

CRIMESPREE COVER INTERVIEW – J.A. KONRATH AND BLAKE CROUCH

J.A. Konrath has a lot going on right now. Besides the print release of his seventh Lt. Jacqueline "Jack" Daniels book, *Shaken*, he's also penned two sci-fi novels for Ace Berkley under the name Joe Kimball for release in 2011. *Timecaster* and *Timecaster: Supersymmetry* take place in Chicago 2064 and feature Jack's grandson as the hero. Konrath is currently working on several collaborations, including a few with Blake Crouch. His blog, "A Newbie's Guide to Publishing," has become the hot spot for self-publishing information, fueled by Konrath's ebook sales, which have topped over 150,000 since 2009.

Blake Crouch is the author of *Desert Places*, *Locked Doors*, *Snowbound*, and *Abandon*, which was an IndieBound Notable book last summer. He has frequently collaborated with J.A. Konrath on such projects as the 250,000-download smash-hit *Serial* which offended masses of people, *Draculas* (a collaboration with Konrath, F. Paul Wilson, and Jeff Strand), and the upcoming *Stirred*, conclusion to both Konrath's Jack Daniels series and Blake's Andrew Z. Thomas/Luther Kite series. Blake's short fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies, Ellery Queen, and Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, where his novella, "The Pain of Others" has just been published.

BLAKE: What's been your single, most satisfying moment as a writer?

JOE: It's hard to top my first book deal, with *Whiskey Sour*. But the most sustainable satisfaction has been self-publishing over the last two years. I've sold over 100,000 ebooks, all on my own. It's been eye-opening, humbling, and has made me a very happy man.

BLAKE: Do you ever get sick and tired of talking about ebooks? It seems to take a lot of time away from writing.

JOE: I never get sick of talking about something I enjoy so much.

BLAKE: All time favorite book....don't think, just say it.

JOE: *The Judas Goat* by Robert B. Parker. Awesome ending.

BLAKE: What's the best writing experience you've ever had?

JOE: Writing *Serial* with you remains a high point. That was too much fun, and it's probably why we've continued to collaborate on so many other projects: *Draculas* (with F. Paul Wilson and Jeff Strand), *Serial Uncut*, *Killers Uncut*, *Stirred...*

BLAKE: Do you ever think of turning off "A Newbie's Guide to Publishing" so you can write more?

JOE: I've pretty much stopped doing all self-promotion. I once was maniacal about visiting bookstores and libraries, and going to conventions. Now I'm a homebody. Blogging takes up very little time compared to travelling to 40 states and signing books in 1200 stores.

BLAKE: Do you regret taking *Endurance* and *Trapped* back from your former publisher?

JOE: Not at all. They wanted me to cut stuff I didn't want to cut, and integrity won out. Luckily, I've made more money, and will ultimately reach a wider audience, than I would have with Grand Central. It blows my mind, by the way, that a writer can achieve this outside of the traditional publishing world.

BLAKE: At heart, are you a horror writer, a thriller writer, a sci-fi guy, a crime novelist, or what?

JOE: At heart, I'm a storyteller. My goal is to entertain, and I'm lucky that I have enough diverse tastes that I can hop around in different genres.

BLAKE: So you'd consider writing romance, erotica, or straight historical? Would you ever write something that didn't contain suspense?

JOE: I'd try erotica, but I'd need another pen name and I don't know if I'm allowed to have any more. Romance might be fun, if they were zombies or serial killers.

BLAKE: Is there a book in the back of your mind you've been dying to write but haven't for some reason?

JOE: I have six books in my head right now that I haven't slated time for. Yet. I'll get to them, eventually.

BLAKE: In all seriousness, you've achieved a helluva lot. Are you satisfied? What's the dream writing scenario for you?

JOE: The secret to success is to never be satisfied. But right now I'm living the dream writing scenario, and I'm pretty happy about it. Luckily, there's still a lot I want to accomplish.

BLAKE: You've always pushed as hard at marketing yourself, decoding new platforms, etc., as you have at writing, but in a perfect world, wouldn't you love to just write and let corporate machines bring your work to the masses?

JOE: Of course. In a perfect world, corporate machines would run smoothly and make good decisions.

BLAKE: When I visited you in Chicago last month, we watched *The Man From Earth*. I think it's the best film of the last five years. Am I wrong?

JOE: You are wrong. The best film of the last five years is *Black Dynamite*.

BLAKE: Strange. I feel like we watched that movie, too, and yet I have so little memory of it.

JOE: We'd been drinking. Watch it again clearheaded.

BLAKE: You have the best innate sense of story and character arc of anyone I know (I'm not blowing smoke, and I'm not the only person who thinks this). You've helped me out of the woods on numerous projects. But having written several books with you, I happen to know you don't outline. So what's your process for working out stories, character arcs, etc.? Is it subconscious? Do stories come fully formed or what? It's uncanny.

JOE: Thanks. You know how there are those weirdo savants who can multiply by fractions or recall what day of the week May 10, 1934 was?

BLAKE: It was a Tuesday, but go ahead...

JOE: It's kinda the same thing. I see story arcs in my head automatically, because I know what they're supposed to do. It's a lot like filling in the blanks,

but in a way that allows for some variation. So the stories don't come fully formed, but they do make themselves obvious and pretty much write themselves. I'll often talk to writers who are stuck on a scene, and I'll explain they aren't actually stuck, all the elements are in place, and all they need to do is tie them together by doing X.

BLAKE: So are you ever surprised by a story you're writing, if you already know what's supposed to happen?

JOE: I always know. It's still fun, like watching a movie unfold in my head.

