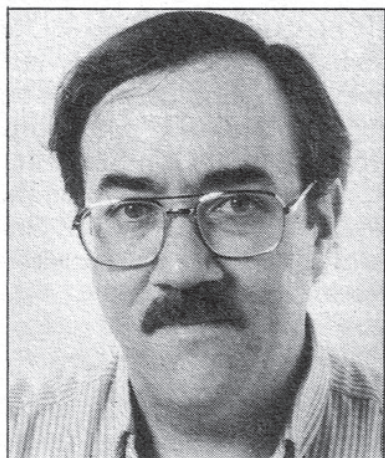


Les Daniels



Courtesy Les Daniels

If there is anything more unfortunate than an overrated author, it is a talented writer who, so far, has been overlooked. While far from being unknown, Les Daniels has not yet gained wide recognition from the general public despite his steadfast group of fans. Never a prolific author, he has however received his share of critical acclaim, from *Playboy* to *The New York Times*. Simply stated, Daniels knows

as much *about* the history of horror in film and literature as he does how to write both fiction and nonfiction *within* it.

Born in 1943, Daniels grew up in Redding, Connecticut. Partly due to his interest in the works of H. P. Lovecraft, he attended Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. (His master's thesis was on *Frankenstein*.) He has remained in Providence ever since, residing in an unassuming house only a few hundred yards away from the more famous Shunned House in the story of the same name by Lovecraft.

Despite a lifelong interest in horror and the macabre, Daniels's first published book was *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America*. Published in 1971, it was the first book to seriously examine the impact of E. C. Comics and other horror comics in this definitive history of the art form. (Daniels was recently contracted to do the authorized history of Marvel Comics.)

In 1975, his most acclaimed and influential work appeared,

the pioneering study *Living in Fear: A History of Horror in the Mass Media*. *Kirkus Reviews* described it as "A serious, thorough, and amusing survey of Western horror literature. Daniels' familiarity with horror is staggering...." Although sorely in need of a revised edition, it remains to this day the definitive examination on this subject. As a sort of follow-up history of horror in short story form, Daniels then edited a companion volume entitled *Dying of Fright: Masterpieces of the Macabre*. This intensely researched book is considered one of the important anthologies of horror ever compiled, with Daniels supplying copious biographical and bibliographical notes before each entry.

On the other hand, Les Daniels is becoming best known for his continuing series of novels featuring Don Sebastian—vampire. Four have been published since 1978: *The Black Castle*, *The Silver Skull*, *Citizen Vampire*, and *Yellow Fog*; a fifth, *No Blood Spilled*, is forthcoming. In each tale, Don Sebastian enters a different period of history, and all too often finds the bloodletting of "normal" men far more terrifying and insane than his own. Daniels is also beginning to write terrific short stories—when Don Sebastian leaves him alone.



WIATER: Since you're such a recognized expert on horror, can you recall your initial exposure to it? It must have been something memorable, to change your life forever.

DANIELS: The earliest influence that I can think of was a book that I had when I was four or five years old, called *Georgie the Ghost*. It was a children's book about a ghost in a haunted house. And it's really not like Casper the Friendly Ghost; it was different, in that he was having a good time being a ghost! It didn't frighten me. There were so many influences. I'm old enough to have caught the end of the radio era, in terms of dramatic shows: "The Shadow," "Inner Sanctum," "Suspense." I still collect old radio shows on tape and record because they were an influence on me.

But I also read horror comics, of course, as most kids did during the fifties. And I was very impressed by the E. C. Comics—*Tales from the Crypt*, *Vault of Horror*, *The Haunt of Fear*. Everybody says they were influenced by them now, so that it's a cliché—which is why I started with *Georgie the Ghost!*—but I feel I can justify my claim to having been a sincere devotee since I wrote my first book on comics, and included the first E. C. horror reprint in color in about fifteen years.

