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ANGELIQUE STEPS OUT OF THE SHADOWS: An Interview with Lara Parker

By Dan Mazur

Like Angelique, the character she portrayed on the classic gothic horror soap opera "Dark Shadows," Topangan Lamar Hawkins (a.k.a. Lara Parker) has led several lives. After her successful early career as an actress, Hawkins has been reincarnated as a published novelist. This month sees the release of "Dark Shadows: The Salem Branch," the second work of fiction that Hawkins—writing under her acting pseudonym Parker—has created based on characters from the television series.

Long awaited by the cult following that the show has retained for over 30 years (though it went off the air in 1971, "Dark Shadows" Festivals have been held annually since 1983), "The Salem Branch" was almost derailed by real-life horrors.

Lara Parker's first "Dark Shadows" novel, 1998's "Angelique's Descent," was a big success, selling over 40,000 copies. She signed a contract with fantasy and sci-fi publisher Tor Books for a follow-up and began her research.

Then came September 11, 2001.

"After 9-11, the whole idea of doing a vampire novel seemed trivial," she says. "I spent a whole year watching TV like everyone else in the country."

The illness and death of Hawkins' father dislocated her further from the task, until her husband, contractor Jim Hawkins, suggested she shelve the project.

"He said, 'Blow it off. You don't have to do this,'" she remembers.

Instead, Hawkins chose to kill two birds with one stone. She wanted to return to graduate school for her Masters' Degree in creative writing, and decided to make her long-delayed "Dark Shadows" novel one of her projects when she returned to school.

First though, she had to overcome academic snobbishness. She applied to the fiction writing program at Antioch University in Marina del Rey, using an excerpt from "Angelique's Descent" as a writing sample. Her application was rejected.

"They told me, 'We're really just not into the genre,'" she says. "I said, 'Are you kidding? I have a published novel and I'm being turned down?'"

Undaunted, she tried again.

"I had some notes I'd written on my mother's illness. I typed up my notes and turned them in, and got accepted."

Once in the program, happily, she found the instructors' attitude toward her project was just the opposite from her application experience.

"Fiction writers tend to be wonderful writers who aren't very interested in story," she explains. "Because I had a story, the instructors would say, 'When's the next installment coming?'"

When an editor had first approached Hawkins/Parker with the idea of writing a "Dark Shadows" novel, she was told to simply "write down one of the stories from the show," and promised that a "real writer" would be brought in to fix it up. But her first draft of her first book convinced the editor that they already had their "real writer."

Hawkins was not content to merely "novelize" a plot from the television series. In both her books she has taken the show as a departure point to delve into themes and settings that captured her interest.

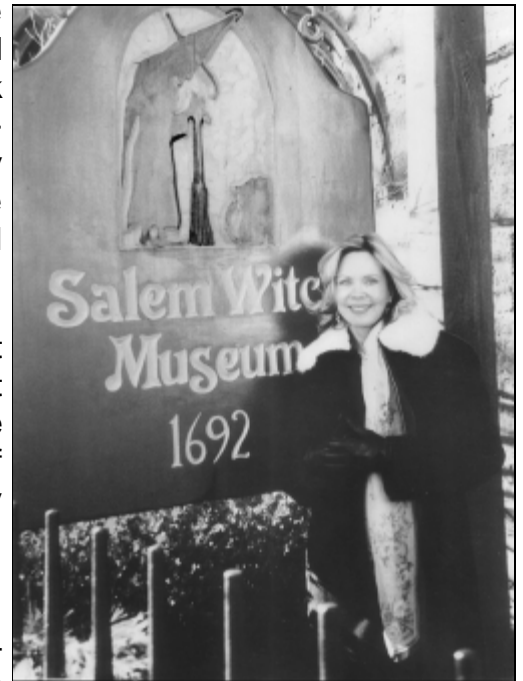
"The Salem Branch," intercuts between the time period of the television show (1971), and Colonial New England. Taking a single flashback sequence of the show that was set in witchhunter-era Salem Village, Hawkins concocts a wholly original drama that allows her to explore the spiritual and sociological currents that contributed to that horrific chapter in American history.

