

## Special Feature:

Interview with Author Barth Anderson

By

Betsy Dornbusch

Barth Anderson is the author of *Patron Saint of Plagues*, a futuristic novel about a man-made virus that takes over Mexico City and the virus-hunter brought in to stop it. Barth's short works have appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Talebones*, *Strange Horizons*, as well as other magazines and anthologies. He's received several Honorable Mentions in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, and he won the Spectrum Award for Best Short Fiction in 2004. He lives in Minneapolis with his wife and two children.

**We'll start with your books. There are so many intriguing details in *Patron Saint*: wetware wiring people to a government database, hotly disputed borders between the US and Mexico, religious/political conflict, not to mention the brutality of the disease itself. The protagonist, Henry David Stark, even has an interesting dialect. What statement, if any, were you trying to make about the real future with the combination of your fictional elements and characterization?**

Thanks. It's meant to be a fun read, first and foremost, so I'm glad you found *Patron Saint* intriguing.

I guess, if there's a statement about the future it's in the inevitability of these monolithic cultures, like America and the Mexico of *Patron Saint*, being intensely vulnerable to nature.

When the story begins, virus hunter Henry David Stark has to solve a couple mysteries – on his grandfather's thriving and healthy farm, Stark is studying why a plant disease called “gold mold” never made an inroad there (gold mold is a disease that has raged through farm fields across America, bringing the U.S. economy to its knees). Soon after, a mysterious and devastating disease emerges in Mexico, an ascendant superpower thanks to a bold new technology called the *pilone*, and Stark is called in to tamp down the outbreak.

*Patron Saint* begins in post-Land Reform America, where the once monolithic ownership of farmland has been democratized, that is, it's been stripped from the few corporations that owned it and turned over to small, democratically run farming cooperatives. It's a decentralized, Jeffersonian America compared to ours, and the

hero, Henry David Stark, is a product of it, an old school, small D democrat. Then as I said, *Patron Saint* quickly changes scenes to Mexico, which has become, in many ways, what America is now, a comfy nest for global corporate economy. Corporations aren't in and of themselves evil, but they are elementally undemocratic, and the network of corporations that prop each other up creates in Mexico a kind of fascism that stands as counterpoint to the diverse, democratic network of Stark's America.

For whatever reason, many Americans are uncomfortable talking about America's demise. I'm not. I think we have to talk about it, because monolithic cultures like ours can't last forever. For example, those of us in the organic foods world have been seeing America's greatest natural resource, agriculture, in dire straits for years. Namely, genetic engineering, and the streamlined number of varieties that we propagate is a real vulnerability. When I was young, there were scores of sweet corn varieties that farmers could choose from, plant, and sell. Now, we have four in common usage. Same with potatoes. This streamlining has occurred in practically every crop that American farmers grow. The Irish potato famine occurred, as everyone probably knows, because the English gave the subjugated Irish one variety of potato to grow, and the whole nation grew it, to their peril. With a total lack of variety in the Irish fields, all it took was one pathogenic microbe shipped in from South America (where potato varieties have been in diverse supply for centuries) to rock that entire culture. As I write this, we're learning the something similar may be the cause of colony collapse disorder, the "vanishing of the honeybees." A microbe or mite from Australia may be to blame – but our use of basically one variety of bee throughout the US is the true problem. We're setting a number of stages for something akin to gold mold to occur right now.

On a side note, I finished the book's final edit amid Hurricane Katrina's landfall in New Orleans (if you read carefully, the deluge and levee metaphors will tell you which passages were written last) and, agree with the observation or not, it struck me that I was watching the first clear sign of America's inability to execute basic services, like the maintenance of levees. Or bridges. The monolith is starting to rock.

### **Why did you choose your setting, Ascension (formerly Mexico City)?**

I love Mexico City. It's dramatic, beautiful, mythic, and monstrous all at the same time. I've been traveling there since I was four, so it's very much a part of me, but still quite foreign, too. There are probably more Mexico and Mexico City stories in my future.

**Your current WIP is called *The Magician and The Fool*. I know Tarot plays a role, but not much else. Tell us about the story.**

Well, it's two stories actually. One is about a homeless man named Boy King who thinks he's being stalked by ancient malevolent forces (and maybe he is!), and the other is about a lapsed art historian named Jeremiah Rosemont who receives a mysterious invitation to Rome because his opinion is needed on a rare Tarot deck. The full story, then, is how these two stories interlace.

Throughout, questions surface about the history of Tarot, since the mysterious deck seems to challenge the card's accepted history, namely, that Tarot comes out of Egypt. That's completely un-provable and improbable, so *The Magician and The Fool* sits squarely on another premise, the idea that Tarot's origins are uniquely Italian (though, throughout the book, cults of all stripes are claiming the mysterious deck as their own). I don't think any Tarot scholarship has put forth the ideas that I'm proposing in this book, that the cards have their roots in occult disciplines of the Ancient Romans and Etruscans.

