

Love, Slaughter, and the Devil: An Interview with Sara Tantlinger

by David E. Cowen, Bram Stoker Nominated Author of *Bleeding Saffron* (Weasel 2018)

Sara Tantlinger's second volume of verse *The Devil's Dreamland* has had universal applause. Besides winning the 2018 Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in Poetry, this book was also awarded the Indie Horror Book Award for 2018. The reviews of this book are stellar. *The Devil's Dreamland* is a poetical biography of the first publicly acknowledged serial killer in the U.S., H. H. Holmes, physician, bigamist, con-man and murderer who was hanged after many years of crime. Following her Stoker win, Sara has agreed to share her thoughts on this book and her writing.



Q: First, congratulations on winning your first, likely of many, Bram Stoker award. At Stokercon2019 you gave a very moving acceptance speech acknowledging your late father and your family among others. Now that the dust has settled from that night what thoughts can you add about winning and what it means to you?

A: Thank you so much! It was such a surreal moment. Being nominated for the first time was and continues to be an immense honor, especially since I was nominated alongside truly great poets and collections this year. The whole process has really given me more motivation to keep writing and to challenge myself. Horror is my favorite genre because it's the genre of pushing boundaries. I never want to rely on the same tricks or stories, and *The Devil's Dreamland* really showed me how motivating myself to do something different can pay off. I am beyond grateful for the recognition of this book amongst my fellow horror peers – that night was something I will forever treasure and look back on fondly.

Q: I want to focus on your craft as a poet and how you came to write your latest book. Your first book, *Love For Slaughter*, was more of a collection of poems rather than a historical fact/fiction piece in poetic verse. How did you come to choose such a nasty though certainly colorful individual as H.H. Holmes for a poetry project as opposed to fiction or non-fiction?

A. After writing *Love For Slaughter* I knew I wanted to do something really different for my next collection. H.H. Holmes had been a person of interest for me ever since I watched a documentary about him a few years ago, so I set about researching him. All the research I read and

accumulated were either heavy historical texts, true crime books that added their own spin on Holmes (like Larson's *Devil in the White City*), or novels loosely based on Holmes (Bloch's *American Gothic*); so, while there was already so much research and fiction out there centered around Holmes, I didn't come across any poetry collections. There isn't a ton of serial killer poetry out there (though there are some great ones like Marge Simon and Mary Turzillo's *Satan's Sweethearts* and Carl Jay Buchanan's *Ripper*), thus I wanted to contribute to this very small niche but make the collection my own take on Holmes through deep research. Poetry allowed me to combine my own interpretations, to create a collection that even those who don't read poetry a lot might enjoy, and to of course twist together something grotesque and poetic.

Q: I understood that you took about 2 years of background research to begin to write this book on Holmes. What did that entail? What kind of sources did you research for this project? How did you choose which aspects of Holmes' lurid tale to turn into poetry? How did you convert a biography into verse?

A: I have a mass file of the research that is just an insane Google Doc; my notes are organized chaos with details from the beginning of Holmes' life until the end. There's a

lot of highlights and color-coding that made sense to me at the time, but just look crazy now, ha. After watching the documentary on Holmes that was on Netflix a few years ago (not sure if it's still on there), I researched just about every book that had Holmes in the title or seemed to mention him – this was a time when eBooks really came in handy since I was able to get a lot of Kindle versions along with some great paperbacks like Adam Selzer's research and also picked up a great hardcover of Harold Schechter's *Depraved*. While Schechter and Erik Larson definitely took more liberties with their details on Holmes' history, Selzer and a few other scholars took much more practical and heavily-researched approaches, so reading both facts and speculation (since much of Holmes' history is speculation) really helped inspire my own ideas.

