

BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

EDGE OF
DARK
WATER

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A novel

by

Joe R. Lansdale

A CONVERSATION WITH JOE R. LANSDALE

Edge of Dark Water is set during the Depression era. How much did the time period affect the story? What do you enjoy most about writing about earlier times? What's most difficult about it for you?

The Great Depression was the engine for the story. I didn't make a point of identifying the era, I just sort of let the story determine that gradually with clues the reader would pick up on. I think I originally wrote it with a year in mind, and slipped it in, but when I started rereading it, I took that out. I thought it stood on its own, and the time period would be evident, and that if it wasn't, it would stand on its own without it. But I think it's pretty clear. I grew up on stories about the Great Depression because my father and mother were born at the turn of the twentieth century, my father in 1909, my mother in 1914, I believe.

My dad was in his early forties when I was born and my mother in her late thirties, so they had reached their mature years during the Great Depression. My father had ridden the rails to go from town to town to compete in boxing and wrestling matches at fairs. It wasn't his primary way of making a living, but it was something he did because he needed the money, and he enjoyed it. For the record, those kinds of wrestling matches led to the invention of what is known as pro wrestling today. Only when my dad did it, the outcome was not ordained.

I remember hearing stories about people being poor and so

desperate. My mother said once they only had onions to eat, for a week or so. And my father told me about some relatives of theirs who were so hungry they ate clay, craving the minerals, I suspect. A lot of my relatives had gone through the Great Depression, and it impacted them. They saved everything, and were very careful with food, cautious about being wasteful. They saved string and stubs of pencils and rubber bands, you name it. Growing up when they did, and then me growing up with them, and knowing what they had been through, it had its impact.

People think times are hard now, and it certainly is for some, but on the whole, not like it was then. Those were tough times and our country was on the brink. It just barely survived. That said, I did enjoy writing about that era because I feel such a kinship to it, having grown up hearing about it all my life. I think it's more interesting to think about and write about than to live it, though it might be interesting to have lived through it.

Does the Sabine River, or East Texas in general, have special significance for you, and if so, how did that come into play in the writing of Edge of Dark Water?

I grew up in Gladewater, Texas, along the Sabine. It was a river I went down in boats, inner tubes, and a navy raft. I fished it and camped along its banks and hung out in the river bottoms with my friends. I was around it for much of my life. It was a river where bodies were found and people were drowned, and all manner of shenanigans occurred along its banks. So, yes, it's part of me, like an artery.

Many reviewers have remarked that one of the great pleasures of reading your work is your portrayal of the spirit of the American South. Is this something you've consciously worked at? Or has it come naturally from your upbringing and living in East Texas?

I started out trying to write stories that took place elsewhere. I was miserable at it. Ardath Mayhar wrote a story that I read, in an old Alfred Hitchcock anthology, titled *Crawfish*. It took place in East Texas and was written in an East Texas voice. It broke the ice for me. Later, my wife and I moved to Nacogdoches, Texas, and Ardath lived there and we met. I couldn't believe I was meeting the person who had written that story, as it had been so important to me as a writer. She was a great friend of mine for many years, until her death. But she taught me with *Crawfish* what it was to tell a story connected to my region and the people who lived there. When I started off in that direction it felt natural. Not all of my stories have taken place in East Texas, or the South, but most of them have. I feel comfortable writing about that era, and writing in the language and variations of that language that I've grown up with.

Did you choose Hollywood as the characters' destination for reasons other than May Lynn's ambitions for her life? What do you think a place like Hollywood represented to people in Depression-era, small East Texas towns like the one in which Edge of Dark Water is set? Did you have something in mind for what Hollywood represented for May Lynn, specifically?

