, heavy with water, battered down by
rain

no shoes on her muddy feet

There's nothing in her dirty hands

and nothing in her hollow eyes but thick, wet strands of
matted hair

Her skin is broken

I can see the cuts and bites from here

As though animals attack her every night

her clothes are barely there

she doesn't speak

she doesn't cry

she just gazes at my house

every night

until the dawn

when she turns and walks back into the trees

Once I tried to give her a story

A narrative to make me less afraid

Maybe she's looking for help

Held captive and tortured as her wounds would imply

Even if she were a ghost

I would be less afraid

But no history fits her

Something won't let it

Something inside eats the words

Which is why

I hate the woman who stands at the edge of my woods

But I hate her more

when she knocks on my door.

- from Choking Back the Devil

The Wali of Baghdad

The angels came from light but the jinn came from fire, and
I asked him if this was why

he whispered evil into men's hearts.

“Man's heart is made of clay, and is a vessel to be filled,
but they choose which whispers

fill them.”

- from Witches

Morgan Le Fay and the Algonquin Round Table

She ensnared you in charms and a coy, crooked smile

With her eyes like the stars and her feminine wiles

She laces her stories with crystalline laughter

But I'm on to her game, and I know what she's after

There's power within every gaze that she holds

She's found you can "never have too many souls"

Every fool in the room will succumb to her bidding

And I'd say I'm not jealous, but who am I kidding?

- from Witches

Donna Lynch is a Bram Stoker Award-nominated horror poet and author and the co-founder, lyricist, and singer of the dark electronic rock band Ego Likeness (Metropolis Records). Her works include the novels Isabel Burning and

Red Horses, the novella Driving Through the Desert, and numerous poetry collections, Daughters of Lilith, and the Stoker Award-nominated Witches (Raw Dog Screaming Press) being among them. Her 7th poetry collection, Choking Back the Devil, was released by RDSP in July 2019.

Lynch lives in Maryland with her husband and collaborator, artist and musician Steven Archer.