

**Falling from Grace: An Interview with
Simon Wood
By
Jennifer Jordan**

Simon Wood is a winner. Let's just get that out of the way. I was introduced to his writing through the spectacular WORKING STIFFS and a story, "My Father's Secret," that appeared in the 2006 Bouchercon special issue of Crimespreemag, earned Mr. Wood the Anthony in Anchorage. His work is dark, incisive, fast-paced and dear Lord does he put his protagonists through hell! His latest book, PAYING THE PIPER, came out in November and portrays what a slice of hell would be like for any parent when a serial kidnapper goes after the children of the reporter that tried to break open the case.

Despite the dire quality of his writing, Mr. Wood (the standing President of the Northern California Sisters in Crime chapter) is a very nice man with a wicked sense of humor and a soft heart for the underdogs of the world – as long as they long-haired dachshunds.

Jennifer Jordan: Having read your short story collection, WORKING STIFFS, and your two books, ACCIDENTS WAITING TO HAPPEN and the latest, PAYING THE PIPER, I have come to a conclusion. You are not a cheerful guy. Can I hope that writing of grimness purges you of same?

Simon Wood: Actually, I consider myself to be quite a cheerful person. My main aim in life is to have fun and laugh. Life (like me) is too short to be miserable. But at the same time, I have a temper and I don't like losing it. So I tend to steer clear of things that piss me off, like politics, religion and Barney the dinosaur. I'm not sure my writing purges me of grimness, because I keep writing about grim predicaments. I guess I suffer from a dark heart and I don't think there's a cure.

JJ: Give me the low down on PAYING THE PIPER.

PAYING THE PIPER came from the need to do a kidnap story. I wanted to put a family through a difficult trauma, but I didn't want to do usual kind of kidnap story. It had to be a little different. I didn't want the ransom to be money. The ransom had to be something more unobtainable than a high dollar figure. And seeing as I really like sticking it to my protagonists (I take conflict far too literally) I wanted to put the character through the worst kind of personal hell. He's partially responsible for what is happening to him. His past mistakes mean he can't turn to anyone and the kidnapper won't let him. If he is to save his children he has to cross a line over and over again forcing him to deceive everyone around him, betray his wife's trust and become something he is not. And to turn the blade a little more, he has to lie, cheat and steal under the watchful eye of an FBI agent with a grudge against the protagonist. It's a real trial by fire and I love that. I really like testing a character to its limit. These people have to hurt for 300+ pages. Hopefully, I get that point across.

JJ: Your writing features the every day man confronting his worst fears often in the form of an anonymous, pissed off villain. What compels you to write in this format?

SW: I think it tracks back to your first question. I see trouble looming over us all. I consider myself quite lucky in that I don't come from a broken home and I've squeaked through life with little incident, but I've been witness to others' downfall. Several of my college friends died before I graduated. A disturbing number of my classmates from school grew up to be killers, rapists and hardened criminals. Their backgrounds weren't that different than mine, but they chose a path in life which no chance of return. So, I've been wondering how I've managed to survived unscathed and it comes down to decisions. The wrong one at the wrong time can come back to bite you in the arse. The idea that a single decision could irrevocably change my life forever scares the crap out of me.

It wasn't intentional for this to spill over in my stories, but it has--and I like it. The underlying theme from the books you've mentioned is a fall from grace. None of the protagonists in those stories are thrown into the predicaments without blame. Their wounds are all self-inflicted wounds. If those characters had done the right thing on page one then the rest of the story would have never happened. Life, despite all the safety systems we perceive, is still a precarious thing. It's so easy to fall off the high wire and there isn't anyone to catch you. These beliefs tend to present themselves in my stories because I can see myself succumbing to a minor infraction that snowballs. In my past, I have had this type of predicament and I'm damn lucky I got to keep my freedom. As much as my stories are a warning to everyone out there that doing bad things will come back ten fold, they're also a reminder to me that I can screw up real bad and it doesn't take much effort to achieve it.

JJ: You are a winner. Tell me what this feels like as I have no idea.

SW: Self-deprecation, I like it. You're my kind of girl.

I'm not sure what it's like to be a winner because it's never happened before. I have a lot of drive, but I never tend to get what I want in life. If there's a cigar for the first five people to the humidor, I'm sixth. That's the way my luck runs--close, but no cigar. So winning the Anthony this year has knocked me for a loop. I'm not sure how I should act. Luckily, my wife Julie keeps me grounded with comments like, "would the award winning author like to take the trash out? He's been told twice already to do it."

Actually, I'm a little embarrassed by it all. I'm such a spaz about my writing. I'm proud of it, but at the same time, I don't think I'm worthy and the world is populated by better writers. So, when I got the nomination, I thought, Yes! Then I thought, No. There's a mistake. The lack of sunlight in Alaska has addled the

organizers' brains and they've miscounted.

During the ceremony, I was quite happy to applaud the winner, then a sense of dread swept over me as Sue Henry listed the nominations. I had a premonition that she was going to call my name and I thought, Crap!

So, to answer your question, it feels great to be a winner. I'm immensely proud. I'm just not sure how I'm going to live it down...

JJ: What the hell is next, Mr. Wood?

SW: More life changing destruction for a bunch of fictional sorry sons of bitches. I've just finished **WE ALL FALL DOWN** which will be out next July. It's somewhat of a departure because the protagonist did nothing to get himself into the trouble he unearths. All he did was to take a job offered to him where his coworkers are dying. The book is based on a real world event I came across in the 80's where three coworkers committed suicide in elaborate ways. Their deaths were never explained and it's always bugged me. I wouldn't like to research it, so invented a scenario to explain it and it's all told through the eyes of the new guy at the firm.

Following that is **DISGRUNTLED**, which centers on workplace violence. On the slate after that is **THE NEVERWAS MAN**, which will be very close to my heart. In 2003, I was hit by a car which resulted in me forgetting half of 2003. I don't remember people, events or places and I'm still rebuilding that time. I still don't remember some things but I believe they happened because people I trust have told me. While that's nice, it's scary. What if my friends lied to me? Then what? On the short story front, I've completed a collection called, **ASKING FOR TROUBLE**, and I'm shopping it around.

JJ: Tell me about all your cute fuzzy animal friends.

I'm a sucker when it comes to animals and I can't leave behind an animal in distress, so for the last few years Julie and I have rescued and fostered dogs and cats for various pounds. We've rescued somewhere in the region of 25-30 cats and dogs and we have "the cat room" where we rehabilitate cats and do minor surgery. However, some of the fuzzy people to cross our paths, we've not been able to let go. One is our longhaired wiener dog, Royston. I love longhaired wiener dogs. I've owned at least one since I was twelve and when I came to the US, I had to leave my two doxies behind with my parents. Julie and I had to have Royston when we heard about a dachshund puppy that had been dumped by the delta in Oakley and expected to survive on his own. The moment I saw this skinny wretch stealing melon from a pig, I knew he was mine. We currently have four cats--Bug, Tegan, Chewie and Chasemina. These aren't normal cats. They were all runts of their respective litters that the SPCA had given up on and we nursed them back to health. Of course, when you've put that much effort into saving an animal under those circumstances, you can't give 'em back. Now you can see what a hardboiled kind of guy I am.