

Hungry...

For M. T. Anderson



An Interview with M. T. Anderson

Joel Shoemaker

I “met” M. T. (Tobin) Anderson through his first published novel, **Thirsty**, the story of Chris, a teenaged boy who slowly understands that he is becoming a vampire. **Thirsty** is not only a fine mood piece but is also highly original, very funny, and so dead-on in its portrayal of male adolescent angst that it remains a personal favorite. It features a strong hook that is deliciously jarring in its juxtaposition of the mundane with the extraordinary. Hauntingly matter-of-fact prose reveals that the vampires are plentiful this year; dead bodies, drained of their blood, are turning up with regularity in the oddest places. There are rituals that hold evil powers at bay, but now they must be performed in the parking lot of the White Hen Pantry, as strip malls have overtaken the sacred site. I enjoyed this wickedly wry commentary on our unthinking acceptance of “progress” and of violent, random death as the price of modern life—at least until it touches us personally.

Always on the lookout for authors and books that appeal to my increasingly difficult-to-reach boy readers, I was thrilled that Tobin consented to be interviewed for this article via e-mail, from February to March 2004.

Shoe: *OK, why the M. T.?*

MT: For the sake of anonymity. This way, when necessary, I can deny everything. Also, when my first book was published, I liked the ring of “**Thirsty** by M. T.”

Shoe: *We’ve never met, and Googling you sheds no biographical light—only half a million hits from booksellers anxious to do business. I don’t know how old you are, if you have a family, a pet, a penchant for anything other than seventeenth-century court gossip and fast food as mentioned on the jacket copy of **Thirsty**. Have you deliberately kept yourself at a low profile online?*

MT: Well, first: I’m thirty-five, don’t have a family or any pets, and, in fact, now can’t actually eat fast food without feeling like my stomach’s bleeding.

I have a very New Englandy horror of self-promotion, and for that reason, I haven’t put anything about me online. No real loss there. An MTA-blog would be a dismal record of wasted hours and frozen chicken pot pie. A few months ago, I did try online dating, but it ended in miserable failure: The only person who responded to my profile was a friend laughing at the crash helmet I was wearing in one of my photos. Maybe there’s a lesson to be learned here about crash helmets.

Shoe: *Have you always thought of yourself as a writer?*

MT: I always wanted to be a writer. And an astronaut, but that isn’t very realistic for someone who can’t do basic times tables with gloves on.

Shoe: *So you must have been a reader. What authors and/or books were your favorites?*

MT: As a kid, Roald Dahl, of course, and Tove Jansson, overwhelmingly. The writers I most admire now are great stylists



and great satirists: Mark Twain, Evelyn Waugh, Lawrence Sterne, Denis Diderot, Richard Brautigan, Ralph Ellison, Vladimir Nabokov, Ronald Firbank, Donald Barthelme, John Marston, Charles Brockden Brown The list goes on. There is something to learn from almost any piece of writing.

dangerously, encourage the splintering of mass demographics); second, the simplification of narrative (because of an assumption that the bulk of people want to hear over and over again the stories they already have heard); and third, the pursuit of anything, be it tumbling helicopters or showering cheerleaders, that might constitute "action."

Shoe: *How did you come to write **Thirsty**?*

MT: **Thirsty** began with a dream. I started to dream regularly about inductions into vampiric ceremonies—being forced to comply by adults who wanted me to eat flesh and drink blood. The only dream scene that made it directly into the book was one where I was floating, disembodied, through a church parish hall during a church supper. Everyone was eating casserole. A girl said to her father, "Can I have some more?"—and he replied, "May you have some more." Suddenly, I realized that it was human flesh that they were eating. He smiled at her, and I could see his fangs. That gave me the idea for the book.



Shoe: ***Thirsty** has a great sexual edge—Chris's confusion, uncertainty, and fears are repeatedly attributed to puberty while the reader knows it's really due to his developing vampirism. His first blood-sucking is masturbatory after he cuts himself shaving. He longs for the seemingly unattainable Rebecca, but genuinely lusts for blood.*

MT: Yep. That's not entirely accidental. One thing I decided about the dreams that spawned the book is that they were, to some extent, about all the ways in which males are taught to be predatory—sexually being one way. In this sense, the book aligns thematically with **Burger Wuss**, where the character is concerned with how to be kind in a world that expects aggression.



Shoe: *All your protagonists are boys. Do you have any feeling for whether or not your readers are boys? How do they respond to your characterizations? Do they "get" your books?*

MT: The only indicator I have of the gender of my readers is the letters I receive; these come equally from boys and girls. I would guess that my male characters are struggling with masculinity more than your average male protagonists—my characters are, as a rule, suspicious of its certainties and confused by its sureties. As I am. Which perhaps explains my failure at online dating. (See above.)