I kept track of what seemed the most accurate and what was most likely not true and tried to find my own truths and imaginings in between it all. I used the Library of Congress to access the memoir and confession Holmes wrote himself in prison, both which were full of lies since Holmes was likely a pathological liar. I was able to find scans of newspapers from Holmes' arrest, some records of the trials in court, supposed blueprints from the "Murder Castle's" early construction, and some accounts from alleged witnesses and victims who had fallen prey to Holmes' money schemes. What is in my poetry collection barely scratches the surface of information I collected, but it

would have been overwhelming to include everything. I carved out the moments that struck me as most interesting or devious, organized a timeline of Holmes' life that I wanted to work with, and for the most part wrote the poems in order of his life but often found myself jumping around the timeline when an idea struck. As far as converting things into verse, I used my go-to methods of evoking strong images and using the senses, always important tactics with horror, and went from there. The whole story was there, I just needed to spin it into poetry.

Q: Did you worry that your work might be seen as idolizing or fantasizing a confessed serial killer? For example, in "Earned Conviction" you imagined his thoughts on the headlines involving him:

I wonder what the headlines
will say about me now,
if my glory will be as great
as Jack the Ripper's

Holmes seemed to thrive on his notoriety. Does humanizing a monster give a type of ratification to what he did? Or, do you believe you were able to reflect the corruption inside this man through your verse?

A: Great questions. I never really worried about myself being seen as idolizing him because I knew I was writing horror and creating a work of fiction based on very real events, but I think since this happened so long ago, it hopefully doesn't come across as invasive as things like all the Ted Bundy films out now do, for instance. It was really important to me when I set out to create this book that I was not capitalizing on anyone's current pain or trauma. I think I'd be deeply uncomfortable creating a book based on someone who tortured people who are still alive or closely related to the victims.

Holmes definitely did thrive on notoriety, though. He liked power and control over his life and each situation he got himself into. My goal was to show how merciless he was, but to also reinforce this idea that just because someone exudes charm on the outside, it does not mean they are a good human. It does not mean they aren't hiding something dark. So while I did not set out to humanize him, I think it is important to show how a monster can possess human traits, especially when trying to get what they want like Holmes did. It's a tale of caution, and a tale of understanding how evil may not present in the form that you think it will, but it's still there. For me to really show those qualities, I did have to make myself understand Holmes as best I could, even when I did not want to.

Q: Some poems in the book give a bit of sympathy or pathos to Holmes such as “Daydreams from a Jail Cell” where Holmes muses nostalgically on the city of Chicago

I am remembering the beauty of Chicago,
the thick smoke of it,
how she intoxicated like the most
stunning of sunsets,
wrapped a cloak of night
around me, perfumed the air
into a miasma of coal and earth,
wilderness and steel,
honey and blood,

After all the work you did on this book what did you think of Mr. Holmes? Did he deserve any sympathy?

A: I’ve always been drawn to books where a horrible main character ends up being portrayed so well by the author that you can feel a stir of sympathy, even if maybe you should not. For example, some of my favorites would be *Lolita*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Gone Girl*, and even *Wuthering Heights* or *The Awakening* where the protagonist isn’t as monstrous as the first two books I mentioned, but they are certainly not your average main character where you are *supposed* to instantly feel empathetic.

Holmes was not a man who necessarily deserved sympathy given his cold and callous actions toward women, children, and just about everyone, but I think the challenge with writing horror is to open up a window of pathos or common ground with an unlikable character and the reader and to help them realize something they (the readers) have in *common* with the problematic character. That's the real horror, to realize you might be able to understand a part or aspect of someone who has done terrible things. If you can understand one small element, maybe you could eventually understand even worse elements?

Q: How did you filter through fact, fiction and legend involving Holmes? For example, at one point Holmes claimed to have killed 27 people. He was only convicted of 9 deaths. He then tried to recant much of this before he was hanged. I've read legends that put the number at 200. Also, he was clearly a huge hustler and con-man swindling many people out of fortunes in several states, not to mention his three wives. Even his name was made up.

A: Yes, his whole life almost feels like a series of falsehoods; I think that's one of the things that intrigued me so much – when working with Holmes, you have these myths and legends to work off of, but it also gives you room to be creative and warp together your own version of

the man and the monster beneath. Through my research, I made note of the most consistent things that seemed to be more likely true than others (the murders of the Pitezel children, for instance), and what was wildly inconsistent or not true. For example, Holmes is often quoted as saying, “I was born with the devil in me...” but there is no factual evidence of that quote. It’s most likely something that got distorted from newspaper headlines at the time and carried over as a legendary quote, even though the man never said it.

