

CARVING A NICHE FOR POETRY: AN INTERVIEW WITH RAW DOG SCREAMING PRESS

*With David E. Cowen, Bram Stoker nominated author of Bleeding Saffron
(Weasel Press 2018)*

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Lynch, Christina
Sng, Janice Leach
and James Frederick
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Arzen, Stephen M.
Wilson, Cynthia



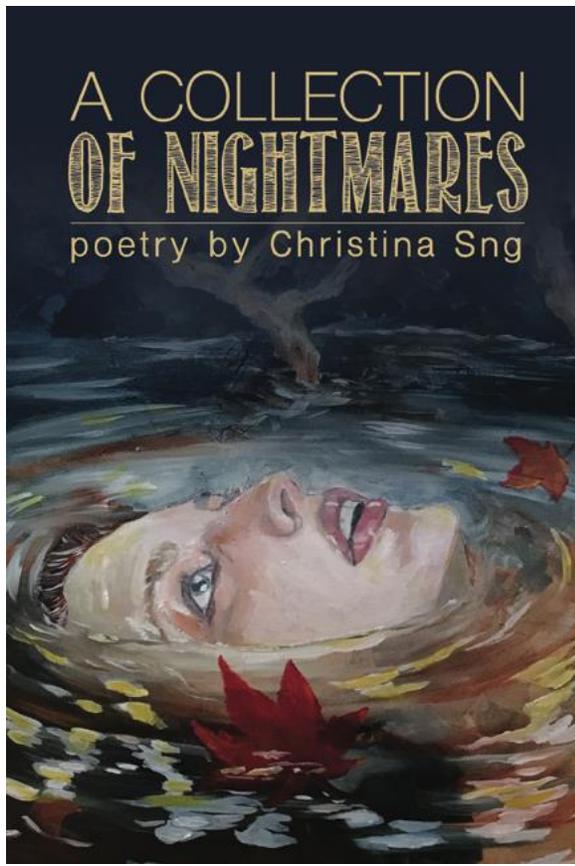
Pelayo, Till Lindeman, John Edward Lawson, Matt Betts and B. E. Burkhead are all poets published through Raw Dog Screaming Press (RDSP). RDSP was founded in 2003 by Jennifer Barnes and John Edward Lawson after running the online Ezine *The Dream People* for several

years. The press was founded with the goal of bringing new and exciting authors to the publishing marketplace when other publishers were reluctant to take a chance on new material. In 2012 fellow Houston poet and essayist Anis Shivani listed RDSP in his Huffington Post column as one of the top 15 independent presses in the United States. In 2019, the Horror Writers Association awarded RDSP its prestigious Specialty Press Award as an “outstanding publisher of horror, dark fantasy and weird fiction.” The publishers of RDSP and its Poetry Editor agreed to sit down with us to discuss their books of poetry and the industry of dark poetry.

Q: RDSP has consistently published poetry collections since it was started. In 16 years RDSP has published no less than 23 collections of poetry. Many of these have garnered nominations and awards. The tales of woe about publishing poetry are legion and legend. RDSP has obviously taken a different approach and made poetry a major branch of its products. With the

economics of publishing poetry so negative why did you take this on?

A (Jennifer): When we first decided to put a major emphasis on publishing poetry it was simply because we loved the works. We never had high expectations for sales of poetry but have been happily surprised that many of our poetry titles have done quite well. In fact, I'd say the percentage of our poetry titles that do better than average is much higher than for our novels. Our second best selling title for all time is actually a poetry release. So the idea that poetry doesn't sell isn't really true. Poetry is probably the best niche we've found to operate in. It's hard to compete against larger companies with genre novels but those companies don't even do poetry so it's easier to get a bit of recognition. Poetry readers are very loyal and await each book avidly. They also don't care as much about whether a release is new or old so older books keep selling.



Q: In 2017 RDSP published the first full collection of poems by Singapore native Christina Sng which was honored with a Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in Poetry. Prior to this volume Christina had published hundreds of poems in publications all over the world. I recently saw that RDSP is going to publish Christina's next volume which I expect will, at a minimum be a finalist for a Bram Stoker. Tell us about how this relationship developed and you were able to convince her to put together such a fine work? What can you tell us about her next volume of poems?

A (John): It's an honor for me to say that over the last two decades my poetry appeared in many of the same publications as Christina's work.

