

"THE WOMAN" and her author: Jack Ketchum on writing, and his latest

Written by W. Brice McVicar
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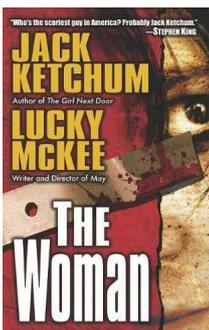


"Twenty-to-life at Florida State Prison."

That's what Jack Ketchum says he'd likely be doing if he hadn't spent the past three decades delving into the horrors that humans are able to do to one another. It's a quick, witty answer and one that fits both the man and his style of writing.

In essence, such a response is the perfect summary of the man behind gut (and heart) wrenching novels such as *THE GIRL NEXT DOOR* and *RED*; tales of a girl beaten, raped and abused at the hands of her would-be guardians and, in the latter, an examination of the lengths one man will go to to see justice served after his dog is viciously killed by a group of young thugs. While many genre authors shine a flashlight on the thing in the corner of the darkened room, Ketchum illuminates the darkness in people's hearts and souls.

"The simple reason is that people scare me more," Ketchum tells Fango. "Monsters and demons and vampires can be scary, but they're also the fun part of horror because we know they don't exist. The real horrors do exist, and I'd prefer to point them out to you other than just thrill and entertain you. I want to do that too, but make the chill run deeper."



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Anyone familiar with Ketchum's work knows all too well what he means and just how successful he is in achieving that goal. Bursting onto the scene in 1980 with his highly controversial debut novel *OFF SEASON*, Ketchum has been awarded four Bram Stoker Awards and nominated for three others. He's also been named the recipient of this year's World Horror Convention Grand Master Award, an honor bestowed on such heavyweights as Stephen King, Robert Bloch, and Ramsey Campbell in the past.

OFF SEASON—a gritty novel about a cannibalistic family residing in caves and living off the flesh of passersby and tourists—caused a whirlwind of controversy upon its publication due to its graphic violence. Flash forward 30 years, and Ketchum is once again riding a wave of controversy due to violence.

A few years ago, Ketchum and director Lucky McKee (*MAY, THE WOODS*) became friends after he produced a film adaptation of Ketchum's novel *THE LOST* and partially-directed *RED*, also based on a book by the esteemed author. That friendship led to the pair writing the current, controversial film *THE WOMAN*, the second sequel to *OFF SEASON*, telling the story of the last surviving member of the cannibals and one man's attempts to tame and domesticate her.

As Ketchum explains it, after McKee saw the Andrew van den Houten-directed *OFFSPRING*, the pair decided a sequel was needed.

"We agreed that (actress) Pollyanna McIntosh was so powerful she deserved a movie all to herself, and decided to write one. We agreed also that this should be both a book and a movie, so we Instant Messaged one another for several months, getting down the themes, plot, characters and kept the IMs so that we had a working outline before we even began writing," Ketchum says. "It was great fun, we think so alike. So then, Lucky did the heavy lifting with the script version, sending the stuff to me for revisions, and I did the heavy lifting on the novel, sending chunks to him; great experience. And then, since I was there for virtually the entire shoot, if we came up to a money or time roadblock on the filming we could think-tank the changes right on the spot and come up with something that would work; often something better."

The film premiered earlier this year at the Sundance Film Festival with one man being ushered out of a screening after he protested the film's violence and the audience's seemingly cheerful reaction. His tirade, in which he claims the movie should be destroyed, was caught on film and

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hit big online.

"I think I should send this guy flowers next Valentine's Day," Ketchum says. "His five-minute rant went so viral that the next day we had 30,000 hits, and it just went on from there. The movie couldn't have bought better publicity. THE WOMAN wants to generate both positive and negative publicity. To my mind, this movie's the real deal. [It's] disturbing in the way good psychological horror should always be, throwing you back on yourself and the people you may or may not know, the urges you may or may not have. It's subversive—about the American nuclear family, about women's rights, about privilege and the lack of it—about many things. If this stuff doesn't disturb some people deeply, Lucky and I and company haven't done our jobs."

In the past five years, Ketchum has had five novels turned into films, each with varying degrees of success. While some authors are simply given a "based on" credit, Ketchum says he's been fortunate to be included, not excluded, from the creative process of turning his own written words into images.

"A movie takes a village. You're only apprehensive if you're not sure of the company you're keeping. If you are sure, you just lean back and enjoy what good creative minds bring to your subject matter, as happened in THE WOMAN," he says. "And that can be great enjoyment indeed. I've made some minor mistakes in not vetting some folks completely, some ideas completely. But usually a writer isn't even invited in on these decisions, and I've been lucky enough so that for the most part everybody's let me in to a great extent, asked for my feedback, instead of shutting the writer out. I can live with that."

Ketchum is also living with changes to the way his books reach readers. With the popularity of eBooks and eReaders soaring, most of Ketchum's library is easily accessible for consumers; though, when asked if the electronic format is helping or hindering authors, the writer shrugs.

"Got me. I'm new at it. I can't say the royalties have been rolling in, but in time, maybe they will. I don't currently own one, but that may change this year as I'm doing a lot of long-distance travelling and books can get heavy if you read as many as I do."

Regardless of format, Ketchum says fans can continue to expect the visceral horror he's been dealing for 30 years. He's currently working on a new book and screenplay with McKee, as well

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as a script by himself based on his novella WEED SPECIES. He describes the script as “so twisted that nobody in their right mind will ever produce it”; a lofty statement from a man who’s no stranger to controversy and censorship. Stephen King once said Ketchum is probably the scariest guy in America, but even Ketchum himself says there are some paths he simply can’t tread too long.

“Nothing is taboo for me. But I do edit myself while writing. There are images, or more often series of images, I don’t really want to live with for the time it takes to face them down and get them down truthfully and honestly on paper. I’ve considered doing a book about animal abuse for a long time, for instance, but I don’t know if I’ll ever write it. There are scenes in many of my books and stories in which animals are abused but they never last long, and whoever does the abusing will pay dearly for it eventually. But an entire book? I’m not sure.”