People underestimate the intelligence of teen readers. We do them a disservice by talking down to them. Instead, we need to bolster their sense of their own intelligence and accomplishments.

We live in a culture of corporate-sponsored narrative, which is a culture of underwritten endumbing. In an attempt to reach an ever wider audience, television, movies, magazines, and even publishers rely on three elements pernicious to complicated narrative: first, the sapping of particularity (for fear that eccentricity will frighten off potential viewers, or more

This creates a vicious cycle, however. As children are raised on simpler and simpler narratives, they become acclimated to that banality, and grow distrustful of anything that deviates from it. So on the one hand, the culture is becoming palpably more insular and contentedly moronic. On the other hand, of course—and more important—there are a huge number of kids who see that this very thing is happening and get angry about it. These are the kids who are the hope of the future—the ones who feel offended by what they're being fed and who want to produce their own content that reflects the complications of their own lives.

Shoe: *Yes, "contentedly moronic" reminds me of "Chet," the celestial being, and his disdain for **Thirsty**'s protagonist, Christopher, whom Chet describes as being "incompetent: self-pitying; self-absorbed; self-centered. The perfect teen." Is this how you consider teens?*

MT: No—that's who we think we are when we're depressed or being taunted by a demon-god.

When I was a teen myself, I felt irritated and hounded by a youth culture that promoted gratification and the pursuit of a product-driven "cool" over things like curiosity, intellectual growth, and compassion. Times have changed, but that basic situation hasn't changed. If anything, it has gotten more intense.

I was angry back then. I wanted to hear voices raised against the demands of the cool. What I'm trying to be, as a writer for kids and teens, is someone who is not afraid to trash a vapid culture for being vapid, someone who will make no concessions for mass-marketed idiocy, for the goopy self-congratulation of boy-bands and starlets.

If there is disdain in my work, it is for elements of youth culture that teens themselves hate—and which they're dealing with directly.

Many writers for teens would say the same thing. We write from the

relative safety of adulthood—but we write for kids who are out there fighting on the front lines, often wounded—all of us working together to try to resist the tyranny of the hot and the cool.

Shoe: *So are you writing for these particular teens?*

MT: What I try to do is write the book as it needs to be written. Much of my sense of the audience is subliminal, rather than something I think about. When I have to envision an audience, I picture myself and my friends when I was that age.

Shoe: *The twelve-to-eighteen-year-old age range we serve is so diverse. Where do you feel your natural readership falls within that range?*

MT: It varies a lot from book to book. **Feed** is older, for example, than **Burger Wuss**, and both of them are much older than **The Game of Sunken Places**. I have to admit, however, that I'm surprised to find how often kids much younger than the intended age read the books. I am occasionally appalled. A ten-year-old, for example, may basically be able to understand the plot and language of **Feed**, but there are parts of the book predicated on a sexualized youth culture that is (I hope!) far beyond those readers' real comprehensions.

Shoe: *Cable TV and the Internet have made many kids more sexually aware and more sexualized than ever before.*

MT: Yes. And not only is the *knowledge* there—photos and feeds, for example, available to anyone with an e-mail account—but there's also an oddly cold and dispassionate attitude toward sexuality. It's all kind of dismal. So much of that sexualization seems to be about *use*, not *enjoyment*.

Shoe: *One of the things I like best about your books is that your characters are really interesting people who wrestle with big issues. Plot seems less important. Is that deliberate?*

MT: Not *really* deliberate. I'm just somewhat bad at plot, because my life doesn't really have one.

For **Burger Wuss**, I wrote the whole plot out ahead of time, scene by scene, all scripted so I knew the function of each element in the drama. It's my most plot-heavy book. It was tremendous fun to write. With the plot out of the way, I was free to concentrate on all the things I really love about writing—dialogue, character, and humor.

Shoe: *Yes, tell me about the humor.*

MT: Humor gets a bad rap. People assume somehow that humor is lightness, is evasion, is a sign that you are "not dealing with something"—when in fact, humor may be a perfectly legitimate response to a world that is fundamentally absurd. Humor is not about trivialities. We should remember that comedy was, for Shakespeare, about concealment, betrayal, and reunification; for Beckett, it embodied the senselessness of life itself; and for Dante, it held forth the promise of heaven.

