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"If there's specific resistance to women making movies, I just choose to ignore that as an obstacle for two reasons: I can't change my gender, and I refuse to stop making movies." - Kathryn Bigelow, director of *Near Dark*

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### Rhodi Hawk ('A Twisted Ladder')

Posted by [BunnyFlask](#) | Tue, April 27 2010  
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Interview by Alan Kelly

Horror author Rhodi Hawk has been ensnared by the power of words and stories since her earliest memory, when her grandmother would read to her from Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens. Rhodi has been reading or writing ever since she began her career as a transcription linguist in US Army intelligence. Later she



Username: \*



began her career as a transcriptionist in a local university. Later she made a living as a technical writer during the Internet boom, while working on her first novel in the early mornings and at night. Her debut novel *A Twisted Ladder* – the first in a planned series – was published last year, winning her the International Thriller Writers Scholarship for her first work of fiction. *A Twisted Ladder* is a complex, intelligent, creepy slice of Southern Gothic literature where myth and science, nightmare and daylight, magic and the monstrous collide.

Rhodi spoke to me about supernatural phenomenon, mental illness, spending time with characters of a dubious nature and being something of tumbleweed...

*Your debut has quite a kick to it, a bit like knocking back a shot of chartreuse without the sugar-cube.*

Really?

*Reading your novel, I was reminded a little of Sarah Langan's last novel. Your writing seems drawn from common influences, albeit with your own unique mark on it. There are parallels in the themes you explore in *A Twisted Ladder* with *Audrey's Door*. Maddy is a very strong young woman, ambitious, intelligent, and resourceful and like Audrey, broken in her own way. Can you tell me a little about the inspiration behind **A Twisted Ladder** ?*

That's a huge compliment. I'm a gushing fan of Sarah Langan.

**A Twisted Ladder** was originally inspired by a dream I had, a nightmare really, about a witnessing murder that seemed to come true. To this day I couldn't say whether the experience was a coincidence or something I don't fully understand, but I was shaken enough to start work on the novel. I hadn't written anything prior to that, so it took me a very long time to get it all out.

**A Twisted Ladder** is really well researched and really made me think some of what I found fascinating was the gift Madeline has inherited and how to control a person psychologically, to implant suggestion or bend others to your will. Something both Zenon and Chloe use for nefarious purposes. Did writing the book require a lot of time investigating paranormal phenomenon?

Absolutely. It was easy to get lost in the research, and since this was my first novel and I didn't really have any time destination for completing it, I indulged without any stops. My research followed two divided paths: that which can be contained in a controlled laboratory, and the personal experiences that are much more difficult to quantify or repeat.

Much of the research for **A Twisted Ladder** was based on university studies of paranormal

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## Upcoming Events

phenomenon. But I also talked to friends and acquaintances about it and gathered informal anecdotes. I learned a lot and formulated some personal philosophies.

For one, I think people are more psychically sensitive in times of elevated emotion, particularly stress. Many people who cite paranormal experiences refer to a death of a loved one, or a trauma, or similar kind of experience. Also, pregnant women and young mothers seem to have heightened sensitivity. That's just my own theory and is not backed up by any scientific studies that I'm aware of. But on the academic side, there are much more tangible experiments-- with results that are repeatable in controlled conditions-- that support the possibility of extrasensory phenomena. Like the penny experiment in *A Twisted Ladder*. That's a simple enough test to replicate.



*I loved Chloe when she first arrives in 1912 at the LeBlanc family sugar plantation, she projects this benevolent image and the family immediately think she is just another illiterate servant. Even at the end of the novel, when you discover how ruthless and soul-sucking she actually is. You're still on her side. She does what she has to do to protect her bloodline. But in doing so, her own children make her a pariah, until she meets Madeline. Is it all about control with the character?*

Chloe's a survivor, and survival is about control. I'm glad you liked her-- she was my favourite character to work with. It's funny, the thing about writing is you have to spend time with people (characters) that you don't always like, or who give you the creeps. I never could take my eyes off Chloe. Never saw her as bad or good. She seemed to put me to the test time and again in terms of my own morals.

*New Orleans is the portal where all the greatest music and literature has sprung from in the whole*

## Upcoming Events

Maya Deren's Legacy: Women and Experimental Film at MoMA

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(5 hours)

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New Orleans is the portal where all the greatest music and literature has sprung from in the whole of America, the most brilliant, truly multicultural melting pot in the entire country - America. Your descriptions of *The Black Bayou*, of *The Deep South* in both time-frames were so vivid and evocative, I could almost taste the swamp water in my mouth and the weirdness of *The Bramble* and *Daddy Blank*, *Ulysses* and *Severin* is some of the scariest shit I've seen in dark literature in a while. Have you ever lived there?