"When I went back to do the research I found that most of the people who were tried for witchcraft were widows or old maids," she says. "They were cranky, sharp-tongued. They had no way of supporting themselves, so they were basically poor. Or they had property someone else wanted. Basically they weren't liked."

Even in writing a gothic horror tale set 35 and 314 years ago, "it's important to have a dialogue with the present day," she says, "a political dialogue."

Among her characters, for instance, is real-life witch prosecutor Cotton Mather. When confronted with his clergyman father's skepticism toward "spectral evidence" that was used to condemn many witch trial victims, Mather's words echo those of George W. Bush: "I speak to a higher father!"

Research was key to Hawkins' writing process, and the results are convincing and rich in narrative detail. She traveled to Salem and was delighted to find that all the Salem witch trials had been recorded, preserving the vocabulary of the period. Other sources included diaries kept by a Colonial woman who was kidnapped by Indians (as is her co-protagonist Miranda du Val), and Thomas Jefferson's writing on the Indians, which Hawkins found perceptive and enlightening.



Parker outside the Salem Witch Museum in Massachusetts.

In creating the character of “nature witch” Miranda, Hawkins clearly draws from her own deep feelings for the natural world, feelings that drew the Tennessee native to live in Topanga Canyon 25 years ago, a few years after moving to Los Angeles for her acting career. Here, she and husband Jim Hawkins have raised their three children, Rick, Andy and Caitlin.

“I’m a nature girl, so this is perfect for me,” she says of the Canyon. Enamored of the rich variety of natural wonders in her adopted home state, she and Jim enjoy frequent backpacking trips to the Sierra as well.

“I feel that’s the spiritual place for me,” she says of the wilderness in general, and California’s canyons and mountains in particular. “God is there, I’m transformed. About two days in, there’s this ‘click.’”

She also explored the psychological and literary underpinnings of horror tales through such works as Sigmund Freud’s essay “The Uncanny,” and early American writer Ann Radcliffe’s “On the Supernatural in Poetry.”

Not a horror fan before she began writing “Dark Shadows” books, her career as a genre novelist has taught her to appreciate the form.

“I enjoy writing horror,” she says. “We all have a dark side. Now that we’re in this era of fundamentalist Christianity, the dark side is really perking up.”

Though her writing career began a little flukily, she’s made the most of the opportunity. She finished her MFA and is currently putting together a book of short stories. She’s open to writing another “Dark Shadows” novel, but non-committal when it comes to other long-form literary projects, with all the other pleasures life has to offer.

“It takes so much time,” she says of novel-writing. “I have to visit the Great Barrier Reef. I have to go to New Zealand. And I’d like to be a grandmother. My family is everything to me.”

I’ve never seen an episode of “Dark Shadows,” but I’ve read a fair amount of horror and fantasy fiction, and I can report that “Dark Shadows: The Salem Branch” by Lara Parker stands solidly on its own—a pleasurable and entertaining read, with no apologies necessary for its soap opera origins or its critically-dissed genre. Parker’s writing is graceful, intelligent and anything but pulpy, avoiding the plagues of over-writing and clichéd hokiness that infect most best-sellers in the genre—Anne Rice and Steven King, for instance. She has mined the television series for characters and situations that allow her to explore universal themes and personal preoccupations that depart from the original episodes. The most compelling sections of the book, for me, are those set during the Salem witch trials. Miranda du Val, a minor character on the shows (she appeared in just one episode) is here promoted to a leading role. Raised by the Wampanoag Indians, Miranda possesses supernatural powers which she must hide from the repressed and fearful Salemites.

“Here’s this girl who can’t show her powers in her community,” Parker elucidates. “But she has them. And they’re not bad. She’s a nature witch is what she is, a wiccan.”

