

*** Published by Winona Kent**—Crime Writers of Canada 2022 Vice Chair and BC/Yukon Representative—in her CWC Regional Newsletter, November 2022 edition.



Bob Harris is a Vancouver writer, book promoter and publicist.

His background stems from 27 years in the music and entertainment industry as a concert promoter, event producer, booking agent and personal manager. He spent 6 years on the corporate side of professional sports technology that is now used in Major League Baseball television broadcasts.

This month he interviews mystery thriller author S.M. "Shoshona" Freedman.

"Bob Harris' interview was thorough and well-researched, and the questions he asked were both original and thought-provoking." S.M. Freedman

*** Bob Harris, CWC Associate, in conversation with S.M. Freedman:**

Your fourth novel *Blood Atonement* was released in the USA on October 15, 2022 and in Canada on October 18th. Before you became a published novelist, you studied at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York. Later on, you relocated in Vancouver and became a private investigator.

I would like to begin our chat today with your recollection of those years studying acting in New York and where it led you.

For a theatre junkie, there was no place more exciting than an acting school in New York. The best part? We got free tickets to the occasional Broadway show and many off (or off-off-off) Broadway shows. You just never knew what you might see. When my dad came to visit, I took him to a show that turned out to be a bunch of naked actors humping for an hour-and-a-half. Awkward. But in the end, I realized that I didn't have the perseverance and passion necessary to be able to handle all the rejections that came along with a career in acting. So, I chose a career in writing instead, which as we all know involves no rejection whatsoever.

What attracted you to the field of private investigation?

I kind of fell backwards into the field. Back in those days, you had to convince a company to hire and train you, and you needed to amass two years under their supervision before you could get your full license. I came home from New York knowing I didn't want to pursue acting as a career, but I had no idea what I wanted to do instead. I knew several people in the PI industry, and I was attracted to the madness and adventure.

When you became a private investigator, were your acting skills beneficial?

Absolutely! Most of the people I worked with were ex-cops, so they were at a disadvantage when we needed to get close to a subject we were following. I looked young and innocent, plus I had the ability to morph into different "characters," to blend in or stand out. No one suspected me of a thing.

At the time when you shifted from private investigation to writing commercial fiction, what influenced you to write thriller and crime genre?

I wrote what I enjoyed reading. Some of my favourite books blend genres (thriller with speculative, suspense with adventure), so it felt natural to write in those categories.

Have you been able to make skills from your private investigation and acting background work in your writing career?

More than anything, the decade I spent as a PI taught me how to properly research someone I was investigating, and the acting background taught me how to understand the psychology behind their actions. Both were a real study in human behaviour and motivation, and I hope these skills translate into writing deeper and more empathetic characters.

Your venture into commercial fiction began with *The Faithful* (2015) and its sequel *Impact Winter* (2016). What initially sparked creation of this series? Can you sum up its story in a couple of sentences?

I'd been dabbling with writing for a while, and I'd taken several creative writing courses, trying to find the story I wanted to tell. But in the end, *The Faithful* found me. It tells the story of Ryanne, a woman whose shadowed

past converges with an FBI agent's investigation into the kidnapping of psychic children, revealing a deadly plot to reshape humanity. With the world's survival dependent on stopping a vast network of conspirators known only as *I Fidele*, Ryanne must decipher—and expose—the truth in time. In the sequel, *Impact Winter*, Ryanne is haunted by visions of the second phase of the new world order: the round-up and brutal internment of all survivors. To save humanity, Ryanne must turn *I Fidele*'s most powerful weapon—their own children—against them.

***The Faithful* was a Quarter Finalist in the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award in 2014. How did that occur?**

With no intention of pursuing traditional publishing, I self-published *The Faithful* in 2014 and entered it into the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award. When it made it to the quarter finals, it grabbed the attention of an acquisitions editor at Thomas & Mercer. She made an offer to re-publish *The Faithful*, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The book was subsequently published by Thomas & Mercer (Amazon's Mystery/Thriller Imprint, September 29, 2015) and continued on to reach International Amazon Bestseller status as a paperback and kindle Amazon Bestseller in the US, UK, Italy, Canada and Australia.