Yes. I'm a bit of a tumble weed, but I've lived in New Orleans for a time and I keep returning. But it's funny-- as much as I love New Orleans; my true fascination is with the wilderness just beyond the city. You don't have to travel very far before you're surrounded by water and forest and pelicans and turtles and giant bugs and wild orchids and people who seem to have gone to seed-- that's where I feel as though I somehow fit. Whatever that means.

Coming back to *The Bramble*, I remember reading something where someone who experienced *Hypnagogia* had seen something like vines move slowly towards them and retreat once they noticed them. With ***A Twisted Ladder***, what I found most frightening is the idea that we could at anytime be struck down by mental illness. That is a very clever way to exploit subject matter, what I mean is to use the idea of a congenital disease like schizophrenia and mould it into a story where it isn't an illness at all. It is a very sincere portrayal and I was wondering what your own experiences in this area was, if any?



It's something that I've known through personal experience. I've come to believe that calling someone crazy is the easy way out. The problem is, when you've got a loved one with mental illness, you're usually over-taxed with patience and energy to begin with. You've got your own life to live. How can you justify following that loved one down yet another rabbit hole? The best we can do is love them and support them and live our own lives.

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RAN commented on "Eli Roth honored with PETA Humanitarian Award"

RAN commented on "The Last House on the Left (2009)"

Theron commented on "Corman Goodness Keeps Coming with 'Piranha'

From a societal standpoint, I think we have a lot more to learn about the human brain. I believe in time we will better understand both mental illness and paranormal phenomena.

*How do you feel about **A Twisted Ladder** being described as Southern Gothic? And are you a fan of that subgenre's authors, like Harper Lee, Truman Capote, and Flannery O'Connor?*

I love it. It's an honour to be considered a member of the Southern Gothic subgenre.

*Congratulations on winning the International Thriller Writers Scholarship.*

Thank you. That felt really wonderful, particularly because the competition was so stiff. My niche is Southern Gothic as a subgenre of horror, which can be considered part of the thriller genre. It felt great for a novel in such a small niche to be recognized in such a wide circle.

*You leave the door open at the end of the story, so will you be going back to the Bayou and if so, what can you tell me about your next adventure?*

Yes, going back to the bayou. Working on the sequel now. There are six books in the series. In book two, there's a lot of emphasis on the drifter lifestyle. A taste of urban survival. But the wilderness is still within reach. The scientific examination centres on the human brain's ability to heal the body.

*What does Rhodi Hawk do on her day off?*

I can't remember the last time I deliberately took a day away from writing. Oh, there have been days when I haven't written a single daggum word. But I never wake up thinking, "Today I'm not going to write." It seems I've always got to find ways to stash it in. So, I lie to myself. A day off is me cramming my time full of things I convince myself I must do, and thinking I'll work the writing in somewhere, but then I don't work it in. The most indulgent thing I do is probably slipping off into the woods. I can justify this by saying I need to study the flora and fauna for world-building. There's something about getting out into the wilds, coming across some creature or strange plant along a creek or a river-- it's when I feel most alive.



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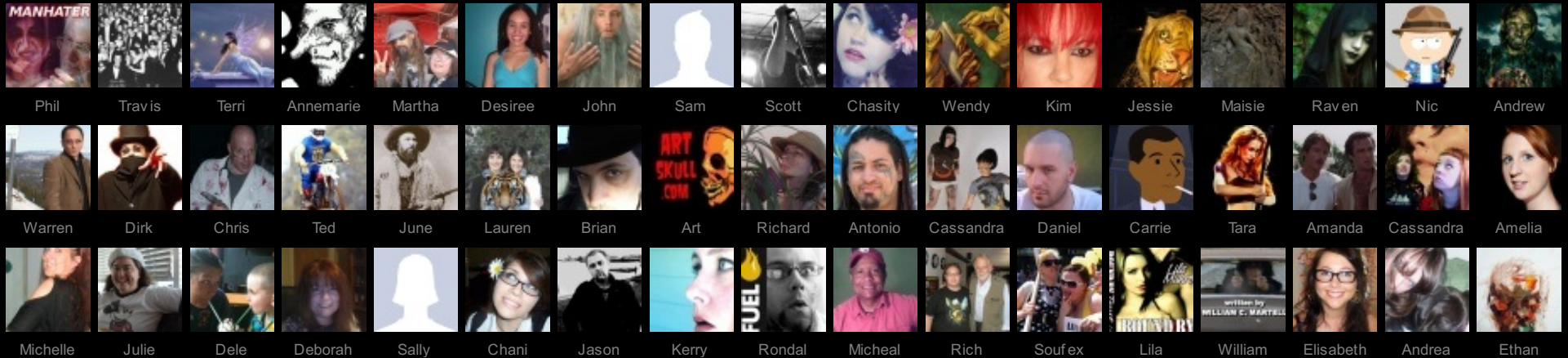
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