That's how she first came onto our radar. In the interim she maintained her inspiring, prolific output, and got to know not only the books we've put into print, but the poets we work with. We didn't develop a working relationship straight away, but fortunately she and Stephanie were in touch with each other. One thing we offer poets is the opportunity to work with an editorial staff who are all published poets, from Jennifer to Stephanie to myself, and the chance to collaborate throughout the entire cover creation process with the renowned artist Stephen Archer who is himself married to a poet. Also, we view the publishing process as collaborative, not a hierarchal relationship. I like to think all these elements combined to make working with us appealing to an established poet like Christina, and contributed to not only bringing her vision to but successfully launching her book in the marketplace.

Her next book, *A Collection of Dreamscapes*, I personally find very compelling. Its focus leans

more toward the fantastic, even while maintaining the dark undercurrent already established in *A Collection of Nightmares*. This one is going to not only continue appealing to horror fans, but also have an impact on the broader speculative fiction scene. We're lucky to help Christina with this one, and I couldn't more eagerly anticipate the reader response.

Q: A longer relationship deals with Stephanie M. Wytovich who has consistently produced great volumes of work, and was awarded a Bram Stoker for her volume *Brothel* also published by RDSP. Her other volumes with RDSP include *Hysteria: A Collection of Madness*, *Mourning Jewelry*, *An Exorcism of Angels*, *Sheet Music to My Acoustic Nightmare*, and most recently, *The Apocalyptic Mannequin* which I'll talk about later. Stephanie is also the poetry editor for RDSP. Can you share the backstory, and certainly let Stephanie add to this, on how Stephanie found a home with RDSP?

A: (Stephanie) I was first introduced to Raw Dog Screaming Press through my undergraduate advisor at Seton Hill University, Michael A. Arnzen. Mike and I would have these long, sweeping, magical talks about horror and literature and film during our advising sessions, and it was always something that I looked forward to and appreciated because I know I had to ask him a million questions about a thousand different things, and even when I'm sure he was tired from answering, he never stopped teaching. Around sophomore year, I learned that he was a published poet, and a horror poet at that, and I thought (and still think) it was literally the coolest thing in the world to be able to write and publish dark poetry and have other people read it. Needless to say, I started reading his work and that was my first informal introduction to RDSP.

Later on in college, I started studying with Heidi Ruby Miller and Jason Jack Miller. Now I owe Heidi and Jason so much when it comes to my writing career because they really took me under

their wing and showed me the ropes: they took me to readings, mentored me, taught me about marketing, told me about writing conventions/conferences, etc., and as the years went by, a beautiful friendship evolved alongside what started as a professional one. One day, they asked me if I wanted to go to a reading in Morgantown, WV with them, and I said yes, and I very distinctly remember wearing my neon green and purple eyeball high heels to the venue and reading some of my twisted asylum poetry at the open mic. Jennifer and John approached me afterward and asked if I'd ever thought about putting together a collection, and the rest is hysteria—I mean history!

A: (Jennifer) We definitely had our eye on Stephanie for awhile to become part of the RDSP team. She was doing so much in the poetry scene and really was a force to be reckoned with. So we knew we wanted to publish her but were also lucky to tap into her knowledge of current poets and get her help with editing poetry. Having her

help has enabled us to put out more poetry collections especially when extra editing work was required.

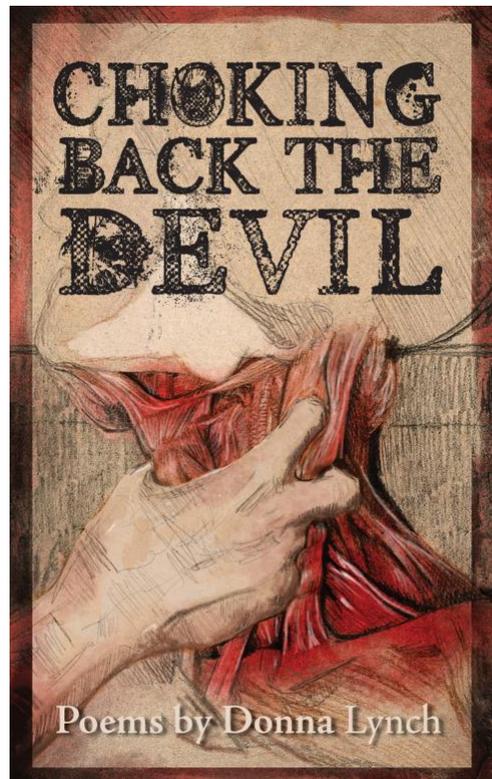
Q: Editing a novel is certainly a lot of work and often requires going back to the author to try to fix language and story plots that are problematic. As a poet I can say that I am very fond of my own words. But I also understand that a good editor's job is to help guide me to a better work. Still, most poets I know are particularly sensitive to suggestions on changing their work. How has RDSP approached the editing process with poetry and how does that differ, if at all, with your fiction authors?