Yes.

Your third book *The Day She Died* was published April 27, 2021 as a standalone thriller by Toronto's Dundurn Press. What was your "storyline pitch" on this one?

The Day She Died tells the story of Eve Gold, who is determined to rebuild her life after a near-fatal car accident. But when brain damage leaves her forgetful, confused, and tortured by repressed memories, she must choose between clinging to the lies that helped her survive her childhood and unearthing the secrets she buried long ago.

Describe your journey of manuscript shopping and landing an agent and publishing deal with Dundurn Press.

After publishing *The Faithful* and *Impact Winter*, I realized I needed an agent in my corner if I wanted to further my career. Friends and family who aren't

in “the biz” might think getting a literary agent is kind of like hiring someone to sell your home: Find someone you trust to do a good job and hire them. Of course, it’s not like that at all. So, for anyone wanting a guidepost to finding an agent, here’s part of a blog I wrote describing the steps I took (twice, actually, because I parted ways with my first agent during the pandemic and had to start from scratch):

1. Research agents and agencies and create a master list of likely candidates. Make a strategy for which groups of agents you’ll query in your first round, second round, third, etc. Then have a drink. And some chocolate.
2. Write a query letter (potentially harder than writing a book).
3. Following each agent’s guidelines, send out the query letter and sample pages to the first group of agents. Eat chocolate and stare into the void while waiting for a response.
4. Get rejections from some. Radio silence from others. Maybe a few requests to read the full manuscript.
5. Query more agents. And then more. As rejections come in, change the query letter, revisit/re-edit the manuscript to fix problems. Get rejections on full manuscripts. (The first time, I queried upwards of eighty agents before I received an offer of representation.)
6. Receive an offer of representation. Pinch myself for a while before reaching out to the other agents who have my query/manuscript to let them know I’ve received an offer. Sort through the flurry of activity as most of those agents “step aside.” The first time, I received two other offers of representation and had conversations with all three agents before making a decision. The second time, I closed down shop after two offers because I was certain I’d found my dream agent.

Now let’s talk about *Blood Atonement*. What is the premise and what inspired this story?

Grace DeRoche develops dissociative identity disorder while growing up in a fictionalized sect of the FLDS (think Netflix’s *Keep Sweet: Pray and Obey* or Hulu’s *Under the Banner of Heaven*). When other escapees die under suspicious circumstances and the evidence points in her direction, Grace must determine if one of her alter personalities has become a murderer, or if she’s in danger of becoming the next victim.

Describe the breadth and depth of research required for this book?

It was intense. The roots of *Blood Atonement* grew from my fascination with dissociative identity disorder. When I learned that DID usually develops as a way for a young mind to protect itself from systemic abuse, and that it's often linked to people who grew up in cults, the wheels started clicking. Most of the FLDS live in the southern U.S., but there's a group that came north to British Columbia and settled right near the border in a town called Lister (they call it Bountiful, but you won't see it marked as such on a map). They'd send young girls north or south in forced marriages, and their "troubled" boys would be sent north to a work camp near Bountiful to repent and get back on the path of "righteousness." I spent many hours researching the FLDS, learning about the Mormon Church's beliefs, why the FLDS split from the mainstream church (essentially because they didn't want to give up polygamy), and how that led them down the path of becoming more cultlike, isolated, and fanatical. I also read memoirs written by people who escaped the FLDS, to get a sense of what it was like to grow up in the FLDS, and the challenges they faced after they escaped.

How did your title emerge? How does "blood atonement" relate to your story?

