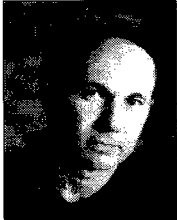


Tim Downs talks bodies in the shadows of Hurricane Katrina

By Tom Mayer

Sun Journal Staff

If bugs do eventually inherit the earth, it's likely no author writing today will be happier than Apex-based novelist Tim Downs. Lately, this smart stylist has made his living from insects in the form of forensic entomologist Nick Polchak — the quirky protagonist in a series of educated novels driven by CSI-inspired plots laced with quick, acerbic dialogue.



Downs

Downs recently agreed to speak to the *Sun Journal* about "First the Dead" (Nelson, \$22.99), his third "Bug Man" novel. Set in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Downs' new work is part Carl Jung, part C.S. Lewis and all thrill-ride with plot twists that surface quicker than the bloated bodies someone is disposing of in the swallowed city.

The following is an excerpt from that interview.

SJ: First, who is Tim Downs? Give me the Cliffs-Notes bio.

TD: Who am I? I grew up in St. Louis, went to college at Indiana University. My first job was writing and drawing a syndicated comic strip called "Downstown" — not a lot of people remember it anymore. My wife and I work part time for a ministry. We do seminars on marriage and parenting skills. I started writing, I don't know, eight, nine years ago — just thought I'd give

it a try. I was in the habit of writing dialogue and writing humor. I thought I'd break out of the four frames, try something longer. That's the real CliffsNotes version.

SJ: That explains the quick-witted dialogue.

TD: If I write a funeral it's going to end up being funny. It's just my natural approach to things.

SJ: Nick Polchak, the hero of "First the Dead" and two other novels, is a forensic entomologist, or bug man. What's a bug man?

TD: Several years ago I read an article on forensic entomology. It caught my attention because of two things. One, it's just gross. And second, it's fascinating. Those two qualities together were qualities for a good character.

What I like about the idea of a forensic entomologist is there are very few of them in the United States, and almost nobody does this full time because you can't support yourself. They tend to be college professors and curators of museums.

It hadn't been done, and when it comes to mystery, to fiction, it's pretty much all been done. This made for a fresh character because Nick's an outsider when it comes to crime scenes and the legal system — he's not a cop. He's a college professor, and who gets a Ph.D. in bugs? It must be a kind of nerdy guy with an incredible memory, incredible analytical skills. I thought that would make a good character.

SJ: Why drop that character in New Orleans following Katrina?

TD: Writers are like wolves, circling everything, looking for something to go after. Even when Katrina was about to happen, I thought this was a fantastic setting for a mystery ... this would be a great way to hide a body. If you wanted to kill somebody what a great way to hide a body when you've got a flooded city, the law has broken down and there are looters and guns everywhere. Great setting for a story.

SJ: Did fact drive the fiction?

TD: Absolutely. There are a couple of things that are important and one is truth is always stranger than fiction, so why make the stuff up? Working with real places, real settings, real fact and then spinning a fictional story into it gives it an air of believability fiction needs. Otherwise it just becomes fantasy.

SJ: How did you research the fact, the myriad details, for "First the Dead?"

TD: It's the Internet. The Internet is the Golden Age for writers. Katrina was thoroughly covered by everybody. I've got satellite photos on my computer. In the book I'll mention where a street dipped into the water, and that's the exact spot where that street dipped into the water.

SJ: With the meticulous detail in "First the Dead," it's a surprise you didn't visit New Orleans after Katrina.

TD: I didn't. Access after Katrina was so difficult I didn't get down there. I'd

been there several times, and I'll be down there again in June. I've got a friend who was involved in relief efforts who's going to give me a tour of the place.

SJ: A different type of tour you take your reader on in this book is one of the subconscious. The deeper story is the archetypal search for a father. Where did that come from?

TD: It comes from my faith. I remember reading that C.S. Lewis once said to never start a story with a moral in mind. My view of the world saturates things. Whenever I write, it finds its way in — that's the way it is with me.

SJ: Being "that way" has earned your writing a number of awards, including a Christy. Of what literary accomplishment are you most proud?

TD: I don't know what to make of awards or criticism, either one. It occurs to me that you'd better enjoy the creative process, because that's what it all comes down to. Do you enjoy writing? Then go for it. Everything else you learn to ignore. It's what you have to do.

SJ: Who helps you do that? Name some literary mentors or heroes.



TD: I like Elmore Leonard for his dialogue. I like Stephen King, especially his short stories, because he's very inventive when it comes to story concepts. I like Martin Cruz Smith for his incredibly thorough research. As an adult, I grew up on C.S. Lewis because I love the fact that he was a great academic who saw the

value of the imagination.

SJ: *Your publisher, Thomas Nelson, seems to be trending toward literary fiction like "First the Dead. Do you agree?*

TD: I certainly do. Starting 30 or 40 years ago we sort of invented this thing called "Christian Fiction" and it was a fairly

superficial version of the real thing. Publishers have broadened their concept of inspirational fiction, faith fiction, trying not to be so utilitarian about it. There's just writing, just fiction and that's what they're trying to do. It's a great thing.

SJ: *Last question: As a mystery crime writer, what's one thing you're commonly*

asked?

TD: The question I get asked by people, especially in interviews, is, "Does your wife ever worry?" I always joke, my wife said to me, "If anything ever happens to me everyone will know."

I said to her, "Honey, if anything ever happens to you, no one will know."

You've got to keep people on their toes.