The Salem sequences are suspenseful and gripping, and Parker’s affinity for the

natural world shines in the passages where Miranda interacts with her natural surroundings. Her powers are mainly manifested as a communion with the natural world, and while her magical abilities work well as fantasy wish-fulfillment, they're limited enough to keep her vulnerable.

In the episode in which Miranda's healing powers are used on near-dead newborn lambs, Parker captures both the drama of pioneer life lived close to nature and the elements, and then the cruel ironies of the witch-hunt mentality.

"The first time suspicion had ebbed around her like a slow rising tide was after the terrible blizzard when the ewes dropped their lambs in the snow. Outside, the air was a tumult of roiling snowflakes swirling against the sky. The field was obliterated, the fence invisible, and the bleating ewes, dumb in their woolen cocoons, eyes lashed by sleet, chose this night of all others to drop blood and lambs to the frozen ground—unaware of the gift they gave, too cold, too confused to nudge a tiny creature to its feet. Slogging into the stinging blast, Miranda had gathered two tiny babies in her arms and carried them inside. Sitting on the bed, she rubbed and dried them. She puffed warm breath into their black snouts and willed them to live. It seemed a fine thing she was doing. Reverend Collins brought in more lambs and placed them in her lap. She wrapped them in rags and, not sleeping all through the night, she fed each one with fingers dipped in milk. Once he looked in with his lantern and caught his breath. "Miranda, thou art like a Madonna, sitting there with the lambs about thee."

"...Only later was the scene reflected on in the parish—that she had saved thirty lambs in the blizzard and wielded a power not of this world. Dead they were, frozen stiff and unseeing when he deposited them on the bed, and they had bleated into life, moving their sharp little hooves, batting at her fingers with their tiny mouths. Out of blood and death came the odor of new wool, and mewling was heard in the room. A slip of a girl should not do these things and, although they gave her praise at first, among themselves they whispered the Devil had come to her aid."

In the "contemporary" sequences (actually set in 1971, the eternal "present" of the "Dark Shadows" series), the protagonist is Barnabas Collins. Parker transforms the romantic, reluctant vampire hero of the television show into a character she can relate to more directly—the "cured" vampire, grappling with issues of mortality. Barnabas' curse has been lifted through the scientific discoveries of brilliant physician Dr. Julia Hoffman.

"I'm getting older," she says, "and I thought, wouldn't it be great for someone who's been a vampire for 200 years to have to deal with the problems of aging."

Mortal at last, able to move among normal humans, Barnabas is beset by all-too-recognizable human weaknesses—indecision, insecurity, and unrequited love, as well as bodily aches and pains.

He is living as a prisoner in a cramped body. Each day his shoulders are more slumped, hands more veined, neck more slack. He is plagued by emotional malaise as well, the tendency towards self-deprecation and an unexpected timidity in public. Humans, he realizes, are irrational, and often reverse perfectly reasonable decisions on a whim. They are unstable, and quick to anger or place blame. He now possesses all of these contemptible qualities. As a vampire he has known guilt and obsession, but he has never been in the throes of embarrassment, and he has never been intimidated

by the supercilious attitude of others.

It's a risky move, and readers may miss the fantasy-identification with an immortal, omnipotent vampire, but Parker is confident and comfortable exploring the inner lives of her characters. If Barnabas is at times a frustratingly passive protagonist (his sections of the book have less of the page-turning, forward momentum of Miranda's) he remains a sympathetic one without any of the melodrama or repetitious bombast of an Anne Rice vampire hero.

Taking advantage of the early-'70s setting, Parker also introduces a commune of hippies who've taken up residence in the woods of the Collins estate. The flower children make an unusual crop of victims for a mysterious new vampire that ex-bloodsucker Barnabas, who befriends them, must battle in his weakened human state.

While avoiding gore and focusing on character development, Parker nonetheless builds to an effectively violent climax, complete with a surprising twist ending. In the unlikely setting of a "TV tie-in" novel, Lara Parker has created a modest gem of elegant, evocative writing and entertaining story-telling.

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