Blood Atonement is a Mormon doctrine, supposedly no longer in practice, that states that certain sins are so grievous the only way to atone is by spilling blood. After turning their backs on the church, Grace and the other escapees are considered "apostates," which is a most grievous sin. Near the beginning of the novel Grace's sister, Desiree, receives a newspaper article about the supposed suicide of one of the other escapees, with a Brigham Young quote from the *Journal of Discourses* that states, "when your brothers or sisters commit a sin that must be atoned by the shedding of their blood, will you love them well enough to shed their blood?"

Was there a scene that was particularly difficult to write? Did you have to set limits on how far you would go with it?

The chapters where Grace faces abuse from their bishop or from her husband were extremely difficult to write. I wanted to write this story with sensitivity and compassion, rather than sensationalizing trauma. So, I decided early on that I would keep all abuse "off the page" while she

dissociates. My hope is that I've honoured the victims and helped to give a voice to those who've been silenced.

I found it interesting how you were able to integrate historical facts in the story pertaining to legal proceedings, actual locations and names of people involved with the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ Latter-Day Saints (FLDS). Which raises the question: did you have re-writes and edits to make at the request of your publisher's legal department?

Actually, no. I was extremely careful with my research, and all the facts used in *Blood Atonement* are public knowledge. And though many real members of the FLDS are mentioned—for example, Grace talks about their prophet Uncle Warren (Jeffs) visiting their sect—I kept all the main characters fictional.

How long did *Blood Atonement* take to complete from concept to final sign-off by your publisher's editor?

Approximately four years. I was writing *Blood Atonement* when I signed with Dundurn for *The Day She Died*, and thankfully they also loved and wanted to publish *Blood Atonement*!

I'm drawn to your comment on a recent podcast earlier this month with Joanna Vander Vlugt, who I interviewed for Winona Kent's July Regional CWC newsletter. You said, "I've always been obsessed with extremism and damage that's done to people in childhood and how they survive that, and how they thrive or don't thrive or what that damage does to them as they're adults going about in the world...." What attracts you to extremism? How did your interest originate?

I write what I fear, and I find extremism terrifying. I'm fascinated by the harm caused by all aspects of extremism in our society—religious, patriarchal, political—and how that impacts survivors years or even decades later. How do we break free from the ingrained lessons and damage done in childhood? It seems to me that every religion and political ideology can become damaging when taken to the extreme. Followers of the FLDS take their beliefs to the knife's edge of cultlike fanaticism, and I wanted to highlight the damage done to their lost children. I think it translates to many

factions of our society, and I hope it serves as a fictionalized example of the real damage done by intolerance and extremism.

You also mentioned during Joanna’s podcast that in the re-writing and editing stage of the book you became more aware of what your statement was — that it went beyond just telling a story — and at the end of it all, you realized you were discussing a much broader view. Can you expand on that?

While writing a story, I’m invested in the details and characters and building of this fictional world. The theme is probably already there, percolating in the back of my head, but I never write the first draft with a broader message in mind. In the case of *Blood Atonement*, the world felt different to me when I opened that first Word document than it does now. Extremism and racism and hatred are all rearing their ugly heads.

Your previous works of fiction carry a theme of trauma. Be it childhood stress trauma or childhood experience trauma or intergenerational trauma, is this a theme that you plan to continue in future novels?

I suspect so, although sometimes I think it would be nice to write something fun and light and entertaining. Something that provides an escape from the woes of the world.

Getting back to *Blood Atonement*, I think the book trailer is top drawer. Who produced it? Did you have input?

I created it, so thank you!

I speculate the timing of the book’s release could reap beneficial traction from recent media attention to FLDS and viewership generated by TV documentaries such as Rachel Dretzin’s “*Keep Sweet: Pray and Obey*” (Netflix) and the FX TV miniseries “*Under the Banner of Heaven*” (Hulu) which is an adaptation of Jon Krakauer’s non-fiction book *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* published in 2003. Do you agree?