Hollywood, especially then, the thirties, was one of those faraway places that seemed to offer something special. It was a place someone could go to and become something new and shiny and famous. Or at least that was the thought. It was like Oz. A magical place. It was a dream destination; it was very early on part of our American myth. I think for May Lynn it was that and more. It was a possible escape from poverty and the possibility of maybe working in a café and then becoming a wife and mother. Not bad ambitions, necessarily. But they weren't good ambitions for her; she felt she was something special, and that there was a magic cloak out there in Hollywood somewhere, waiting to be tossed over her shoulders.

Speaking of Hollywood, a few of your stories have been adapted for television and film, including the novella “Bubba Ho-Tep,” which was adapted into the cult classic film of the same name, starring Bruce Campbell. Can you tell us a little about how it feels to see your writing transformed for the screen?

I much prefer prose, but I love film as well. I’ve grown up with it and loved it all my life. Along with comics and books and stories and music. It is cool to write something and then see an actor interpret it, in film or on the stage. I’ve had both of those pleasures. I also had a film made from a short story of mine titled “Incident On and Off a Mountain Road.” It was made for Showtime, directed, as was *Bubba Ho-Tep*, by Don Coscarelli. Last summer, my son wrote a screenplay based on a story of mine, and it was made into an independent film titled *Christmas with the Dead*, and comes out soon. So that’s a part of me as well—films.

As for “Bubba,” I never thought it could be filmed. I was wrong. It was a pleasure to see what Don did with it. It’s very faithful to the story, and most of the dialogue is from the story, and some of the dialogue is taken from the prose and turned into dialogue. Even where the film varies from the story, it is slight and right. Bruce Campbell and Ossie Davis were awesome in it.

Where did you come up with the idea of Skunk? Were you inspired by any particular characters from the canon? Do you have a favorite bounty-hunter character from other novels or films?

Skunk is that bad dream that is coming after you and will not stop; a juggernaut. He is mortality and death, a creeping doom that all of us suspect is waiting somewhere around the corner, or under the bed, in the night shadows. He is like an elemental, a nightmare that just might be there when you wake up. He is every dark thing I have ever imagined.

In addition to being a riveting story of adventure and suspense, Edge of Dark Water can be classified as a coming-of-age novel. Was weaving together these two genres of storytelling difficult? Do you remember the writing of any scenes where the marriage of the two seemed especially natural or especially difficult?

It is a coming-of-age story. I'm a great fan of young adult fiction and have read it all my life. Even wrote a couple of young adult novels, *The Boar* and *All the Earth, Thrown to the Sky*. I didn't find it difficult at all, because I've done that sort of thing before with adult novels. It seems to be in my DNA.

I think one thing that helps me write so many different kinds of fiction is I like so many different kinds, and have never seen one kind as better than another. It's not the type, it's the quality. So for me, it felt pretty natural.

Each of the young protagonists who set out on their journey to honor May Lynn is marked by difference—Sue Ellen by her tomboyish ways, Jinx by the color of her skin, and Terry by his reputation as a “sissy.” Was this a conscious decision, or did it come about organically as you thought about the group’s adventure?

I'm sure my writerly experience and subconscious came into play here. I wasn't aware of doing it, but when you've been selling writing for over forty years, you tend to develop certain instincts. You do things you're not aware of thinking about. I'm very much a writer who works out of the subconscious. I have a hard time sitting down to plot, so I don't. It happens each day as I write. I'm sure my subconscious is doing the planning. It just doesn't tell me what's going on until my fingers touch the keys.

The awards you've received over the course of your writing career are quite numerous—the Edgar Award for Best Novel, the British Fantasy Award,

the American Mystery Award, the Grinzane Cavour Prize for Literature, and eight Bram Stoker Awards. Out of all those acclaimed works, do you have a favorite, or one whose creation you remember the most fondly?

I appreciate them all.

Can you tell us a little about your life outside of writing? I hear you're a member of the Martial Arts Hall of Fame, and music runs almost as strong in your family as storytelling.

