The Little Creative Interview
with Scott Coon

Let's Meet…

Scott Coon

Scott Coon is a published short story writer. His short stories have appeared in Sonar 4, HUNGUR, Pariah, and other magazines. "The Hero Rush" was featured in Bewildering Stories' Quarterly Review and "The Laughing Bombs" was chosen by Bewildering Stories for their 2011 Annual Review, The Mariner Awards.

1) When did you first begin expressing yourself creatively and how?

Before I had even started grade school, I had a babysitter named Susan who was a very good artist in my eyes, as was my Uncle Ricky. By the third grade, I was writing and illustrating my own poetry. Where the inspiration to write poetry came from is beyond me. I knew no writers and don't remember any poetry that I read. Yet there I was in the third grade writing it.

All through grade school, I wanted to be an artist and spent my time drawing. But somehow I always came back to writing. My first submission was to Dragon magazine, an article that was of course rejected. When my high school started a creative writing program, I jumped right in. In that program I had my first "stage rush" while reading for the class. I killed off two characters and someone said "Hey! They didn't do anything! Why did you kill them?" That was it. I was going to be a writer.

2) From where do you draw inspiration for your work?

Television. Yes, people say that you should read and that television rots your brain BUT if I watch documentaries and you read low-grade pulp fiction… yeah. Yes, I read a lot too but after a long day of braining hard, I find that the light panel in my living room is more at my speed.

If you are a science fiction writer, you absolutely should be watching shows like "Cosmos" and "Through the Wormhole". But it's not just the documentaries that are rich with information. If you pay attention, you can learn all kinds of things from all kinds of shows. The tricky bit is to discern what is true and what is just made up to make the story work. "Phineas and Ferb" is full of both kinds of information, especially about platypuses.

When I encounter inspiration whether from TV or just in daily life, I write it down. Things like "a bomb that, instead of whistling, makes a weird laughter like sound when falling" and "telepathy as a form of secure military communication". I call these seeds. These little seeds pile up and eventually come together into a story. In this case, that story became "The Laughing Bombs".

3) What work are you currently most proud of?

I am quite proud of "Heroes of the Hydra" because of the reader reaction to it. Each reader seems to bring something different to the human side of this story.

The primary seed for this story was "what if you were trapped behind enemy lines with a head injury that kept wiping your memory clean?" I realized that the answer was that you would most likely die… unless you had help. From there I asked myself what complications could be thrown into this situation of two or more soldiers behind enemy lines. In that brainstorming I found a surreal love story to couple with my surreal war story. But I had no idea that that love story would hit readers, especially female readers, the way that it did.

4) What advice would you give to others about the creative side of what you do?

Stream of consciousness writing is fine. Stream of consciousness writing that you try to get published is most likely doomed. Know where you are going before you write the first word. In other words, OUTLINE. Not outlining leads to ambling stories with no direction, conclusion, or audience.

I outline so much that it's more like I am sculpting the story rather than writing it. I start with a seed idea. Usually I have more than one. I write in a tablet and start brainstorming by asking myself questions about the seeds. Then I pick out the good answers to form my story around. Then comes more questions, each layer of questions getting more and more specific as I build up the details of my story.

At some point I realize that I have story somewhere in all of that mess and I need to know how to approach it. I identify events I intend to include in the story and build sections in my Word document for each event and start filling in the details. I put brackets around the events so that I can reorder them easily to properly build the plot to a crescendo.

As I add details and answer questions, more questions pop up and are put right into my document. At this point I'll have a mix of high and low level outlining butI don't stop. I keep outlining, rearranging, and answering questions until I have the whole story outlined from end to end down to the paragraph level. Then I read that form end to end until I'm satisfied that that is what my story should be.

I find this very freeing when I start writing the actual prose. I don't have to worry about what I am going to write, only how I am going to write it. Of course, the story will morph a bit between here and when it appears in print but it won't be because I finally figured out how my story is going to end.

5) What advice would you give to others about the business side of what you do?

Stay in touch with the business world for your craft. Find publications that cover the business side of your craft and learn it. I had a subscription to "Writer's Digest" for a couple of decades. Letting it lapse has put me behind. Now I am playing catch up.

In addition to trade magazines, learn from others who have been successful recently. Charles Dickens knew how to write but he also knew how to sell his work to publishers and an audience during his lifetime. Studying Charles Dickens is an important part of your training as a writer but that won't tell you what publishers want today nor will it tell you how to reach a modern audience. Look for stories about writers who have recently sold their first, second, or third novel and learn from their stories.

It's not good enough to be good at what you do. You need to be good at presenting and promoting it, too. After all, how will anyone ever know how awesome your novel is if they don't even know that it exists?