So my credentials are intact and I can say I read the E. C.s without blushing. Strangely enough, my father—who always gave me a moderately hard time about the fact that I was morbidly interested in all this—used to introduce me to a lot of books in the field. My mother gave me a copy of Lovecraft's *The Outsider* as a high school graduation gift. I don't know how to explain this, even now.

WIATER: You were the first person to actually try to write an entire history of horror in the mass media. Even before the genre's current popularity, this seems like an insane project to take on single-handedly.

DANIELS: It was even more insane than *Comix*, in that it was intended to deal with all fiction, all films, a lot of plays, radio, television. Comics. Rock 'n' roll. *Anything* where there was a strong horror element. Of course I didn't cover every single thing, but it was pretty solid from the dawn of time to the mid-seventies when it came out! It took much too long to write—I had reams of papers and notes all over the place, I was reading constantly, I was trying to catch again all the old movies that I could, and generally driving myself insane. I finally decided to cut it off at *The Exorcist*, because that seemed like a landmark film—there's always a temptation to say, "Wait a minute, something else has just come!" and start writing again. So the book ended at a point just before the current horror boom.

WIATER: Any chance of updating it to the present?

DANIELS: Not really. I mean, you're doing it with these interviews [*laughs*]! So many other people have written so much about the field since, the idea of me doing it wouldn't be unique anymore. I probably won't do it.

WIATER: Completist collectors of Les Daniels might want to know something about your most "obscure" title, *Thirteen Tales of Terror* (1977).

DANIELS: It's a book of mine that even my most rabid fans are least familiar with. Scribner's had been doing a series of paperback anthologies for high schools on the premise that since they had difficulty in getting students to read, they might have better luck if they gave them something they were interested in. So they asked me to edit an anthology of horror stories to be used as a textbook. I did it in conjunction with my sister, who was an education professor at Tufts at the time.

She did a workbook which also has my name on it, which *must* be my most obscure work. With questions like, "What does it mean when the creature bores into Ralph's head?" It was all very strange. I enjoyed doing this—there was no reason not to—but I was marking time, too. Because the only things I know about are comics and horror

[laughs] . . . ! I think I was trying to build up the strength to write my first novel, which I began working on while doing *Thirteen Tales of Terror*.

WIATER: That, of course, was *The Black Castle*, a historical vampire story. Where did it have its origins?

DANIELS: It came to me in 1965 or 1966, when I was still in graduate school. I was reading a lot of gothic novels at the time and I wanted to write my master's thesis on horror fiction in general—a version of what eventually appeared as *Living in Fear*. This was too massive a project and was squeezed down into writing on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. But I was absorbed by the gothics. I especially liked *The Monk* by Matthew Gregory Lewis, which was lurid and tasteless—and right up my alley.

I'm embarrassed to say some of these things, but I wouldn't lie to you: I had a dream about two characters who essentially were a monk and a vampire. I guess I've always been more interested in the bad guys than the good guys. Instead of the usual good versus evil conflict, I thought it would be more interesting to have two fairly rotten people jockeying for position. Using it as a way to try to decide which sort of evil was actually more of a menace; usually the vampire is set up as a boogeyman character, and this is the source of all of our problems. Whereas I feel that even if there were such creatures—or whatever sort of aberrant social behavior we have such as Jack the Ripper or Charles Manson—as awful as they may be, they really don't cause as much trouble as the socially acceptable, institutionalized forms of cruelty, evil, and intolerance.

WIATER: So you always saw Don Sebastian, a bloodsucking creature of the undead, as inevitably the "lesser of two evils"?

DANIELS: I had the idea, even back then, that the vampire—without being whitewashed in any way—could be the hero by being a sort of antiestablishment character. But I didn't have the strength or the intelligence to write the book at the time. Then, when I decided I would have to write a novel if I wanted to keep writing, that resurfaced as the book that came out as *The Black Castle*. But the first novel was meant to stand on its own. I had no intention of writing another one with this character. But immediately thereafter, I again had the problem of *What am I going to do?*

WIATER: So you decided to satisfy your fans by continuing the nocturnal adventures of Don Sebastian. One noticeable aspect of your work is that practically all of your characters exist in varying degrees of gray—or black.