So, even though I was careful with my research because I was dealing with true crime, I also did not let that stop me from twisting or morphing moments and events that worked well to really bring out even more horror as I crafted the pieces.

Q: After all that research I think of Clarice M. Starling and her screaming lambs. Did you ever feel you were so immersed in the mind of Holmes from the research and writing that it affected your real-world thinking?

A: Great comparison. I sometimes felt like I was locking myself away and being antisocial; the research and getting into Holmes’ mindset was intense, but I try to live a fairly balanced life and usually know when to take some time for myself and maybe step away from a project if I need to.

With studying Holmes, it really showed me a new way to think about the worst in humanity, especially given everything that has happened politically, culturally, and socially over the past couple years. Charismatic men can hide venom beneath their exterior. I'm already a fairly skeptical person who doesn't trust others easily, and I think my research into Holmes and how he used words and small actions to seduce and charm so many people around him may have possibly made me even more misanthropic in certain ways.

Q: From what I have read about Holmes I think he would be quite pleased at the notoriety of this book and your awards. How do you feel about that?

A: Ha! I think I'd have to agree with that. Through all my research, he struck me as a man who liked being known and revered. With his deceitful prison memoir, we especially see the man who had no regrets for his actions because he tried to spin the whole story in his favor, tried to use the memoir to gain public sympathy as he awaited judgment and execution. Having various media continue his notoriety in a way that paints him as barely more than a heinous, but well-educated and persuasive, devil of a human, would probably give him something akin to satisfaction, I'd say.

Q: Poetry volumes with a central theme are very pervasive lately in the horror field. Wytovich's *Brothel*, another Stoker winner, Simon and Turzillo's *Satan's Sweethearts*, Manzetti and Boston's *Sacrificial Nights*, and *Four Elements* which won the Stoker several years ago. I wonder if this is to help poets compete with the fiction story tellers or just a trend? Your first book *Love For Slaughter*, an excellent and substantial collection, was not centered on a central theme. Any thoughts on this? Should horror poets focus on theme-based projects written for a single volume rather than to publish collections of their work? And does this move dark poetry from collections of poems back to narrative verse from which, of course, much of horror was born?

A: Well, *Love For Slaughter* was greatly inspired by the darkest and most twisted parts of love, especially in relation to the concept of "madness shared by two." So, while it didn't have a central theme, it was kind of based on this idea of what I dub "Horroromance" (horror and romance). I'm a big fan of writing themed poetry and reading themed poetry. It can make collections really interesting, and I feel like most collections have some central heartbeat that the rest of the poems echo in their own ways with keywords or rhythms or ideas.

Your thought on how theme-based poetry collections may compete with prose stories is really interesting, though. That was something I thought about with *The Devil's Dreamland* and one of the reasons why I thought crafting the poetry in order of a narrative arc might work out well. While I really enjoy central themes, I think as long as a poet is writing the collection they truly want to write, it should not matter if the overarching theme is central, general, or something else altogether. To me, good poetry is shown through memorable phrases, evoking the senses, and demonstrating clever approaches to a craft that has been around for so, so long. Narrative verse is gorgeous when done with care, but I don't think it's the only way for a poem to tell us a story. Poetry can be so personal; we all read and interpret it differently. As long as poets are writing what feels organic and true to their individual voice, and as long as we keep encouraging poetry and cultivating it within organizations like the HWA, then I am very open to any forms, themes, and more that writers want to demonstrate.

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 like your volume. Obviously, *The Devil's Dreamland* was an

exception. But which type are you and why do you choose that practice over the other?

A: I have always been horrible with trying to write every day. It's a great method and practice, but sometimes my life is so overtaken with teaching, grading, editing, and freelancing that it just isn't realistic for me to beat myself up for not writing for myself every day. Maybe someday if I don't have such a hectic schedule that could be my reality, but if anyone out there is reading this, do not torture yourself and feel like you are any less of a writer if you don't write something every single day.

