

An Interview with William L. Biersach

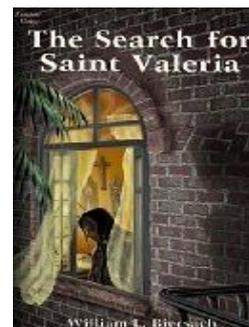
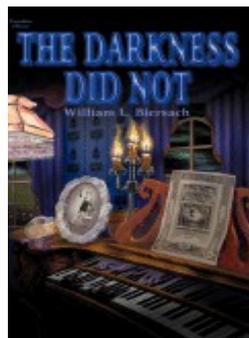
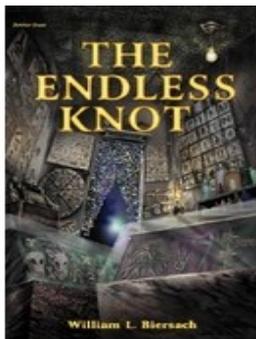
August, 2010 Featured Author
at

Time with Tannia

(<http://timewithtannia.tripod.com>)

By:

Tannia E. Ortiz-Lopés



1. Tell us about yourself.

Contact: <www.tumblrhouse.com>

Ah, the hardest question first. Allow me to dodge the obvious by telling you about my father. One day I entered his study, the book-lined sanctuary in which he spent hours with smoldering pipe in hand pouring over volumes of history, philosophy, and theology. I was twelve at the time, and amidst the rows of paperbacks I perused at Vroman's Bookstore, I had come upon a paperback edition of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. I was certainly aware of the book. No one who lapped up science fiction and fantasy as I did could be unaware of the theory of evolution. It provided the fabric of so many fantastic universes concocted by so many imaginative minds. But I had a question, and Dad was the wisest man I knew. And so I put it to him: "This thing called evolution. Is it true?"

My father could have given me a one-syllable answer, and he could have easily backed it up with an hour of explanation. But he knew me too well. I didn't just want his answer. I wanted the answer. So, with his hand on my shoulder, he guided me to a whole bookcase devoted to the subject. "These should give you a grasp of the subject," he said, and

returned with relish to whatever he had been reading. Thus I began my quest. By the time I was fourteen, my dictionary (also supplied by Dad) frayed with use, I had read most of those books. Naturally I had come to the same conclusion he had withheld in favor of the joy of watching me digging out the answer for myself.

My mother, unlike my father, never went to college. Her life was perhaps defined most by her being born at the onset of the Great Depression. She taught me a great lesson in life when Dad fell under the debilitating shadow of cancer. She bravely took care of him for thirteen long, arduous, and unbelievably painful years. The morning he died she sat with his lifeless body for several hours, then woke me to say a Hail Mary for the repose of his soul.

Though they came from disparate backgrounds, the thing they shared, and which they generously revealed to me, each in their own way, was the Holy Catholic Faith. Mom is still going strong at eighty, and I am profoundly grateful that today she is one of my closest friends.

So, getting back to your question, I would say that I am a man who, at 56 years of age, wishes to apply my talents in my unique way to the proclamation of that splendid and all-encompassing Faith. The one thing that was glaringly absent from most of the works of fiction I devoured as a youth was any mention of the Catholic Religion. It was strange, really, admiring characters like Perry Mason and Archie Goodwin, but realizing with a sinking feeling that they never went to Mass on Sunday. The same was true of so many captains and explorers shooting around the universe in their spaceships. The religion founded by Jesus Christ just didn't seem to apply. You might say that I am attempting, in my peculiar way, to write stories for Catholics, young and old, populated by characters who not only believe in the Faith of Our Fathers, but who struggle to live it day by day. My heroes are not alabaster statues, but imperfect men and women striving to serve God as best they can in disruptive circumstances. If I have been at all successful, it is because my garden is flowered with such people, and they never cease to inspire me.

2. What aspects of Ray Bradbury's story "A Sound of Thunder" kindled in you the desire to become a writer?

It was Mrs. Salvati, my fifth grade English teacher, who read us a passage from Ray Bradbury's short story, "A Sound of Thunder"—specifically the description of the approach through the primeval jungle of a Tyrannosaurus Rex. She took each sentence apart to show us Mr. Bradbury's command of descriptive details, the use of participles, and such. I took this lesson very much to heart in my attempts at writing short stories of my own. Five years later, Fr. Enda, considered a tyrant and megalomaniac by my high school comrades, perceived my struggle with description and often made me read my essays aloud to the class, interjecting his comments, criticisms, and even an occasional compliment. It was grueling and arduous, but it confirmed that I was on the right track, and it went a long way toward girding myself against censure. He has since gone to God, but I owe him much.