Shoe: *Was it happenstance that food-related words are used in your first three titles?*

MT: A friend recently pointed out to me that I seem to be hitting all the bodily appetites in my titles. So maybe my next books should be called **Wank**, **Crap**, and **Snooze**. That'll get copies flying out the door!

Shoe: *Your teens swear quite a bit. I know some school librarians who will not buy books with "bad language" in them for fear of being called on the carpet for condoning the use of such language. What would you say to them?*

MT: Well, I should just point out in passing that **Feed** in no way condones the use of profanity. The intensity of the profanity is just one example of the way that English is deteriorating under the influence of a highly commercialized anti-intellectualism. In such a case, I feel that the reader needs to experience the intensity of that language in order to reject it. And it's not as if teens won't have come into contact with that language in advance, anyway.

Swears often reveal a society's deepest concerns, as does

anything taboo. It's telling that in earlier generations, oaths related to God, the ambiguous line demarcating what is human and what is divine, were considered foulest: zounds (God's wounds), Sblood (God's blood), bloody, and even just "By God!" These, quaintly, it seems to us now, were considered dangerous.

We, however, are a culture fixated not on the spiritual—which seems irrelevant now—but on the physical. We are obsessed with the sculpting of our bodies through abstinence, in the same way that Puritan writers, for example, kept journals in which they tracked their spiritual growth and self-control. We are committed to the production of commodified bodies and the efficient operation of those bodies to produce maximum gratification—and so our swears focus on the human body, rather than the divine, on its pleasures and effluvia.

Before I wrote **Feed**, I talked about the project at a library visit and asked the librarians what they thought about this very issue—knowing that the swearing in the book was absolutely essential to the depiction of the decline of English, and yet at the same time, aware that it would keep the book out of many schools. One woman gave what I felt was an excellent and honest reply: She said that if there were two books to choose between, both of which were of great merit, both of which were wonderful books, and one had swearing in it, she'd buy the one that didn't and avoid the conflict while still maintaining the quality of the library's collection. That seems to me to be a perfectly reasonable determination. You have to choose your battles.

Shoe: *They say that you should write about what you know. The jacket copy for **Burger Wuss** says you know burgers. Do you also have firsthand knowledge of revenge and first love gone wrong?*

MT: I don't think I've ever disliked anyone enough to consider revenge. I could probably think of someone if I tried, but I'm not particularly vindictive and I've never really been wronged.

As for first love, doesn't it always go wrong? In Turgenev's **First Love**, it goes wrong with a horsewhip. That's enough to scare away anyone.

Shoe: *By the end of the book, Anthony should be older and wiser; but is he?*

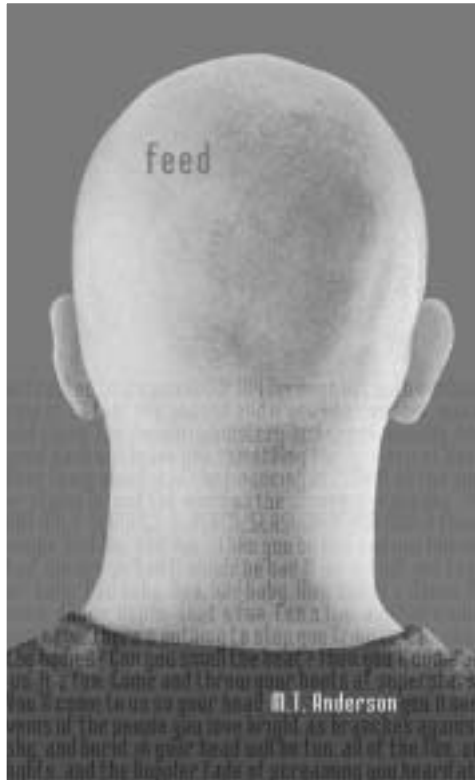
MT: Are any of us?

You know what's terrifying?

Listening to women talk about men they've been on dates with. I always find myself defending men who are simply trying to do the right thing, but who do not exude self-confidence, and who are, for this reason, consigned to the ranks of the second-rate. For this reason, during dates, I now prefer just to huddle under the table, eating appetizers off my knees.

Shoe: *In your next book, the "feed" is a brain implant that pushes a constant stream of media and Internet-like content to a large percentage of the human population 24/7. What made you want to write about that and its effects on teens?*

MT: I conceive of **Feed** as a novel that uses images from an imagined future in an almost allegorical way to discuss things we're dealing with now. The technology is not, *per se*, the object of my interest. I think we all have, at this point, a direct



connection to the media in our brains. It's impossible for us to think of life without conceiving of it in images that are taken from movies, from songs, from ads, all of which are challenging us to be better consumers rather than better people.

