

Sample Interview with Dave Hoing and Roger Hileman, co-authors of *A Killing Snow*

Dave Hoing wrote *A Killing Snow* in collaboration with **Roger Hileman**, a long-time friend. In keeping with many good stories, their novel is about strong characters and their relationships. The story takes place during the late 1880s, inspired by the memoirs of a real life Civil War veteran and a deadly blizzard that struck the Midwest in 1888.

How did you become involved with the subject or theme of your book?

DAVE: A combination of a desire to write another historical novel, a chance discovery of a very interesting work of historical nonfiction, and Roger's acquisition of some very interesting memoirs. (See his answer below.)

ROGER: I enjoy researching my family history, and once while interviewing a relative, he showed me the memoirs of a mutual ancestor. A valuable chance find, to be sure. How I managed to obtain a copy of the memoirs is another story, but let's just say there was enough stuff in there to fill up several books. His account is amazingly accurate and detailed, especially the Dakota homesteading years.

Why did you choose to write in this particular field or genre?

DAVE: I'm a professional member of SFWA (Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America), and that's the field in which I published the majority of my short stories early in my writing career. However, I've moved away from both writing and reading speculative fiction. My first love now is literary and historical fiction, although mysteries are a guilty pleasure—which I don't actually feel guilty about.

ROGER: I'm a historian wannabe. I first got into genealogical research, but I was more interested in discovering the more intimate details of a particular ancestor's life, not just collecting as many names as I could. An old history professor friend of mine once told me that the best way to learn history is to make it personal. He'd have his students research their family trees, and then they'd discuss the surrounding times and places. The more I imagined the *when* and *where* of my ancestors, the more I needed to learn the historical context. I was hooked. It wasn't much of a stretch to create historical fiction using my own family as starting-off points for my characters.

Where did your love of books/storytelling/reading/writing/etc. come from?

DAVE: I've always loved books—so much so that not only have I worked in a university library for the past 39 years, but I collect antiquarian books in my spare time. The first "novel" I wrote was when I was in kindergarten, after having seen the 1961 movie *The Lost World*. The plot of my story was suspiciously similar to that of the movie, but hey, I was five. After that, I always enjoyed the creative writing assignments in school. Fiction is great. After all, in what other profession are you

encouraged to tell lies? ☺

ROGER: I spent a large part of my adult life performing on stage as an instrumental musician, actor, and singer. The theater felt like home to me. I was awed by the storyteller; the way she could stand alone on stage and enthrall an audience with mere words. I wanted to tell those kinds of stories, so I began writing plays, then later screenplays. When I wrote a screenplay that caught Dave's attention, he convinced me to switch to prose. I've grown to appreciate prose as performance art, which has blossomed into a lucrative audio book industry.

I see your web site uses the tagline, "Where fiction and music meet." How does that work?

DAVE: Roger and I have interests in fiction and music, and sometimes combine the two.

ROGER: Although I'm college educated in music and Dave's the English major, we have interest in each other's fields. Often Dave writes music for me to advise him on, and Dave's still trying to teach me how to write prose.

How long have you been writing?

DAVE: The Pleistocene Era.

ROGER: Not yet long enough.

What cultural value do you see in writing/reading/storytelling/etc.?

DAVE: It's how we learn to know ourselves, "ourselves" being the entire human community.

ROGER: I enjoy losing myself in a story so real the characters begin feeling like old friends. I think it's important that we understand others who live in different worlds than ours.

What were your goals and intentions in this book, and how well do you feel you achieved them?

DAVE: Our goal was to create a believable and interesting story with believable and interesting characters, and I think we did that.

ROGER: I wanted a chance to delve deeper into my great-great uncle's memoirs and corroborate his account with the historical record. I think we did an adequate job of shining a light on this remarkable man and sharing him with the world.

Can you share some stories about people you met while researching this book?

DAVE: Roger is the primary research guy in our collaborations. However, I used the names of my friends and student employees at the library for some of the minor

characters. That was great fun for me and for them.

ROGER: David Laskin's book, *The Children's Blizzard*, was a valuable resource for us, with its detailed descriptions of weather forecasting technology and first-hand accounts of the 1888 blizzard. The author of my uncle's memoirs was quoted in that book several times. The sources of the quotes weren't cited, however, so I contacted Laskin to see if he could help. He graciously dug through boxes of notes, but it was to no avail. Also, I reconnected with my fourth cousin Hal, who now owns the memoirs after an arduous search to recover them.

What are some of the references that you used while researching this book?

DAVE: See my previous answer—although working, as I do, in the Archives of a university library, I did make many forays into our collections for information about local history.