BLAKE: Best piece of writing advice you got (and don't say "read a lot" - that's true but lame).

JOE: Learn what works, and why. That applies to life as well. What do you like most about writing?

BLAKE: I love when you have an idea of how the story plays out, but then characters surprise you and it goes in a completely new direction which was really where you should've been going all along. I guess what I'm saying is...I love the thrill of telling yourself a story that's working and surprising you.

JOE: What do you dislike most about writing?

BLAKE: The difficult days when it's like pulling teeth to get words on the page, and your sentences aren't flowing like you want and your characters don't want to talk to you (or anybody).

JOE: Do Blake Crouch stories have a unifying, underlying theme?

BLAKE: I think so, and it's the idea of pushing regular people to their breaking point and beyond and watching how they respond. I've realized in the past year that I'm just not interested in writing about characters who aren't at the end of their rope. And the rope is on fire.

JOE: You got hosed by your publisher, and their many mistakes have hampered your career. Besides bad covers, poor distribution, lack of support, and the failure to release your last two books in paperback, there was also a long gap between your second and third books. What happened?

BLAKE: Yeah, and sadly my experience is not unique. The gap between my 2nd and 3rd books was partly my fault. I was originally going to write *Snowbound* after *Locked Doors*. I started it but stopped when *Abandon* came calling. I submitted *Abandon* instead, and man were they pissed. So I wrote *Snowbound*, and they were still pissed. I changed editors, but stayed at the same publishing company, and my new editor loved both *Abandon* and *Snowbound*, but decided to publish *Abandon* first. All the interim bullshit took about two years and delayed the publication of my third novel.

JOE: Where do you feel the publishing industry is headed?

BLAKE: I don't know. Adaptation is my hope. There are a lot of very smart people in publishing who I'm sure are making efforts to stay afloat. The problem is, when a royalty rate like Amazon's comes along (70%) and a writer can make the same royalty on a \$2.99 ebook as a \$26 hardcover, it becomes a little less enticing to sign your rights away forever to a publisher who isn't offering a large sum of money.

JOE: What book has disturbed you the most? What movie?

BLAKE: Book: *Red Dragon*. Movie: It's not a movie, but the last 60 seconds of Episode 8 of *Twin Peaks*. I saw it when I saw 12, and it left me physically quaking. I've never recovered.

JOE: Your books have some pretty intense scenes in them, and you don't shy away from putting violence on the page. Have you ever censored yourself?

BLAKE: Not really, because usually, when I'm writing, I tend to know what lines I'm crossing, and I'm okay with it.

JOE: The magazine cover photo was taken at BeerKon 2010. Best conference ever?

BLAKE: Oh, no doubt. 2011 will be even better.

JOE: We've collaborated on a bunch of stories, and are now doing a novel, *Stirred*, which will be the last Jack Daniels ebook, and also conclude your

Andrew Z. Thomas/Luther Kite series. How do all of these books connect and intertwine with one another?

BLAKE: One of our brilliant cover artists, Jeroen ten Berge, is currently working up a graphic on this. Essentially, *Serial Uncut*, soon to be expanded as *Serial Killers Uncut*, is the centerpiece of our universe—all our villains (from your Jack Daniels and Jack Kilborn series, from my *Desert Places* series, *Snowbound*, *Abandon*, and others) in one novel-length work. The way these villains' paths cross tangentially connects almost every one of our novels. For instance, Luther Kite is one of the bad guys from my *Desert Places* series. He shows up in my novella *Bad Girl*, which is a part of *Serial Uncut*, which sets him up to pursue Jack Daniels in *Shaken*, a battle which will be fully resolved in our collaboration novel *Stirred*. We're essentially doing the same thing comics have been doing for years: creating a shared universe for our characters. It facilitates our collaborations, but more importantly, encourages readers who like one of our books, to try the other 20 which are connected in some way or another.

JOE: How does your collaborative writing differ from your solo writing?

BLAKE: My solo writing tends to be slower, more methodical. Not that this is a good thing or makes my writing any better, I just don't have you breathing down my neck since you write about ten books a year.

JOE: You're exaggerating. Last year I only wrote 7. How did the *Draculas* project come about?

BLAKE: You had the basic premise and title and called me up and pitched it. I thought it sounded like a blast. We developed a cast of characters, a setting, and then contacted F. Paul Wilson and Jeff Strand to see if they wanted to be involved. Luckily, they did. We then gave Jeff and Paul first pick of which characters they wanted to write (they took all the cool ones that had weapons), and we were off.

JOE: You busted ass marketing *Draculas*. What are some of the things you did to ensure it had a big launch?

BLAKE: We started thinking about marketing very early on, like in August, when we had only written about 10,000 words. We all had fan bases to pull from, and started wondering what the effect on sales would be if we could

launch a book with over 100 reviews on day 1, just blow up the blogosphere. So we made a call for reviews on your blog, and also contacted all of your Goodreads friends to see if they would review the book prior to publication. I also reached out to all of my contacts. We got 260 people to request the book, and at that point, knew if only half of those folks came through for us, we'd be golden. Luckily, most came through.

JOE: You're ruler of the world. What laws do you pass?

BLAKE: Just one. Express lane in coffee shops for people who drink actual coffee and not shit with whipcream and nutmeg on it that takes five hours to make.

JOE: Happy endings or tragic endings? (I'm talking stories, not massages.)

BLAKE: Mostly tragic, but I'm trying to change.

JOE: Are there any writers you'd love to collaborate with?

BLAKE: Many, but I'll only call out one of them. Top of the list...David Morrell. You?

JOE: David would be fun, but I gotta go with Stephen King.

BLAKE: Careful...he actually writes faster than you do.