Years later, I met Mr. Bradbury when he was signing copies of the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *The Martian Chronicles*. When I ventured to thank him for writing "A Sound of Thunder" he, having heard all this many times before, interrupted me saying, "Yes, yes, yes, I know: it changed your life and made you everything you are today." "Not precisely," I answered. "You taught me how to use participles, and I am forever grateful to you for that." "Oh," he said dreamily as he drew a spiral galaxy on the title page and scribbled his indistinguishable signature beneath it. "Yes, I did like that story."

3. Music composition, arrangements, and performance requires creativity, patience, and great imagination. Do you believe that your music background has enhanced your ability to create awesome fiction stories? Based on your experience, how do these disciplines interact with each other? What set them apart?

As I learned from Frederick Lesemann, my musical mentor in college, all art seeks to make order out of the chaos of raw materials. The musician does so with pitched sound events (notes) of varying lengths arranged in the framework of time. The painter works with color and texture on a two-dimensional surface to produce distance, perspective, and mood. The writer imparts his vision with the imagery and power of words. I dabble in all three, actually, and I find that a burst of inspiration in one, say music, invariably sparks a similar outburst in the other two. I guess I'm wired that way.

Ideas are a mystery. Every honest creative person I know admits that they have no notion where their ideas come from; why a glimpse of some innocuous object on the sidewalk sparks a plot for a story; how a persnickety character once committed to paper suddenly begins arguing with them as to just what they would do in such a situation. The thing every artist fears is the cessation of these very ideas—and dry up they do all too often. Starting an artistic project, be it a poem or a symphony, inevitably involves the risk that the spigot will seize three quarters of the way through. This is why artists tend to be twitchy. Those who do not live under this particular shadow have a hard time understanding it, but anyone committed to creativity knows only too well.

One thing that music has taught me which easily translates to writing: when you come to such a juncture, don't stop—improvise!

4. The Endless Knot was your first published book, but not the first one you wrote. What is your rule of thumb to determine the fate of your manuscripts? File 13, recycling paper or publishing? For the benefit of new writers, what is your writing formula?

The Endless Knot was my fifth or sixth book, depending on my loose definition of what constitutes a finished work. My first, written in the sixth grade as a means of practicing typing, was horrible. My second and third also, embarrassingly so. While I may wish today that I had kept those manuscripts for later review, they all met their end in the dumpster. One has to dig through coal to get to a diamond, and even that just looks like a crusty mothball until it is chipped into its final form. Many are the times I have started a chapter knowing that it was going to be deleted by evening. But if I didn't go through the process, I wouldn't try again the next day and make it work. This is how I look back on those failed novels. They were just part of the process. It wasn't until I typed THE END on the last page of The Endless Knot that I said to myself, "There! I have finally written a good book!"

The one exception to all that I have just said came in the form of The Search for Saint Valeria. After a dry, unproductive period, I sat down one day at the laptop and started typing with no hope at all that anything would come of the effort. Eleven days later I typed THE END. The rewrite, which for me is usually as arduous as the first attempt, proved miraculous. A word here, an indentation there. God was kind. For one brief moment I knew what it was like to be Rex Stout. But that was a once-in-a-lifetime gift. It hasn't happened since, and I doubt it ever will again.

I have no writing formula of which I am aware. For the benefit of new writers I would say this: write with passion, write with clarity, and most importantly, write within your competence. In other words, write about that which you thoroughly and confidently know. Don't try to be J. R. R. Tolkien. That was his job. Another thing: don't take yourself too seriously. There are millions of writers out there who are probably better than you. Don't worry about it. If God made you to be a writer, it's because He wants you to say what you have to say.

My friend Charles A. Coulombe once told me that if you realize as you're writing that everything that ever happened to you seems to be distilling itself into this opus, then you're definitely on the right track. That is not to say everything is autobiographical—Heavens no!—but that you went through what you went through precisely to make this book possible.

I would also add that whatever you have to say, God could easily choose someone else to say it. So remain humble about your work. While you're working, don't ignore friends who need your help or advice, using your "great work" as an excuse to play the recluse. Make writing an integral part of your life, but don't play the flamboyant artist. Nobody with any sense really believes it.

5. Fr. Baptist is a witty and clever cop-turned-priest. Was this character inspired by a real person?

As I explained in more detail in the introduction to *The Search for Saint Valeria*, there was a real Fr. John Baptist who taught history at my high school. It was no secret that he was an alcoholic, and we all know how merciless adolescents can be to those in authority with chinks in their armor. But this brilliant but befuddled Capuchin did me a great favor when push came to shove. I was fifteen when my older brother, Jim, died at the age of nineteen. Fr. Baptist agreed to celebrate the Requiem in Latin at a time when this noble language had been purged from every Catholic liturgy or ceremony. He even wore black vestments, which by then had been popularly replaced with white. It was a courageous act on his part. I suspect that he endured flak from his fellow friars. But it was a profound gift. One I shall never forget. So, on an impulse as I wrote the first page of the manuscript which became *The Endless Knot*, I bequeathed his name to my principle character. That is as far as any similarity goes. The Fr. John Baptist in my stories is a complete fabrication. I have never met a priest quite like him.

