

Laughter in the graveyard

Harris' 'Southern Vampire' novels bring new blood to old myths

By JAMES D. WATTS JR.
World Scene Writer

Sometimes, the best way to get people's attention is to raise the undead.

Charlaine Harris had been writing and publishing mystery novels for several years — stand-alone books like "A Secret Rage," as well as two separate series, each of which revolves around women who find themselves entangled in criminal doings in small Southern towns.

Her work was earning praise and she had her loyal fans, but "I wasn't setting anything on fire, as far as sales were concerned," Harris said.

"That's when I decided I would write the book I wanted to write — something completely new, instead of what I had been doing," Harris said, speaking by phone from her home in Arkansas. "I've always been interested in the supernatural — I won't say I'm a true believer, but I certainly don't disbelieve. It's just a fascinating topic to me, and I thought I could have some fun with it."

The result was "Dead Until Dark," the first in Harris' "Southern Vampire" series about the various communities of otherworldly creatures — vampires, shape-shifters, werewolves, fairies — that happen to live among the mundanely human people of Louisiana.

At the center of these books is a young woman named Sookie Stackhouse, who has the at-times unfortunate ability to read people's thoughts.

The book won the Anthony Award for best paperback original, and Harris' unique twist on the vampire myth — leavened with a great deal of romance and humor — quickly made the books a success.

The eighth book in the series, "From Dead to Worse," officially goes on sale Tuesday. On Wednesday, Harris will be in Tulsa for a special event at Barnes & Noble Booksellers, 5231 E. 41st St. (see info box)

The release of "From Dead to Worse" comes amid a flurry of activity surrounding Harris. Berkeley Publishing is bringing her entire catalog back into print, which now totals 26 novels, not counting the short stories she written or the anthologies she's edited.

She was the guest of honor at the 20th Malice Domestic convention, which celebrates the traditional mystery. And a TV series, based on the

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"Southern Vampire" books and overseen by "Six Feet Under" creator Alan Ball, is set to debut on HBO in September. Academy Award-winner Anna Paquin will star as Sookie.

"It had been scheduled to air in January, but the writer's strike caused it to be moved back," Harris said. "I've read the first three episodes, and they're based on the books. Whether they'll stick to that I don't know. Alan Ball owns the books now, so there are probably going to be differences."

"I have no input into the series although I'm listed as a consultant, but Alan has been very gracious about the process," Harris said. "Right before I come to Tulsa, I'll get to visit the set, and that's pretty exciting."

Harris published her first "Southern Vampire" novel in 2001, not too long after Laurell K. Hamilton made a splash with her Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter series.

"She started before I did, and she was something of a trailblazer in finding new ways of using the vampire myths," Harris said.

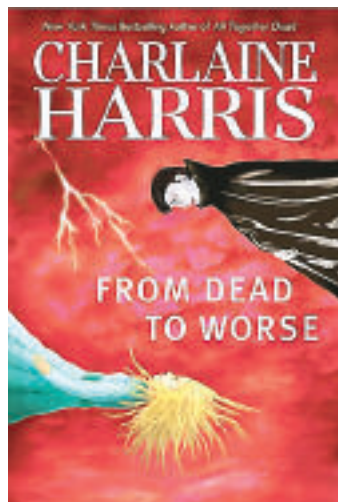
Harris' take on vampires is that this eternally persecuted minority has become more a part of modern society, thanks to the development of a synthetic blood that satisfies the creatures' cravings for hemoglobin.

However, this scientific breakthrough doesn't quell the rivalries among the various supernatural folk that have been simmering for millennia — and erupt into full-scale violence now and then.

One such incident occurred in last year's "All Together Dead," and the repercussions of this paranormal version of gang warfare are still being felt in "From Dead to Worse."

Even so, Harris said, what sets her vision of vampires apart is the humor she brings to her stories.

"That was one of the things that was so liberating about writing that first Sookie Stackhouse novel," she said. "It was the first time I made a conscious effort not to rein in my sense of humor. When I was writing traditional mysteries, I always ended up cutting out a lot of the humorous



Author signing

Charlaine Harris will be at the Barnes & Noble, 5231 E. 41st St., beginning at 7 p.m. Wednesday for a special book signing.

Harris will give a reading from her new novel, "From Dead to Worse," answer questions from the audience, and sign copies of her books.

Harris' complete works — which includes the "Southern Vampire" series as well as novels featuring Aurora Teagarden, the Lily Bard-Shakespeare, Ark., novels, and the Harper Connelly mysteries — are being republished this year.

stuff, because I was worried about them being too funny.

"And I also wrote my first explicit sex scene in that book — well, explicit for me, anyway," Harris said, laughing. "To tell the truth, the hard part was trying not to laugh the whole time I was writing it, because I really couldn't believe I was doing this."

Harris will continue to add to the Sookie Stackhouse novels, and will likely continue with her series about Harper Connelly, a mystery series that also has a supernatural slant. She's been approached by the Horror Writers of America to contribute

a story for its annual anthology — an honor of which she's especially proud.

"I'm not a big planner — I never thought I'd write this many books, for one thing," Harris said, laughing. "But the reaction to the Sookie Stackhouse novels has exceeded anything I, or my publishers, envisioned. I'm just pleased, after writing and publishing for 26 years, to have reached this level. Most people would have given up by now."

James D. Watts Jr. 581-8478
james.watts@tulsa-world.com

book ahead

Watch for stories in the Scene section this week on the following authors:

— Nancy Horan, author of "Loving Frank," a novel that brings to life a pivotal moment in the life of Frank Lloyd Wright — his affair with Mamah Cheney.