We write behavioral scripts for ourselves based on what we see through advertising. I watch TV, and suddenly, I realize that I should be driving with my rugged pals through the Rockies to hurl myself off an overpass. I mean, that's what guys my age *do*, right?

Statistically, no. But the image is more powerful than the statistic—and suddenly, we begin to feel strictures on how we behave and develop. No longer can we imagine ourselves exterior to the media, outside of sales-oriented image complexes—because these things formed us. Our hopes, our dreams were scripted at least partially by ad campaigns. We are the media and the message.

Shoe: *The humor in **Feed** is outrageous, from the first line through *School™*, from speeches by the President which I swear sound like ones I've heard recently, to the lesions as beauty spots, etc. But the book also has all this serious stuff about parents*

who don't parent, kids with no direction, underground social and political protest, the entire question of the extent to which we are raising a nation of idiots, and finally, failed love and death. I was devastated when Vi wanted Titus to make love and he said it would be like "being felt up by a zombie." This is not light stuff. How have teens you've talked with responded?

MT: A lot of teens feel the way I used to—frustrated by the demands made upon them by a venal youth culture produced by middle-aged executives and their twenty-something assistants. Many teens are aware of the manipulation, and they're looking for ways to satirize what's happening all around them. I hope that this book will give them an opportunity to do just that.

Shoe: *Titus knows he's still a boy, but he's "trying on" some more adult behaviors. But he's lost, isn't he? He isn't sure he really wants to leave his boyhood behind. Do you think this is getting harder than it used to be?*

MT: Marketing demographics have changed the experience of childhood, as corporations have redefined previously understood categories of age and development. For example, many marketers talk about a fourteen-to-twenty-five set—previously unthinkable. Magazines like **Stuff** and **Maxim** are designed to interest males at both ends of that spectrum, promoting various products of interest to that demographic, such as state-of-the-art audio equipment, athletic equipment, and breast implants. Childhood ends sooner—and is replaced by an adolescence prolonged well into what used to be adulthood. Our culture is obsessed with the glamour of that prolonged adolescence. I'm sure it's hard for kids to be rushed into that adolescent stage. For the last several decades, the middle school years have been known among teachers as the hardest for kids (girls especially). A few people I've

talked to say that the middle school emphasis on clothing, purchases, fitting in, popularity, etc., is creeping backwards into sixth grade. It would be great if there were something we could do to halt that backward spread.

Shoe: *Your latest book is quite a departure from the previous three. Here your protagonists are two thirteen-year-old boys who are best friends. There is no food in the title, there is no swearing, and it's with a different publisher. How did all this come about?*

MT: I wrote **The Game of Sunken Places** [reviewed in this issue on page 139] some years ago, and it always remained one of my favorite projects, not because it was the deepest book ever, but just because it was so much fun to write. It's a fantasy adventure story—mysterious, spooky, reasonably fast-paced—a tribute to all those YA and middle-grade novels in which kids on vacation battle evil in knee-socks. It's about this great friendship—very characteristic for that age—and these two kids forced to wear Victorian clothes and face the powers of darkness in the Vermont woods. I hope that readers will get a kick out of it, and will become as fond of these characters as I am. More importantly, in its promotion of action in tweed, I hope the book will provide a convenient solvent for modern, latex-based adventure.

Shoe: *I'm picturing you dressed like Uncle Max, all black and white and formal.*

MT: Yep. My motto is "Dress to repress."

Shoe: *You mentioned being off to sing in the opera last weekend. Were you in full voice?*

MT: I was in fine voice, thank you, though I needn't have been, as I spent most of my time singing in a chorus of witches and dipsomaniacal sailors.

Shoe: *I have not seen your picture books. I'm guessing that the first two, **Handel, Who Knew What He Liked** and **Strange Mr. Satie**, spring from your musical interest?*

MT: Yes, both of these books are picture-book biographies of composers. Kevin Hawkes did the illustrations for the Handel book, and Petra Mathers did the illustrations for the Satie book. Both illustrators did an astounding amount of research for these pictures. In Petra's illustrations for **Mr. Satie**, for example, there are all these portraits of Parisian personalities who knew Satie. It was amazing to work with both of these people.

Shoe: *What are the subjects of the next two?*

MT: **The Serpent Came to Gloucester** is a nonfiction (!) book about the Great Sea Serpent Sighting of 1817. **Me, All Alone, at the End of the World** is a fantasy picture book about a boy who lives by the planet's edge, and how a luxury resort moves in to take advantage of the three-hour sunsets. It looks like they will both be published in 2005.