Absolutely. It’s ironically good timing. I wrote *Blood Atonement* before these two specials came out, but it’s clear to me that there’s still an interest in the FLDS, even years after Warren Jeffs was sentenced to prison. The FLDS has

become even more reclusive and fanatical in the years since Jeffs was arrested, and they still follow him and call him their prophet, even as he rots in his prison cell.

Reflecting on your path as a novelist, who and what are your influences and why? Past and present. Are there mentors?

Growing up, I loved reading horror and suspense masters like Stephen King, Peter Straub, and Dean Koontz, as well as Ann Cleaves, Agatha Christie, and Mary Higgins Clark (to name just a few). I also loved Diana Gabaldon, Tess Gerritsen, and of course Sue Grafton.

What is it about Sue Grafton's novels that you like?

I just love her kick-ass detective, Kinsey Millhone. I'm pretty sure she was a main reason I decided to become a PI. Turns out, the reality is not half as interesting.

How has your membership in Crime Writers of Canada, Sisters in Crime, International Thriller Writers, and Mystery Writers of America benefitted your career?

The connections I've made with local authors through CWC and Sisters in Crime Canada West is of enormous value to me. Writing can be a lonely endeavor, but connecting with local authors and taking part in such a brilliant and supportive community is one of the highlights of my career.

Are there writer's conferences and book fairs that you are booked for or planning to attend in 2023?

I haven't attended any conferences since 2019 for obvious reasons, and I'm excited to get back out there. I'm attending Readers Take Denver at the end of March, and I'm thrilled to attend my first Bouchercon (Murder at the Marina) at the end of August in San Diego.

You have two new books that are now in editing stage. Can you give me a short overview of each? Do you write other genres?

I'm trying my hand at my first YA novel, which I hope will be the beginning of a series. *Changeling* delves into the ancient mystical roots of Indigenous Judaism, telling the story of Roger Woods, high-school student and Elvis impersonator, who was a missing child for the first five years of his life.

When his newborn nephew disappears from his crib, Roger must face the terror of his forgotten childhood to save the baby from an existence worse than death. The other book I'm currently rewriting/editing is a historical suspense novel called *Bury Me Not*. It tells the story of a young boy and his family as they deal with his horrifying past life memories.

Having been away from *The Faithful* series for several years, do you look forward to completing the trilogy and will you find it easy to pick up with the characters again?

Yes, and no. The third in the trilogy has been eluding me for quite some time, and it's only in the past year or two that I've realized what the problem is. When I started writing *The Faithful* in 2012, the world felt very different to me than it does now. I'm now struggling to write post-apocalyptic fiction, because it doesn't feel quite as fictional as it did a decade ago.

Can we spend a few moments on your writing routine? How do you approach a project? What is key in planning it and keeping organized during your research and writing?

With each project, I become more of a plotter and less of a pantsier. I usually start off with brainstorming, character and world building, and research. I've recently started using an app called Plottr, and it's a great visual tool for plotting and compiling all needed information in one place.

What is your secret to keeping readers hooked? Especially in dark psychological thriller fiction?

Pacing, of course. For me, I think it's also creating a character with depth and a wealth of imperfections.

What keeps you writing?

Honestly? Deadlines.

Thank you for today's chat, Shoshona. It's been enjoyable learning about your life as a writer. To wrap up, here are five items you could give me flash answers to:

1. Your favourite beverage.

Water. No, who am I kidding? It's coffee.

2. Your first live concert experience.

Ugh. David Lee Roth when I was twelve. I was dragged to it by my older stepsister, who promptly lost me in the crowd on the floor. I spent the rest of the concert trying not to get trampled.

3. Your most memorable childhood book.

Hansel and Gretel. No wonder I grew into reading Stephen King!

4. A favourite family vacation with your children when they were youngsters.

In 2019 we spent a couple weeks in Florida. We chartered a boat off the coast of Key West and spent the day kayaking, snorkeling, and swimming with sharks, and finished at an amazing restaurant on the water where we ate key lime pie.

5. A thrilling moment during your acting career.

Stepping out of the train station in New York.

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