A (Jennifer):

Generally RDSP does not accept works that need a lot of changes. We are never interested in challenging an author's vision so if our vision for a project and theirs doesn't match that's an indication that we are not a good publisher for

that release. As an editor I try to help the author put out the best version of their book. I make suggestions, however if the author feels strongly about something I will always go with their recommendation. This goes double for poetry because there really aren't any hard and fast rules. However, the poets we work with are usually very receptive to suggestions.

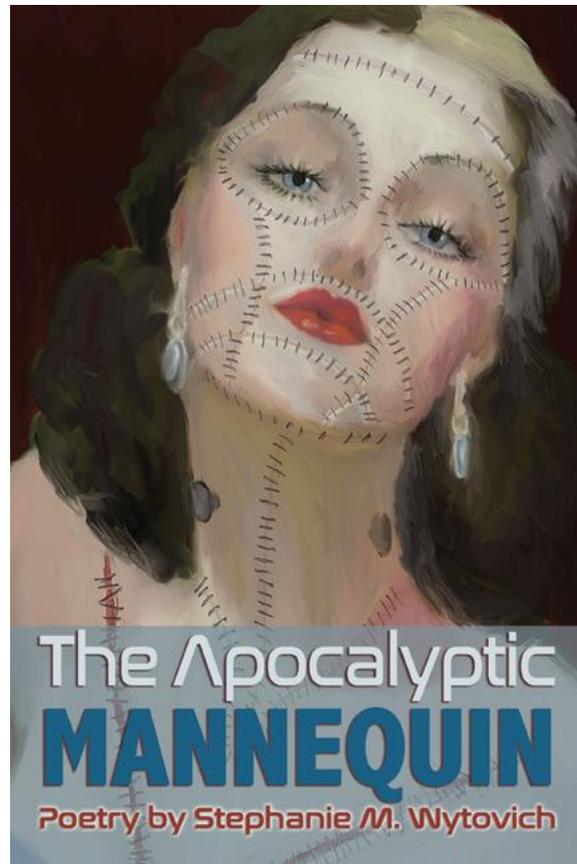
Q: RDSP has two major poetry releases this year with Donna Lynch's *Choking Back the Devil* and Stephanie M. Wytovich's *The Apocalyptic Mannequin*. *Choking Back the Devil* powerfully delves into that blurred line between horror and madness where the reader has to decide if the inherently unreliable narrator is truly seeing creatures of vapid



darkness or has just crossed over to the terrible road to mental breakdown.

The Apocalyptic

Mannequin is a gritty, focused volume focused on the temporary survivors of a cataclysmic apocalypse. Both volumes are intensely

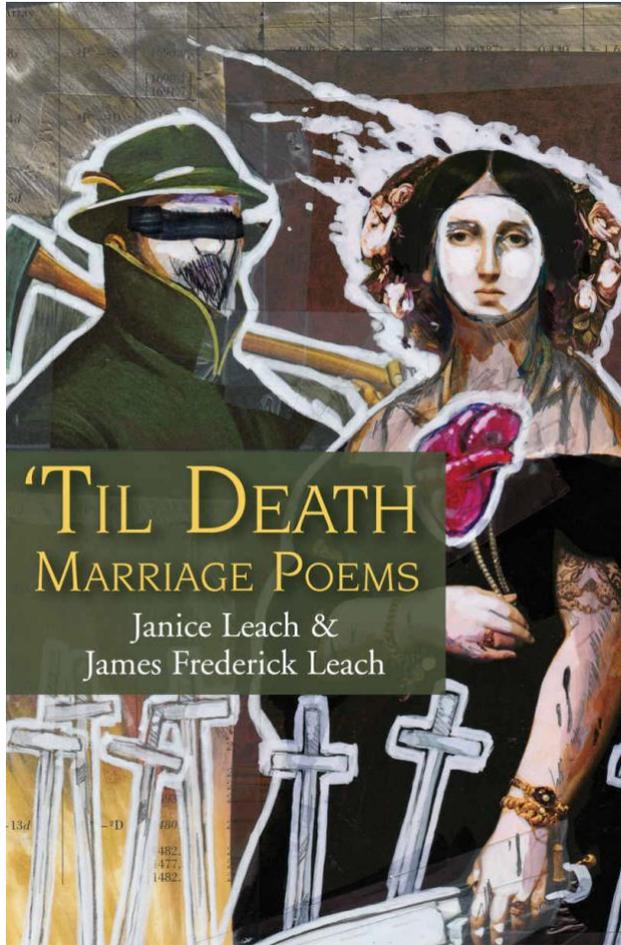


lyrical. When I look at these two volumes and many of the prior poetry publications of RDSP there is a rich diversity of both authors and subject matter and a very high quality of poetry. Was this something you strived to achieve or did it sort of just fall into place? How did you attract such a high caliber group of poets to give you their works to publish?