Horan will sign copies of her book at 6 p.m. Thursday at the Price Tower Arts Center, 510 Dewey Ave., in Bartlesville.

— Kim Doner, whose book "On a Road in Africa" was inspired by former Tulisan Chrysee Perry Martin, who for 30 years has run the Nairobi Animal Orphanage, rescuing endangered members of Africa's wildlife from cheetahs to chimpanzees.

Doner and Martin will take part in a special event 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday at Saks Fifth Avenue in Utica Square, to benefit Tulsa Zoo.

Doner will give two readings at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m.

best-sellers

HARDCOVER FICTION

1. "Unaccustomed Earth" Jhumpa Lahiri, Knopf, \$25.
2. "The Miracle at Speedy Motors" Alexander McCall Smith, Pantheon, \$22.95
3. "The Whole Truth" David Baldacci, Grand Central, \$26.99
4. "Hold Tight" Harlan Coben, Dutton, \$26.95
5. "A Thousand Splendid Suns" Khaled Hosseini, Riverhead, \$25.95
6. "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" Junot Diaz, Riverhead, \$24.95
7. "Lush Life" Richard Price, FSG, \$26
8. "The Appeal" John Grisham, Doubleday, \$27.95
9. "Red Bird" Mary Oliver, Beacon, \$23
10. "The Girl With No Shadow" Joanne Harris, Morrow, \$24.95

HARDCOVER NONFICTION

1. "The Last Lecture" Randy Pausch, Hyperion, \$21.95
2. "Just Who Will You Be?" Maria Shriver, Hyperion, \$14.95
3. "In Defense of Food" Michael Pollan, Penguin Press, \$21.95
4. "Armageddon in Retrospect" Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Putnam, \$24.95
5. "Ladies of Liberty" Cokie Roberts, Morrow, \$26.95
6. "Beautiful Boy" David Sheff, Houghton Mifflin, \$24
7. "What Now?" Ann Patchett, Harper, \$14.95
8. "Home" Julie Andrews, Hyperion, \$26.95
9. "Bonk" Mary Roach, Norton, \$24.95
10. "Bad Money" Kevin Phillips, Viking, \$25.95

TRADE PAPERBACK FICTION

1. "Water for Elephants" Sara Gruen, Algonquin, \$13.95
2. "Loving Frank" Nancy Horan, Ballantine, \$14
3. "The Friday Night Knitting Club" Kate Jacobs, Berkeley, \$14
4. "The Gathering" Anne Enright, Black Cat, \$14
5. "Nineteen Minutes" Jodi Picoult, Washington Square, \$15

TRADE PAPERBACK NONFICTION

1. "A New Earth" Eckhart Tolle, Plume, \$14
2. "Three Cups of Tea" Greg Mortenson, David Oliver Relin, Penguin, \$15
3. "Eat, Pray, Love" Elizabeth Gilbert, Penguin, \$15
4. "The Power of Now" Eckhart Tolle, New World, \$14
5. "The Omnivore's Dilemma" Michael Pollan, Penguin, \$16

Book Sense Best-seller List, compiled by the American Booksellers Association, for week ending April 27.

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Taylor Parks, 12, won second place and \$50 for her "A Villain's Poem" in last year's Young People's Creative Writing Contest. She also recorded her winning poem for broadcast on KWGS Public Radio 89.5 FM, a co-sponsor of the annual contest. Parks is pictured with Rich Fisher, KWGS general manager and host of "Studio Tulsa."

Library launches Young People's Creative Writing Contest

at the library

Use your creativity, sharpen your writing skills and earn recognition for your hard work by entering Tulsa City-County Library's 2008 Young People's Creative Writing Contest. The library is accepting entries now through June 7. Cash prizes are awarded.

The contest is open to young writers who are between the ages of 10 and 18 by June 7, and live in Tulsa County, attend school in Tulsa County or have a nonexpired TCCL nonresident library card.

The Tulsa Library Trust, the Friends of the Tulsa City-County Libraries, KWGS Public Radio, 89.5 FM, and the Tulsa Performing Arts Center Trust co-sponsor the Young People's Creative Writing Contest.

The contest has four age divisions: 10 to 11, 12 to 13, 14 to 15 and 16 to 18. Within each age division, there are four categories:

- ▶ Short Story — each entry no more than 1,500 words.
- ▶ Informal Essay — a short composition on a topic or issue giving your opinion or recounting a personal experience. No term papers, reports or research papers are considered. Limited to 1,500 words.
- ▶ Poetry — one poem, no more than 300 words.
- ▶ One-Act Play — no more than six characters, no more than three locations. Limited to five to 60 minutes in length.

Within each age division and category, cash prizes are awarded in the following amounts: \$100 for first place, \$50 for second place and \$25 for third place.

Louis Sachar, winner of the Tulsa Library Trust's 2008 Anne V. Zarrow Award for Young Readers' Literature, will present awards to contest winners at a special ceremony at 10 a.m. Aug. 23 at Central Library. Also, he will give tips on how to write creatively — and give life to words and voices to characters.

KWGS will invite some of the poetry and essay winners to record their works, and, at the discretion of the station, will broadcast some of them.

The Tulsa Performing Arts Center Trust will present some of the award-winning plays at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center in the Charles E. Norman Theatre. The playwrights will be invited to attend rehearsals and will be honored at a reception following the performance.

Entry forms with rules and regulations are available at all TCCL locations or on the library's teen Web site at www.tulsaworld.com/teens.tulsalibrary.com. For more details, contact your neighborhood library or call 596-1638.