DANIELS: Who are the good guys and who are the bad? This goes back

to some of the horror fiction I read as a kid, which is different from much of what you get today. But this is what I wanted to do, partly for the philosophical reason of examining the nature of evil. And thinking, which *is* evil? Is it a supposedly supernatural force? Or just the way people behave?

WIATER: You're one of the few dark dreamers who is apparently more comfortable creating historical horror novels, with no obvious hero. That is certainly going against the tide of most of those working in the genre today, don't you think?

DANIELS: I find that almost all the books which have been coming out for the last few years are written with a very deliberate hero and/or heroine in mind. People I usually think of as "Betty and Bob," who are the wonderful folks who live in the suburbs, and are a cute couple, and have a kid. And something *bad* is going to happen to them! And the book is usually about how Betty and Bob managed to overcome "it." Sometimes only Betty manages to overcome "it." Sometimes only Bob . . . But I find that much less interesting to me—I want to get in and deal with the parts that are frightening. Having these sort of TV-style "nice folks" taking up the bulk of the book, and for me to be expected to really worry about them . . . !

WIATER: Yet your work has always been highly acclaimed, even if you've yet to achieve best-seller status. Especially within the "hard-core" horror community of serious readers and fans.

DANIELS: Maybe they're all polite, but from other writers I've had an awfully good response. Perhaps because of the lack of "Betty and Bob" material, or my variations on traditional approaches, my work appeals more to other writers—or to people who are specially interested in the field, as opposed to the general public. Because in some sense my novels are less accessible as they're not very warmhearted or they're set in the past—which may be confusing to some average readers who don't remember anything that happened before 1988!

WIATER: In spite of the gruesome scenes described in your novels, your style is generally considered both highly literate and, dare I say, tastefully rendered.

DANIELS: I don't know how I do that. My policy is "Nothing succeeds like excess." There is *nothing* one shouldn't be allowed to do in fiction. But in practice, it's worked out in strange ways. I often think I'm writing something that's outrageous and offensive because I'm dwelling on it at such length. It may take me an hour to write a paragraph that someone else will read in seven seconds. I *like* lurid, flamboyant, melodramatic horror. It's great fun. Maybe in the screenplays I've written

that haven't been produced, what I was doing would have been considered excessive. Not because it was really any different, but people reading books sometimes just glibly pass over things that, if they actually saw them, would be too outrageous. But I'm in favor of outlandishness and bad taste. I haven't had too much trouble with publishers, though.

But it's funny—in terms of taste and what you should be allowed to do. I find that the one thing above all else which distinguishes the modern horror novel from what went before—in virtually every recent novel I've read—is that whenever a character is terrified, he or she immediately proceeds to wet his or her pants. And this seems to be the big “breakthrough” that modern horror has achieved. I'm thinking seriously of writing a novel about a small town, isolated, where you can tell that something has gone terribly wrong . . . because everyone is walking around with wet pants.

WIATER: In spite of that unlikely scenario, you take the craft of horror fiction extremely seriously.

DANIELS: [*pauses*] I'm writing out of the Poe–Lovecraft tradition in the sense of being someone who's not necessarily expecting to make huge amounts of money, or is writing for huge amounts of money. But writing because this is either what I want to do, or am “doomed” to do. I don't think I'm on a bandwagon. I started working in this field before the big breakthrough of the seventies came, and I imagine I'll be here even if it dies down.

WIATER: Your own creation notwithstanding, there are also vampire series from several other talented authors, including Anne Rice and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro. Why is there such a continued fascination with this theme, no matter what the approach?

DANIELS: The theory in the past, when these stories were popular in the Victorian era and afterward, was that there were a lot of sexual symbolism and sexual metaphors of people creeping into each other's rooms and doing things to one another. Although there's still some of that, vampires now relate more directly to the immortality concept. The idea that people have of maintaining their bodies forever, which is now part of our public consciousness in weird, desperate ways such as diets and exercise. People assume if they do these things, they will somehow cheat death. I think the appeal of vampires today has something to do with that idea.