A (Jennifer):

The goal for everything we do with RDSP is to match or exceed the quality of anything the mainstream press puts out. We may not always reach that goal but we certainly try. We started working with many of our poets first as novelists so we already had a reservoir of great writers to choose from. Our approach to poetry was to treat it the same as we do our novels, while there was poetry being published by indie presses in the horror scene it was not always done with that sort of professional approach. There has been a struggle for horror poetry to be recognized as a serious format but that is definitely changing. I think poets who are serious about their work see the care we take and want to work with us because of that.

Q: I have a particular affection for *'Til Death: Marriage Poems* by Janice Leach and James Fredrick Leach published by RDSP in 2017. This volume was dark, but not necessarily just focused on horror, offering many fantasy elements as



well. The verse, “This morning” is an exceptionally beautiful love poem as well. The entire book is set out as if each and every poem is a collaborative effort, with no inkling to the reader whether Janice or James was the predominant author of any one piece. The

book is unique and exciting with wonderful imagery and sensations. How this this volume come to be? Was it just through the submission process or did you come to know the Leach’s as part of your profession? Was the overall theme for this book something presented to your company or developed with the authors?

A: (Jennifer):

'Til Death was decades in the making. It truly represents the Leach's marriage which is also many decades long and that's why it's such a powerful collection. They came to us with it pretty much fully formed so we can only take credit for recognizing how dynamic and layered it is but not much else! We actually first met at one of the writing retreats we hosted, part of the retreat included the chance to get editor feedback on short pieces. When I read the pieces Janice had brought with her I knew instantly that these were worth publishing. I asked them to send their work Stephanie's way and she agreed. I think it resonated particularly for RDSP because we have such an interest in collaboration and perhaps also because John and I are a husband and wife team too.

Q: The use of a theme-based volume of poems has become popular with dark poetry. Many such books are almost poetical novels. Stephanie's

Brothel and Apocalyptic Mannequin are two such volumes. Alessandro Manzetti and Bruce Boston's Sacrificial Nights and the transformative Four Elements by Linda Addison, Rain Graves, the late Charlee Jacob and Marge Simon also followed this thematic motif. In some ways using an overall theme instead of a collection of diverse poems brings dark poetry closer to the older tradition of narrative poetry where poets were the ultimate story tellers. Do you see this as what will become a prevailing trend in dark poetry? Are thematic poetry volumes more marketable than collections? Are all of us poets going to need to become poetical novelist to publish in the future?

A (Jennifer):

A common refrain from many horror readers who try our poetry books is that they thought they didn't like poetry and so haven't read much of it but after tackling one of our collections they find they can enjoy poetry. My theory is that's because most of our poets are storytellers at heart.

Whether they also write novels or only do verse they have stories to tell and that gives traditional horror readers something to latch on in unfamiliar territory. That can also make the books easier to market. When you can say a book is about something in specific it helps you find the right audience. So a themed collection gives the publisher, at the very least, a core audience to try to reach. It helps with choosing cover art and gives us something to say in the description.

A (Stephanie):

I think one of the most beautiful things about poetry is that there are so many different ways to write it, and one way isn't necessarily preferable to the other. Personally, I've always liked to write thematically because it's easier for me to organize my thoughts and work through my own creative process, plus I grew up admiring and obsessing over the work of Ellen Hopkins in my teens. Hopkins is known for her free-verse poetry

novels, and when I discovered her, I wanted so desperately to learn how to write in a similar fashion, so I devoured everything by her and have reread a lot of her work from time to time. The same thing can be said for Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, and most recently, *Shout*. Having said that, I don't think I necessarily write poetic novels, per se, but I do like the idea of writing in a shared world, so that's why my books all take place in one setting or surround one setting or theme whether that be madness, grief, religion, brothels, road trips, or the apocalypse.

In regard to marketability, I don't think that it's the theme that sells the book, but rather the author's name and the publishing team's approach to marketing. I'm hungry for dark poetry, and I'm always looking for new names and new approaches for what that looks like.

If someone submits a thematic collection to me, great! I'm excited to read it.

If someone submits a collection of experimental dark surrealist poems, I'm here for that, too.

In the end, I want to be moved and I want to be scared/uncomfortable. However the poet chooses to do that is up to them.

