



KEVIN CLARK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Local author John Saul, photographed at his home in Seattle Sept. 29, 2023. Saul has written over 30 horror novels and received the Horror Writers Association Lifetime Achievement Award in June.

## Meet the horror writer who doesn't like horror

### BOOKS

By JORDAN SNOWDEN - Special to The Seattle Times

Halloween may be right around the corner, but horror writer and longtime Seattle resident John Saul had cause for a spooky celebration this summer.

Saul received a Horror Writers Association Lifetime Achievement Award — the HWA's most prestigious award and an “acknowledgment of superior achievement in an entire career.” Over the course of a little over three decades, Saul, who is now retired, wrote nearly 40 books.

But ask him what he owes his success to, and there's a good chance he'll chalk it up to timing and

circumstance. Saul happened to know the right people at the right time at the start of the horror genre's paperback boom in the late '70s, rocketing his debut novel, "Suffer the Children," to The New York Times bestseller list.

But there's undoubtedly more to Saul's longstanding success and mastery of the genre. He has a knack for crafting goose bumps-inducing stories with an emphasis on plot. Instead of jump scare after jump scare, Saul's novels aim to take readers on an eerie journey during which empathy is built for the characters, and evil and mystic ongoings don't just happen without reason.

In the days when citizens band radio, a two-way radio system, was big, a young, unpublished Saul had an idea: a thriller involving CB radio and truckers. The story "wrote itself along, and I had written half a manuscript," Saul said.

With a new thriller concept in hand, Saul reconnected with his past agent, Jane Rotrosen, during a trip to New York City.

"I didn't have my manuscript with me, but we talked for an hour or so," Saul recalled, "and at the end, she said, 'You know, you're reasonably presentable and fairly well-spoken, and I like that you have two four-letter words as a name that we can put in very big type on the front of a paperback book. That makes it very promotable.'"

Upon returning home, Saul sent her his trucker manuscript. Rotrosen subsequently sent it to her best friend in publishing, Linda Grey, senior editor at Dell, a publisher that's since been consolidated into Penguin Random House. Grey liked his writing but already had a CB radio trucker thriller in the works from another author. Instead, Grey asked Rotrosen if Saul could write to compete with this guy, Stephen King.

"[Rotrosen] explained that King was a new author with a book called 'Carrie' that was doing very well," Saul said.

So Saul and his now husband, Mike, went to the supermarket to check out the book racks. They didn't buy any, but read the backs to see "what they were all about."

"We thought, 'Hm, they're basically children in jeopardy with some kind of supernatural possibility,'" Saul said.

Thus, "Suffer the Children" was born, an atmospheric novel set in a coastal New England town where children go missing and a curse plagues the young protagonist's family.

Then, as Saul put it, things got weird. Dell immediately wanted an outline. He wrote one within a week, and by the end of November 1976, he got a call from Rotrosen asking him if he was sitting down. "I was so naive that I didn't know how unique this whole thing was," Saul recalled. "That I was not only getting

a response to my manuscript but in less than six weeks.”

The catch was that Dell needed the manuscript by early January.

They wanted to publish “Suffer the Children” as a lead title in the summer of 1977. That gave Saul about a month to write the entire book. “I had always been able to write a term paper the night before it was due, this would just be a series of term papers every day,” Saul remembered thinking.

When Grey acquired Saul’s book at Dell, she was on a mission to take an unknown author with their first novel and put it on The New York Times bestseller list in paperback.

“She wanted to prove to the industry that paperback publishing was respectable,” Saul said.

Grey chose his book, backed it with marketing tools like the first ever TV advertising campaign for a novel, and the rest was history, Saul said.

“My story is unique ... For me, it was magic,” he said. “And Linda Grey remained my editor for the rest of her career.”

Grey and Saul discovered that the faster he wrote, the better he wrote. “If it was taking me a long time to write, then there was going to be a problem,” Saul said. For the first two decades of his career, Saul released a new book almost every year.

While he stayed in the thriller genre, Saul cut down on gore and violence and pivoted to novels with a more psychological bent. Too many kids were reading his work.

“I was like, well, if they’re gonna read it, I have to write more responsibly,” Saul said. Plus, if he was being honest, he wasn’t a huge fan of the genre himself.

“I couldn’t sit through the movie ‘The Exorcist,’ I had to go stand in the lobby,” he said. He often scared himself with his own writing. But that’s how he knew it would work.

“When writing ‘Suffer the Children,’ I was still living in Oshkosh, Wis. It was snowing outside, and I was writing a particularly scary scene,” Saul recalled. “I knew perfectly well that it was a red herring.

At the end, nothing was going to happen at all. But I kept writing along, and all of a sudden, a squirrel jumped up on the window sill. I screamed, leaped out of my chair and left the room. That helped a lot, because my theory was if it scared me, it would scare the reader.

So I always kept that in mind.”

Saul may not have liked reading or watching horror/thrillers, but he sure knows how to write them, and

his knowledge coincided with the building mass market publishing wave in the '80s and early '90s.

"I always felt like I was fortunate in the fact that I didn't really need bookstores at all," Saul said. "As long as I had supermarkets, liquor stores, airports and drugstores, I was fine. At the height of mass market, every cashier had a small rack of paperback books right there for impulse buys."

Now 10 years retired, Saul is just happy to be remembered. In response to his recent Lifetime Achievement Award, Saul said, "It's always nice to be recognized as having some achievement and skill. I was very honored. And quite frankly, it was a total surprise because I figured they probably forgot all about me."

Jordan Snowden: [jordan.alif.snowden@gmail.com](mailto:jordan.alif.snowden@gmail.com); on Twitter: @snowden\_jordan. Jordan Snowden is a freelance writer based in Pittsburgh whose work has been published in Apartment Therapy, Pittsburgh City Paper, Wear Your Voice and elsewhere.

She also runs @jord\_reads\_books, a book-focused Instagram account where she connects with other bookworms.