Shoe: *You have published short stories for adults in several prestigious journals, and also are the fiction editor for a journal of experimental writing called **3rd bed** (<http://www.3rdbed.com>). What qualifies as experimental writing in this day and age?*

MT: **3rd bed** is both a print and an electronic journal. Our purpose is to publish surreal and absurdist literature that might not be published by the standard literary journals. A lot of our contributors are younger people whose voices wouldn't otherwise be heard. **3rd bed** also has begun to publish paperback books—classics of experimentation from the '70s and '80s that have gone out of print. The title of the journal is taken



from Plato. He describes how there are three types of beds. The first bed is the ideal form of the bed, made by the gods. The second bed is made by the carpenter, in imitation of the ideal bed. The third bed is the bed drawn by the artist.

And according to Goldilocks, the third bed is always just right.

Shoe: *I enjoyed reading your short stories, especially A Brief Guide to the Ghosts of Great Britain in **Open Your Eyes**, which seems as if it could be quite autobiographical, at least in tenor?*

MT: It is entirely autobiographical!

Shoe: *Ah, what a wonderful starting point for our next interview! But to conclude this one, could you tell me what it is like teaching others how to write?*

MT: Teaching keeps you honest. You can't tell a student to cut something for the good of the book and then not force yourself to confront that possibility in your own work. Often, in discussing student work, I'll realize something about my own novel. It's extremely helpful.

I've been teaching Writing for Children and Young Adults at the graduate level at Vermont College for about four years now. The faculty is wonderful—I've learned so much from them myself in my time working there. The students are incredibly impressive. In some cases, they've published more than I have! On the other hand, sometimes students come into the program quite inexperienced and leave confident of their own voice, which is also very exciting. The whole experience is quite inspiring for all of us.

Shoe: *And your imaginative writing will continue to inspire and challenge teen readers. Thanks, Tobin.*



Books Discussed

NOVELS

Thirsty. Candlewick, 2003, ©1997 (hardcover O.P.). 256p. \$6.99 Trade pb. 0-7636-2014-9.

Burger Wuss. Candlewick, 1999. 208p. \$16.99. 0-7636-0680-4. \$6.99 Trade pb. 0-7636-1567-6. **VOYA** December 1999.

Feed. Candlewick, 2002. 288p. \$16.99. 0-7636-1726-1. \$7.99 Trade pb. 0-7636-2259-1. **VOYA** December 2002.

The Game of Sunken Places. Scholastic, 2004. 272p. \$16.95. 0-439-41660-4. \$5.99 Trade pb. 0-439-41661-2. **VOYA** June 2004.

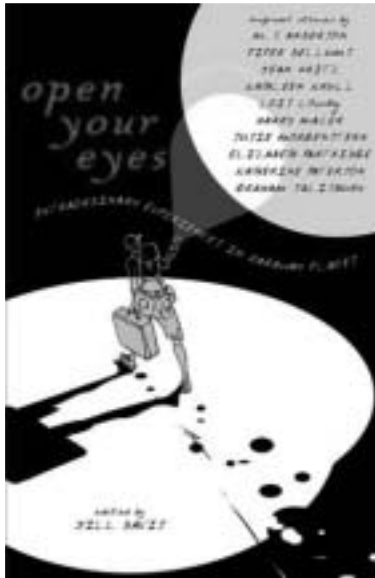
SHORT STORIES FOR TEENS

Barcarole for Paper and Bones in **Shelf Life: Stories by the Book.** Gary Paulsen, Ed. Simon & Schuster, 2003. 192p. \$16.95. 0-689-84180-9. **VOYA** August 2003.

A Brief Guide to the Ghosts of Great Britain in **Open Your Eyes: Extraordinary Experiences in Faraway Places.** Jill Davis, Ed. Viking, 2003. 240p. \$16.99. 0-670-03616-1. **VOYA** April 2004.

The Mud and Fever Dialogues in **Sixteen: Stories About That Sweet and Bitter Birthday.** Megan McCafferty, Ed. Three Rivers Press/Crown, 2004. 304p. \$10.95 Trade pb. 1-4000-5270-X.

Angel's Food in **Twice Told.** Dutton, forthcoming.



PICTURE BOOKS

Handel, Who Knew What He Liked. Candlewick, 2001. 48p. \$16.99. 0-7636-1046-1.

Strange Mr. Satie. Viking, 2003. 48p. \$16.99. 0-670-03637-4.

The Serpent Came to Gloucester. Candlewick, forthcoming.

Me, All Alone, at the End of the World. Candlewick, forthcoming.

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