Q: This question is directed to John Edward Lawson the co-founder of RDSP. You have published several volumes of poetry, *The Plague Factory*, *The Horrible* (with a wonderful Ringuesque cover), *Wholesome Terror: Lawfully Combative Verse*, *The Scars are Complimentary*, *The Troublesome Amputee* and *SuiPsalms*. Do you take some credit for RDSP's devotion to poetry? Any new poetry works we should be looking out for from you?

A (John): Our path to publishing poetry was a convoluted one. Although Jennifer majored in English and had poetry published nationwide before I was even officially a writer, she had moved on by the time I got into publishing. What happened was I started getting noticed for my screenplays, but to establish a track record for potential buyers I started writing articles and selling short stories. Which lead to collections and novels, and to help cultivate the kind of publishing scene where my writing could thrive I volunteered to help Eraserhead Press. They needed me to take over their literary journal, *The Dream People*, and that's when I first had exposure to contemporary poetry. Jennifer joined me, and we published as many poets as we did fiction authors. This is how we got to know Michael A. Arnzen, among many others we eventually published. It's also what got me to try my own hand at composing verse.

Which I'm still doing. If you're a subscriber to Deena Warner's annual limited edition

Halloween greetings card you should be receiving it right about now, and find it features my poem “Autumnal Armistice.” As collections go I’m putting the final touches on *Bibliophobia*, which has been years in the making, in addition to building a new collection titled *The Red Wallpaper*.

Q: Besides Christina Sng’s new volume are there any other poetry volumes you have committed to for 2020 and beyond?

A (Jennifer):

Yes, we're very excited to have *A Collection of Dreamscapes* coming from Christina next year! We will also be putting out a collection by Albert Wendland titled *Temporary Planets for Transitory Days* which is penned by the main character from his novels *The Man who Loved Alien Landscapes* and *In a Suspect Universe* so that's a cool and unique project. Also, John's *Bibliophobia*. Assuming Stephanie has the time

it's quite likely that we will do a collection from her as well.

Would you please share with us some of your favorite poems from the many books of poetry you've published in your many volumes.

A (John):

"I" by Stephen M. Wilson, from *Kicking Against the Pricks*, and "The Ghost of Buena Vista" by Chad Hensley, from *Embrace the Hideous Immaculate*.

A (Stephanie):

"Garden" by Janice Leach and James Frederick Leach, *'Til Death: Marriage Poems* and "I Left My Heart in San Francisco. I Left Yours Somewhere in Colorado" by Matt Betts, *Underwater Fistfight*.

A (Jennifer):

"Dreamtigers" by Cynthia Pelayo, *Poems of My Night* and "Borderlines: A Horror Story in 7 Small Parts" by Donna Lynch, *Choking Back the Devil*.

Jennifer Barnes has a B.A. in English with a concentration in poetry from the University of Maryland. After having a son in 2005, she became interested in writing children's books and was inspired by the art of Kristen Margiotta to pen *Better Haunted Homes and Gardens*. She is co-founder and managing editor of Raw Dog Screaming Press.

John Edward Lawson's novels, short fiction, and poetry have garnered nominations for many awards, including the Stoker and Wonderland Awards. In addition to being a founder of Raw Dog Screaming Press and former editor-in-chief of *The Dream People* he currently serves as vice president of Diverse Writers and Artists of Speculative Fiction.

Stephanie M. Wytovich is an American poet, novelist, and essayist. Her work has been showcased in numerous venues such as *Weird Tales*, *Gutted: Beautiful Horror Stories*, *Fantastic Tales of Terror*, *Year's Best Hardcore Horror: Volume 2*, *The Best Horror of the Year: Volume 8*, as well as many others.

Wytovich is the Poetry Editor for Raw Dog Screaming Press, an adjunct at Western Connecticut State University, Southern New Hampshire University, and Point Park University, and a mentor with Crystal Lake Publishing. She is a member of the Science Fiction Poetry Association, an active member of the Horror Writers Association, and a graduate of Seton Hill University's MFA program for Writing Popular Fiction. Her Bram Stoker Award-winning poetry collection, *Brothel*, earned a home with Raw Dog Screaming Press alongside *Hysteria: A Collection of Madness*, *Mourning Jewelry*, *An Exorcism of Angels*, *Sheet*

Music to My Acoustic Nightmare, and *The Apocalyptic Mannequin*. Her debut novel, *The Eighth*, is published with Dark Regions Press.

Follow Wytovich on her blog at <http://stephaniewytovich.blogspot.com/> and on twitter @SWytovich.