ROGER: Along with Michael Hileman, Jr.'s memoirs and Laskin's *Children's Blizzard*, I corroborated dates and places in the memoirs with documents on Andersonville Prison, the 96th Illinois Infantry's regimental history, the history of Gann Valley, South Dakota, and other sources describing the many artifacts sprinkled throughout the book.

What do you think most characterizes your writing?

DAVE: Free-form preciseness, I hope, or perhaps controlled anarchy. I write without an outline, having in mind only a beginning, ending, and theme when I start to write. In the first draft I let the characters indulge themselves and take over the writing for me (and I'm sure my fellow writers can relate to this), but then I go back and rein them in, making sure everything is consistent, from plot to setting to the actual prose itself, and every little detail in between. In other words, once my characters have had their fun, I put their lives into literary order. And I'm an obsessive reviser. Nothing is ever, ever, ever, good enough. But that's okay. I'm one of those sad creatures who actually *likes* to revise.

ROGER: I'm a structure guy, much to Dave's dismay. He's tempered my desire to plot everything out to the nth detail before writing a scene. I like the text to have a lyrical quality whenever possible, so it needs to have a rhythmic flow whenever possible.

What was the hardest part of writing this book?

DAVE: Nothing was hard. It was a pleasure to write from the first word to the last period.

ROGER: For me, it was deciding what to omit from Michael's story. His story had to support the larger one without getting in the way.

What did you enjoy most about writing this book?

DAVE: Everything, especially working with Roger and learning his family history. I also

came to know and like most of the characters, as if they were real people. The one I don't especially like is the villain of the story, which is okay. I'm not supposed to like him.

ROGER: The collaboration. I enjoy the friendly discipline of shooting emails daily back and forth. Exchanging ideas, reviewing pages.

Are there vocabulary words or concepts in your book that may be new to readers? Define some of those.

DAVE: Set more than a century in the past, *A Killing Snow* transports the reader to a world much different from our own. We had to depict the everyday lives, thought processes, and technology of the times, which may be unfamiliar to modern readers.

ROGER: Especially the technology. There was weather equipment, a printing press, and a thing they called a hay burner which had to be described well enough to satisfy readers.

Are there under-represented groups or ideas featured in your book? If so, discuss them.

DAVE: Irish immigrants and Native Americans play a prominent role in the book. In fact, the entire plot revolves around the murder of an Irish immigrant.

ROGER: Women, too. They had fewer rights then, and they had to overcome a deeply-rooted cultural context in order to be treated equally. Mariel's pretty progressive for her time, and she was willing to stand firm for what she valued.

What is the biggest thing that people THINK they know about your subject/genre, that isn't so?

DAVE: Our book casts a little bit different light on the plight of Native Americans. It also deals with Fenianism in a way many people may not have seen before.

ROGER: In our depiction of Dakota Territory in the 1880s, guns aren't revered or even all that pervasive. They're simply tools. In fact, the murder weapon used in the story wasn't a gun.

What is the most important thing that people DON'T know about your subject/genre, that they need to know?

DAVE: That despite the many differences between the 1880s and now, at their core people are fundamentally the same. We all have places we want to get to in our lives. The means to get there may be different, but the desire and need aren't.

ROGER: Homesteaders' dreams of owning a successful small family farm were usually guaranteed to fail. They couldn't prove them up because the allotted amount of acreage available to them was too small to be sustainable in that capricious climate.

What inspires you?

DAVE: I never know until it happens, but anything is fair game. I've even written two short stories solely around short Latin phrases I thought were cool.

ROGER: A walk in the woods, a mountain hike. Pristine wilderness.

How did you get to be where you are in your life today?

DAVE: Serendipity and survival.

ROGER: Being the faithful sidekick.

Who are some of your favorite authors that you feel were influential in your work? What impact have they had on your writing?

DAVE: Oddly enough, it was two writers I don't read anymore. Like most young writers, I tried to emulate the big name authors. Hence, in my fantasy phase, one might have noticed a (badly done) Tolkienesque flavor to my writing, especially the dialogue. I also liked Vonnegut's "bounce around" style in novels like *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse Five*.

ROGER: Dave. After that, mainly 20th century playwrights. Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Samuel Beckett. I learned it's not just what you say, but all that lies underneath.

What did you find most useful in learning to write?

DAVE: Writing workshops.

ROGER: I write a lot of nonfiction in my day job. It teaches me to write to be read, to consider the reader. Robert E. Horn's research on information design is an excellent resource.

What was least useful or most destructive?

DAVE: Writing workshops.