My vampire characters *do* pay a price to be vampires. And part of that price is that they are predators. I suppose that's a more traditional approach. I'm ambivalent as to whether they're “admirable” or not—they always have a cruel and inhuman streak in addition to the advan-

tages they obviously possess. The one advantage that interests me the most is not just extending their current life, but the idea that, by being a vampire, they have acquired mystical knowledge about the meaning of life and death, and the beyond, and the secrets of the universe. That's very attractive to me, though it's still sort of a Faustian theme the way my vampires are paying for this. They are suffering, and they are causing suffering, in order to maintain their existence.

WIATER: Do you truly believe that people are basically evil, rather than good?

DANIELS: I do have a tendency to believe that in the abstract. It's strange, because I generally *like* people, when I'm dealing with my own life. But as a philosophical concept, looking at the parade of history so to speak, it's not very encouraging.

WIATER: You're clearly not what some people would consider a prolific author, though that word is an undeniably relative term. My question is, do you enjoy writing, or prefer having written?

DANIELS: I never have reached a point where I get up the next morning and say, "Oh, boy, time to write!" [*laughs*] I really have to drag myself over to the typewriter; the pressure to do well intimidates me in getting there.

WIATER: Can you describe a typical workday?

DANIELS: A "typical workday" is mostly conducted at night. I live on an odd schedule, which I guess other horror writers have done—Sheridan Le Fanu and Lovecraft—but I'm not really doing it to imitate them or be affected. I usually spend the day doing research, going to the library, and reading. By midnight, except on occasions when something colorful comes up, there usually isn't much for me to do, and there's fewer distractions, so that's a good time for me to get started. I sometimes go on even to dawn. It helps for me to know that I have a project, and that somebody is waiting for me to finish it. I'm not one of those writers who has twenty books in a drawer that I wrote for the fun of it, hoping that someday maybe somebody would want them.

WIATER: Is there anything besides the skill of creating frightening situations which clearly sets horror writers apart from everyone else? In other words, can you as a professional writer of fear be "happy" in the usual sense of the word?

DANIELS: I think so. I mean, I write more or less instinctively—I try to write books that I would read if I hadn't written them. I don't have any list of rules or anything of that kind. I'm really happy in the sense that I'm doing approximately what I wanted to do in my youth: I *am* writing horror novels and stories, and they *are* being published. I'm at

least flirting with the film industry. This is, in a way, a dream come true. I wouldn't be at all hurt if I became fabulously successful at it, which I haven't yet. But I'm still having a good time.

WIATER: In other words, you'll continue to actively explore the genre, no matter what.

DANIELS: Whatever is wrong that makes me this way—I have a fairly solid commitment to it [*laughs*]. In *Living in Fear*, I think I called it partially a “left-handed religious impulse”; that there is some fascination with mortality and death which is a major issue—unless either by being deeply religious or an atheist one knows precisely what is going to happen after death—that is a topic worthy of concern. I don't claim to be giving any pat answers, but there is a fascination that makes me want to speculate on it. This is part of what keeps me going.

And just to realize it's possible to “knock somebody's socks off” with stories about this subject inspires me. I don't know if it's the kind of inspiration that most people would be glad to have, but I assume a certain number of people who are reading this interview will relate to what I'm saying.

WIATER: But does this “impulse” indicate any personal beliefs in the supernatural or the occult?

DANIELS: I don't know if there really is a supernatural, but I just *love* to toy with it. As I said earlier, you also get opportunities to deal with moral questions of “What is Good and Evil?” as well as “What is death?” I don't think I'm dealing with these in the manner of a great philosopher or religious leader—or anything even close to that. But in my own way these subjects interest me and I deal with them as best I can, and try to be entertaining.

I find that I entertain myself: At three o'clock in the morning, I'm pounding away on the typewriter and having a hell of a time. So I keep doing it.