### **Care to share any personal anecdotes about Tarot?**

One of the most interesting readings I've ever given was to a deaf woman who had an interpreter conveying all my rantings to her via sign language. There I was, interpreting symbols from the cards for the interpreter who was creating new symbols with her hands for the deaf woman. Symbols upon symbols and interpretations upon interpretations. It still boggles my mind to contemplate that reading.

### **You also write a lot of nonfiction articles about food and organic farming, including running "The Wedge," the website for the well-known Co-op. How does this interest and experience inform your fiction?**

On a process level, I think writing articles for the Wedge website, with monthly and sometimes weekly, even daily deadlines, has made me a more nimble and less precious writer. I haven't written to immediate deadline like this since I was nineteen and a radio news reporter for my hometown radio station (it was mostly writing obituaries and stripping down newswire stories, making them readable). I'm much more confident about throwing down a sentence and letting it stand, these days.

### **Talk to me about your short works. What themes are you exploring in short fiction lately?**

Certainly "meaning" is a theme. I think characters in both my recent short stories and *The Magician and The Fool* struggle with the meaning of events around them. It's not a theme, but surreality is a key feature of my recent short stories, too ("A Clockwork Requiem" at *Clarkesworld* and "The Last Escape," due out soon in the anthology *Paper Cities*), and the events of *The Magician and The Fool* are

certainly disorienting for both Boy King and Jeremiah Rosemont. All this speaks directly to the nature of Tarot cards, actually. What do they mean? Is there really a secret “meaning” to anything, everything? Is “meaning” in the cards, in the symbols, or in us? What the hell *is* meaning? One could ask the same questions of stories. Do they mean something in and of themselves or do readers supply “meaning”? Why do we go to authors and Tarot readers to tell us what something might mean? Do stories really even mean anything or can they just be an affect, a special effect, an emotion rather a moral?

Should I keep asking myself questions like this? Or should we move on?

**(laughing) What’s been a favorite story, based on theme or otherwise?**

I guess I’m partial to stories that address alienation and feelings of disjointedness while still maintaining a core, genre spark, and it’s rare to find authors who hit those notes simultaneously. I think SF and F is thought to provide answers (meaning!), classically speaking, so I appreciate the writer who can say, “Humans got nothin’,” and not pretend otherwise. In the newer crop of writers, Doug Lain’s and Mark Teppo’s stories are deeply intriguing and satisfying to me as a reader, mainly because they describe the world the way I see it. Surreal. Their worlds are wondrous and a little menacing, but exploration and even adventure is still there. Alan Deniro’s stories, too, are always speeding off over high cliffs, and I’m deeply grateful to him for every story he writes.

I guess if I were going to offer up one book that hits these notes for me, it would be *Catch-22*.

**What about the theory of the “grand theme” in story—that fiction should speak to national or worldwide problems of the day? Is this something you believe in, or do you prefer to keep your fiction more personal, “close to heart”, so to speak?**

No, I don’t abide by that theory. *Patron Saint of Plagues* does attempt to address issues of the day, but that has more to do with the political animal and news-hound in me. I don’t believe fiction *should* speak to national problems.

I’m very actively trying to get away from consciously following themes or issues of the day. I want them out of my writing and out of my brain. I can be depressingly over-analytic, so I’m trusting myself more in my writing these days and shutting off my chatterbox brain. I’m *feeling* my stories more instead of thinkingthinkingthinking them all the way through. I think becoming a father really changed that in me. Now, I write. I edit. I finish. And that’s good. I’m a more present person, which is a good thing, for my writing and my kids, since, ironically, writing almost by nature can discourage one from being present. Pay attention to a room full of writers some

time. It's like an ADHD convention. We're a very distracted lot. I'm trying to countermand that in myself.

**Some people think writing short fiction is much harder than writing novels. As a veteran of both lengths, what are your thoughts? Are there any differences in how you approach short verses long fiction?**

I spent years trying to get short stories right. They were tough for me. In the late eighties, in college, I was convinced I'd never be able to get my brain around short stories. I was too much of a novelistic thinker, I thought. Everyone read my stories and said, "This reads like the first chapter of a book." And I'd say, "Crap." That went on into the nineties.

I discovered Gene Wolf very late, during my reconnection with SF and F, and reading his short work opened my brain right up. Maureen McHugh did this to me, too. For each of these writers, every sentence is like another incremental dilation of a camera lens, letting in a little more light, information, or field of vision of what we're looking at. To me that explained what short stories can do. They're like peeking through a keyhole. Novels can certainly be written this way (*Mission Child* by McHugh comes to mind), but more often than not, novels are the whole room. A novel rifles through the drawers and reads the diary under the bed, but a short story is just a tiny viewing through one small aperture, and that's all.