I do keep a log of ideas and inspiration quite often, but given my schedule, I tend to work better when I can have certain mornings set aside specifically for writing. I like to gather my journals of ideas and write based off that, or I'll go hunting for open submissions, especially themed ones, and try to write for those specific ideas. Honestly my process is a mess and all over the place, but my whole life is a kind of organized chaos, so I think I do work best when I have a strong project idea and can make myself write for deadlines and goals.

Q: 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? In an interview earlier this year for

HorrorTree you mention that your early poetical efforts were borne of a personal tragedy.

A: Oh absolutely. Thanks for reading that interview! Yes, poetry for me started as a hugely cathartic movement, and in many ways still is. I have a ton of poems I have written based off real life events and chaos that are stuffed together in what *could* be a collection, but I don't know if I have the guts to send it out anywhere, yet. I might start sending out just a few pieces here and there to see if they get published anywhere. But with all writing, it's nice that you can write for yourself to exorcise some demons, but you don't have to show anyone that work if you don't want to, but if you change your mind, it's always there waiting for you.

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

A: My HWA membership has given me networking connections (like with other poets) that feels invaluable. Being able to submit to the annual poetry showcase, the fact that StokerCon has poetry workshops and panels, and just connecting with writers to talk shop, read their work, and be in the loop of what new pieces and connections others are writing makes me very happy. I'm so thrilled the

HWA has continued to support poetry over the years, and I look forward to seeing its growth, too.

Q: I know you have a novella just out, but what poetic projects are you planning now? What is next for you in poetry? Are you going to keep with it or abandon the poets for the bright lights of fiction?

A: Yes! My debut novella, *To Be Devoured*, will be out July 29th through Unnerving. I am currently working on a historical horror novel, which I think will take me some time. Right now, I am not quite sure what my next collection of poetry will be. I have a very, very vague idea for something, but it's not at the stage where I'm ready to dive into it, yet. However, poetry is something I could never abandon. It is a deep, important part of my entire being and I will always be writing it.

Please share some of your work with us:

Holmes vs. The Ripper, Part I

November 1888,
cold metallic tang of blood
billows up in the atmosphere
hovering, haunting
crimson pollution in Victorian streets.

Slightly after the witching hour
a woman cries, “murder!”
Violence is nothing new here,
neighbors turn away, shut their ears
slicing off sound as he slices off
a woman’s breasts.

Around 10:45am,
a landlord goes to collect rent
Mary Kelly’s is overdue,
she doesn’t open the door
blood smears the broken window.

Mary Kelly is nothing more
than a gumbo-stewed organ soup
scarlet flesh pile, skinned down,
inhumanly carved up on the bed
a massacre of mutilation.

There will come a debate after this,
was she truly the Ripper’s last?
Are the following Whitechapel murders
his or someone else’s?

At this stillborn, chilled moment
Jack remains the most brutal
servant of the Devil.

At this stillborn, chilled moment
H.H. Holmes hears
backward whispers slithering
into his small ears

You can do better
You can do better

[Published in *The Devil's Dreamland: Poetry Inspired by H.H. Holmes*, StrangeHouse Books, 2018]

Nyctophilia

I was in love with Night,

the way she whispered
into my splintered heart
and told me someone
who consumed
as much darkness
as I did would either
become a poet
or a murderer.
I decided to be both.

I killed who I loved

without question
or concern
because Night
promised me
that killing love
is the most
poetic.

But then I saw you,
and Night grew jealous.
How could I not
love you?
The silver of the moon
is weaved between
your spine,
inside your muscles.

I want to rip
those slivers
of darkness out
of you, suck them down
into my marrow,
and capture the bats
in your throat
with my lips.

I long to cut you and see
the stars in your veins,

to know if you bleed
their light. I want to find
the constellations
hiding in your blood,
and scatter them across
Night so that she may love
us as we love her,

before the sun kills us all.

[Published in *Love For Slaughter*, StrangeHouse Books,
2017]

Skull Pop

I got lost between
Crystal Head vodka
and chewing stereo wires,
trying to recreate the way
your tongue tastes like
drunken sparks against mine.