I have been a martial artist for nearly fifty years. I still teach. I don't spend quite as much time as I once did at it, but I'm still active. I created a system called Shen Chuan, Martial Science, and another arm of that, which is a family system. I studied numerous martial arts in my lifetime, beginning with boxing and wrestling, which my dad taught me when I was eleven. I wasn't very good then, but I stayed with it and became very active by the time I was a teenager and on up until now. By the time I was in my late teens I was pretty dang good. I am a member of the International Martial Arts Hall of Fame and the United States Martial Arts Hall of Fame. I own a dojo and have top students who teach the regular classes for me. I mostly teach private lessons these days, and seminars, and now and again I go in and teach the weekly classes. It's a good life.

As for music, my mother loved it and sang around the house. She at one point wanted to be a singer, but the hard Depression life took over. My brother was involved in music early on. He's seventeen years older than me, and tried to make a go at Sun Records back when Elvis and Johnny Cash and Jerry Lee Lewis were starting out in the 1950s. My brother wasn't as successful, but he loved music. He worked in the field as a producer for a while, and these days is writing comics. My wife's grandmother was musical, and Karen was a clarinet player.

My daughter is a professional singer and songwriter. She is currently working on an album in Nashville, and she is extraordinarily talented. My son isn't involved in music. He's a journalist and writes screenplays and comics and runs his own online newspaper. As for me and music, I listen to it.

What writers, artists, or filmmakers inspire you? Did you have the work of any other writers or filmmakers in mind during the writing of Edge of Dark Water?

I have so many influences, but believe I am my own thing. I may be a blend of many things, but in the end, I'm me. I love a lot of the Southern writers. Harper Lee, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, some of Faulkner, Davis Grubb. I enjoy Ernest Hemingway's style over his content. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and shorter works, especially "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz." I love Richard Matheson, Ray Bradbury, Charles Beaumont, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and James Cain, Andrew Vachss, Neal Barrett Jr., Elmore Leonard. Writers like Mark Twain, of course, Jack London, Rudyard Kipling, and so on.

In films, I really love John Ford, Howard Hawks, John Huston, the Coen brothers, and Clint Eastwood, who I think is a great director. Comic books also have been a great pleasure and an influence. This list could become too heavy to lift, as I've only touched on the many writers and filmmakers who have given me so much pleasure and have been an influence, so I'll end it there. Oh, wait. I should say that as a kid the writer who inspired me the most and made me have to be a writer, not just want to be one, was Edgar Rice Burroughs. He's still my sentimental favorite.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Many reviewers have praised *Edge of Dark Water* by comparing it to classic works of American fiction. What is it about the book that draws these comparisons? Which novels did *Edge of Dark Water* remind you of?
2. What would you say are the larger themes of *Edge of Dark Water*? What does this ragtag group's attempts to preserve May Lynn's dream of Hollywood stardom suggest about America's ideals of success?
3. Who was your favorite character in *Edge of Dark Water* and why?
4. What did you think of the way Lansdale portrays East Texas during the Great Depression? Does his portrayal of the dangers of the road seem accurate to you? What about the state of race relations in the region? No year is ever mentioned outright in the novel—what do you make of Lansdale's decision not to pin down the story with a specific date?
5. What did you think of the author's use of oral storytelling in *Edge of Dark Water*?

6. Why do you think Lansdale chose the Sabine River for the group's journey? Would another means of transportation, such as a highway or trail, evoke a different mood or perspective?
7. What role does freedom play in *Edge of Dark Water*, especially in regard to Sue Ellen's coming-of-age adventure story? If you were Sue Ellen, do you think you would have set out on the same journey away from home, or wanted to?
8. Which villain in *Edge of Dark Water* did you find most frightening and why—Skunk, Constable Sy, or Uncle Gene?
9. What do you think *Edge of Dark Water* says about gender roles during the Depression?
10. What did you think of the role Terry played in May Lynn's death? Do you blame him for the crime or for withholding information from Sue Ellen, Jinx, and Sue Ellen's mother?