ROGER: The cliché "write what you know." Aw, c'mon. How do you learn cool, new stuff? Do extensive research, especially in an area you don't know much, but become passionate about. Then use it in a story. Oh. I guess you "know" it then.

Are you a full-time or part-time writer? How does that affect your writing?

DAVE: Part-time, although I probably spend more time writing than I do at my full-time job at the library.

ROGER: I do a lot of writing for my full-time job, but it's deadly dull. I still don't have a

fiction writing discipline. No excuses, it's just not a good habit yet.

What are some day jobs that you have held? If any of them impacted your writing, share an example.

DAVE: I've been a clerk in both grocery and convenience stores, a security guard—from which I got exactly one short story—and fiction editor for various small magazines. Throughout it all, I've worked in the University of Northern Iowa Library, where my title is Library Associate. I've not yet written a novel about a library, but as mentioned before, I use the names of my student employees for some of the characters in our books.

ROGER: The best job I had for creativity was carrying mail for the U.S. Postal Service. That was back when I was writing screenplays. Once I hit the street, I could work on autopilot, saving part of my brain for working out dialogue and visualizing action sequences, running them over and over in my mind until I could get somewhere to write them down. That method was completely wrecked once they started sending out trays of machine-sorted mail for us to deliver without being able to look at it ahead of time. My concentration was constantly broken by sorting errors.

For those interested in exploring the subject or theme of your book, where should they start?

DAVE: The old-school guy inside me would say, naturally, the library. But the Internet works, as long as the sources are reputable. There are also the county hall of records, museums, diaries and, perhaps best of all, conversations with older people about their lives. Those memories are priceless, and deserve to be preserved!

ROGER: Read David Laskin's *Children's Blizzard; In All Its Fury: A History of the Blizzard of January 12, 1888*, by W.H. O'Gara; and the *Memoirs of Michael Hileman, Jr.*, by Thomas Pirnie.

What process did you go through to get your book published?

DAVE: Probably not the best method for most writers, but I sent it cold to Penmore Press. They read and accepted it within a day or two.

ROGER: Our normal strategy is to query agents for a year first, then publishers. With this one, we wrote it while we were querying agents with the previous novel we'd written. At the end of the year, we had two novels ready to publish. We assumed our old publisher would take the previous one, so we submitted it to them. At the same time, Dave sent *A Killing Snow* to Penmore, where we figured we'd get a polite rejection. Astonishingly, the opposite result occurred, with us receiving notice on both novels within two days of each other.

How do you find or make time to write?

DAVE: As the Nike ad says, Just do it. Lose the excuses for not writing, and write.

ROGER: I have a lot of demands on my time, so it's sort of snuck in, usually in 20- or 30-minute increments when I can.

Do you write more by logic or intuition, or some combination of the two? Summarize your writing process.

DAVE: Both. As I explained before, intuition first, then logic. I start with a premise, know the ending, give the characters a lot of latitude in the middle, then revise, revise, revise! Did I mention revise? Free-wheeling is great and gives the piece a spontaneous, unexpected feel, but that's not enough. If you have any hope of making it stand out, then revising is essential. If you do it right, you can make it controlled and spontaneous.

ROGER: I usually start with self-flagellation ("You fool, [whap] you cannot write [whap]—fraud!"). Then I eventually give myself permission to write some garbage. With that out of the way, next I focus on the scene at hand. In the olden days I would have had everything outlined down to the last grain of sand. But I've taken Dave's advice and am now a little more comfortable letting the characters decide a few things.

What do you like to read in your free time?

DAVE: I'm interested in virtually everything except internal combustion engines, so I read about virtually everything except internal combustion engines.

ROGER: I *am* interested in internal combustion engines. In fact, I heavily researched them for *Hammon Falls*.

What projects are you working on at the present?

DAVE: Revising one of our previous novels at the suggestion of our current publishers, trying to find an agent for our latest finished novel, *In the Blood*, and composing a song cycle using all the musical modes.

ROGER: This thing called a press kit. It reminds me too much of my day job, though. And helping Dave with all that other stuff.

What do your plans for future projects include?

DAVE: Write. Compose. Win the lottery. Move to the south of France. Write. Compose.

ROGER: Retire and devote more time to learning the craft of fiction writing. Also continue developing my other passions, like film scoring, playing jazz, and web design. By the way, Dave often does win the lottery, so that's a realistic goal for him. And Dave, if you do move to the south of France, you better make sure you have a good Internet connection, because I'll want a direct line.

What question do you wish that someone would ask about your book, but nobody has?

DAVE: Hollywood producer: “Can I buy the rights to your book?”

ROGER: Yeah, what he said.