[Published in *Love For Slaughter*, StrangeHouse Books,
2017]

Bubonic Litany

Almost tender at first,
freckle-sized spots
from me to you
little love bites
as fleas cascade
down like dying eyelashes

make a wish, darling.

They call me pandemic
and blame the heavens,
riot against clouds
accuse the very air hovering
around, but my miasma
digs deeper into the dirt
of filthy, human secrets.

I sing you a plaguing love song
as masked men arrive, a covenant
of fake doctors with ill intent,
stuffing aromatic rose petals, juniper,
lemon, mint, spices inside their beaks,
all hiding from my putrid breath
as their canes poke your boiling skin
saying, *let me in.*

I am bubonic on your tongue,
dance with me beneath melting, gray skies
as you swell up, apple-sized raindrops

bulge beneath your flesh,
longing to burst, ooze pus and blood,
contaminate those pecking beaks
before your flesh darkly rots, falls off,
and this is me trying to find a way inside you.

Fever and crimson vomit,
do you hear the rats, sweet little pathogens,
scurrying after you?

Harbor me in your lungs
(two to seven days, then you're mine)
every haggard breath is my affection
contaminating mortality,
are the boils on your groin
too much love?

Just trying to dig in deep
with parasitic hands and teeth,
let me in.

Each patch of purple skin
glimmers wetly on your body,
slick bruises from my grip
aching and clinging for you to just
let me in.

Come with me
before you are left behind,
discarded to deal with the fervor
of what I leave in my wake,

away from the religious fanatics
who will bloom dandelion-quick
and blame the living
for the dead,
cut and burn each other.

Let me love you,
carry you away in the embrace
of millions of others
because everyone is a leper in the end,
and the only plague vaccine
is to give in.

I am Black Death
and I'd say once again to let me in,
but here I am
beneath your heart's withered shadows,
within your marrow's rust
clutching your carcass
in pestilence's last embrace.

[Published in *Dissections: The Journal of Contemporary Horror*, 2018]

Lucid Dreamer

wake up
the blue feathers are full,

whispering against your morning skin
dragging beads and netting
across the willow hoop's frame
where delicious nightmares remain
hostage to the dreamcatcher's spidery cradle

open those eyes
to your favorite dark thoughts
watch them make love to remnants
of soft images you tried to keep afloat
within a sleep-cloud above your head

but your nightmare-girl sighs,
blue feathers bind her wrists together
shadowed body pliable and caught
between the spikes and plumages

you've come to claim your punishment
because terror has never
whetted your appetite the way she does
never traced its tongue
so far inside your mind
never wrapped long, stroking fingers
around your spine
so hard
with that hot, nightmare blood
dripping and staining the sheets

open your lips
to simmering bites
against the curve of your throat
swallow your nightmare-girl down
keep her aching in your belly

wake up
splay your palms against webbing
and beads where the blackest thoughts
are caught,
where you'd rather live between the warm
thighs of illusionary darkness bound in terror,
and make love in a bed of blue feathers

[Published in *Twisted Moon Mag*, 2018]

Sara Tantlinger resides outside of Pittsburgh on a hill in the woods. She is the Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *The Devil's Dreamland: Poetry Inspired by H.H. Holmes*. She is a poetry editor for the *Oddville Press*, a graduate of Seton Hill's MFA program, a member of the SFPA, and an active member of the HWA. She embraces all things strange and can be found lurking in graveyards or on Twitter @SaraJane524 and at saratantlinger.com

Sara's poetry, flash fiction, and short stories can be found in several magazines and anthologies, including the *HWA Poetry Showcase Vol. II and V*, *the Horror Zine*, *Unnerving*, *Abyss & Apex*, *the 2018 Rhysling Anthology*, *100 Word Horrors*, and *the Sunlight Press*. Her debut novella, *To Be Devoured*, will be out with Unnerving on July 29th. Currently, Sara is editing *Not All Monsters*, an anthology that will be comprised entirely of women who write speculative fiction. The anthology is set for a 2020 release with StrangeHouse Books.