I'm still figuring out novels, though. *Patron Saint* was my attempt at a strongly plotted story. Plot is not my strong suit and I wanted to get it right before starting to experiment with the novel form. That's always the way I've been. Learn the conventions thoroughly, then riff. *The Magician and The Fool* is strongly plotted, too, but I loosened up a lot while writing it. I had to. A personal crisis interfered with the story during a crucial rewrite and deadline, and I learned so much from that that I'm still processing it actually. All the plotting, research, back story, notes and notes and notes went right out the window as my life changed beneath my feet, and the story tumbled and reformed daily, sometimes hourly. I mean, I got two chapters out from the ending, and I was like, "No idea. No idea how this thing ends now." That's very unusual and a bit scary for me. I've always been a proponent of writing the ending first or at least knowing exactly how the ending will play out. But there was no other way to write this book. I had a deadline and had to trust how the book was happening, because I was changing too fast to understand what was even happening to me, let alone how the book ended. It was as if someone else was leaping into the driver's seat and writing the story. My editor knew a lot of what I was going through and was scared for me, I think, skeptical that the book could be completed, let alone coherent. But I think I wooed her over. Of the ending she wrote, "The ending! Holy crap! Holy CRAP!"

Anyway. I'm excited to see what this new person in my brain writes next.

**What have you read lately, speculative fiction or otherwise?**

I just finished *Twin Cities Noir*, an anthology of noir fiction by Minnesota writers. And I'm constantly reading, or catching up with, Mark Teppo's "The Oneiromantic Mosaic of Harry Potemkin" at Farrago's Wainscot, one of the boldest pieces of fantasy I've read in years. People overuse the term *tour de force* ("show of strength"). But that's exactly what "Harry Potemkin" is.

**No writing career is easy, but in the past few years you've sold to professional markets and earned a two-book contract. What have you done in the past to establish your success, and what do you see for your career in the future?**

There's no doubt that short fiction is the farm league of the science fiction and fantasy field, and the key to my own success, such as it is. When my agents approached Juliet Ulman, my editor-to-be at Bantam Spectra, the first thing she said to them was, "Barth Anderson? I was wondering when I was going to see something from him." Some writers may be able to jump right into novels, but editors pay very close attention to short fiction in this market.

As for the future, I have a non-fiction food book coming out from Wheatland Press called *A Skeptic's Guide to Natural Foods*, and, beyond that, I can tell there's an alliance forming between my food writing and my fiction. This would be a great ease to my mind, if it happened. I think my writing peers look at my organic food career and go "What's *that* about?" Meanwhile, my organic and grocery colleagues hear about my books and go, "He writes *what*?" Hard to say what the next project will be, but it might be a mystery that takes place somewhere in the organic food/farming world. I've told a few people about the plot and I get a good "ooo" factor.

**What do you think about the notion that "science fiction is dead?" (Caveat—here at *Electric Spec* we are actively seeking science fiction stories!)**

Rubbish. I think there's terrific interest in science fiction outside our cul-de-sac market, but SF writers/editors would never know it because we're convinced everyone hates us. It's simply not true.

SF magazines and publishers need to take a lesson from the organic food world's highly successful marketing, because the similarities between the natural foods market and SF/F market are intriguing. Both are very small segments of larger markets consisting of highly informed and motivated devotees with near evangelical loyalty. Both are dominated by a split between, what the natural foods world calls, the "core" and the "midlevel". The core is the card-carrying devotee:

The SF fan and the political organic partisan are really of one stripe. Then you have the midlevel, the person who wants the products in question but doesn't hold to the core's agenda. They shop for health and taste, and don't care about organic certification or the politics of the farmer. The mid-level reader, then, reads for good stories and insight, not simply because it *is* science fiction.

It's important to understand that in the natural foods world, the midlevel makes up about 45% of the market, the core about 10%. And yet, many natural foods companies pitch to the core – the people who will buy the product no matter what.

Successful natural foods companies (like my co-op, the Wedge) figured out how to pitch to the midlevel and core simultaneously. It's not a betrayal of core values to serve both the food-lover and political junkie (though core devotees will always tell you otherwise – loudly). Science fiction writers need to read beyond their genre and understand why non-genre readers read what they read. SF/F editors and publishers have all but abandoned their “mid-level” reader when buying works and marketing them, though I think that's changing. The smart editor should be asking: Why do non-genre readers recognize Kelly Link? Or Jonathan Lethem? Margaret Atwood? Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*? That's the midlevel and that's where all future growth is for the genre.

So ultimately, I think questions of SF being dead are misguided. SF isn't dead. It simply tends to trap itself by playing solely to its core.

**We work with a lot of first-time authors at *Electric Spec*. What's the best advice you can give writers?**

Don't get caught up in one piece for too long. The best advice I ever received was to break new ground continually, especially early in your writing career. Your growth as a writer is dependent upon exposing yourself to new forms, stories, conundrums, endings, characters, etc. If there's one gnawing problem with a short story that you've been working on for longer than, say, six months (for short fiction, even that might be too long), take that basic thing you want to get right, reshape it, and place it in a new story, a new context. You can always come back to a story later and try to retool it. But, when in doubt, keep your feet moving and let them take you over the next hill whenever possible.

Also, continually read new works by writers who are unfamiliar to you. Challenge your own comfort zones. The more newness and innovation you can bring to the workbench in your brain the better, says me.

**Thanks for taking the time to talk with *Electric Spec*!**