6. Mr. Feeney, his sidekick gardener and assistant, is on a league of his own. He plays a vital role in your books. Is he your voice in the stories?

Some of my acquaintances insist that Martin and I are one and the same. My denials fall on deaf ears. Others have suggested that I was brilliant in creating him. To this I retort, "Hey! What about the profound things Fr. Baptist says? Didn't I come up with that as well?" Their deafness continues to be, well, deafening.

I admit that Martin and I are kindred spirits, having both been born on the Feast of St. Philip Neri, the Laughing Saint. I understand his problems with arthritis from my own experience, but I am quick to add that while he has the Bible memorized I still require the use of a concordance.

7. Millie, the cook, is one of my favorite characters. She exercises control over the rectory and inspires respect and, at times, fear to others. Her sense of humor and mannerisms are priceless. Who is truly Millie?

I never met the woman, but a priest once told me that he did when he was assigned to a parish in Van Nuys. "She was exactly like that," he insisted. "How did you know?" Another priest assured me that she resides in Palos Verdes. I think Millie must be an archetype of the perfect housekeeper for a devout priest. She keeps Fr. Baptist humble.

I have received emails from several ladies out there who enjoyed releasing their angst vicariously through Millie. I wonder if their husbands appreciate the favor.

8. Monsignor Havermeyer is a unique character. He is the good servant trapped in two worlds. Does he represent the awakening of the faith?

I wanted to portray growth in my characters. When we first meet Msgr. Havermeyer he wears sweatshirts and lazes his time away in an opulent parish. But after being disfigured in an electrical fire in which others were killed, he undergoes a change of direction. In the subsequent books we see his struggle to learn the Tridentine Mass, to re-embrace Catholic principles that he had discarded along the way. I like him a lot, and I especially like the tension between Martin and him. The monsignor isn't used to being pestered and prodded, and Martin doesn't know any other way. This ongoing sparring will blossom into something truly remarkable in the opus I'm currently working on.

9. The Tumbler Knights bring colour, honor, and eloquence speaking to your stories. How do they fit together with Fr. Baptist's idea of the Church today vs. the days of old?

As Fr. Baptist explains more than once and in various ways, the Knights of the Round Table in King Arthur's day began much the same way. Things needed to be done, and a group of young men were willing to try to do them. The Knights Tumbler are young men who strive to do the same. Castles and javelins are things of the past, so they use weapons available in the present. Their primary motivation: the defense and propagation of the Catholic Faith.

As you may know, these gentlemen became genuine knights in my second novel, *The Darkness Did Not*. It is my hope that young men out there, having read my stories, will be motivated to go and do likewise.

10. What do you considered to be the three main elements of writing an entertaining, profound, and marvelous story?

I'm afraid that I do not analyze my work in those terms. I leave it to my readers (and critics) to coax those sorts of concepts out of my stories (or deny their presence). I write what interests me, to be sure, and I usually write with a certain person in mind whom I wish to engross, convince, or amuse. As my manuscript thickens, I often go back and reread earlier chapters, and if I find myself in any way unsure or unconvinced, I plunge into another rewrite. In other words, I write to please myself—and I'm a hard man to please.

I think the main thing is to make characters believable. Nothing pleases me more than someone telling me (see above) that Millie reminds them of someone they know. Caricatures defy connection. Real people remind us of others we have encountered along

the way.

11. Your books' covers are very original and convey part of the story. Who choose them and how are they chosen?

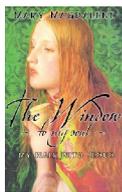
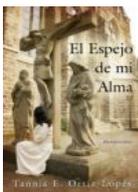
Bonnie Callahan is the artist hired by Tumblar House. Each cover is a scene from the book. She wisely reads my descriptions and asks me questions. I give her my ideas, usually accompanied by ratty pencil sketches, and then she does her magic. She seems to have visited the places I describe, for she makes them seem not only real but familiar.

12. How do you handle rejection letters?

Like Gene Wilder in *Young Frankenstein*: “with quiet dignity and grace.”

13. A word of advice to new writers.

(1) Take up the banjo. It's a lot more fun (especially if it's MIDlied like Bela Fleck's). (2) If you decide to be a writer, give it all you've got. Anything less will render the experience worthless. (3) Write what you know, not what you wish you knew. Readers perceive when you're guessing. (4) Set a goal each day, say eight pages, and stick to it. (Thus recommended Stephen King in his essay on writing, and he should know.) Likely most of what comes out will be garbage, but that's life. Throw the refuse away and keep on plugging. Stalls are hard events from which to recover—believe me, I know!—so don't allow yourself the opportunity. (5) Write only what you could hand to the Blessed Mother without apology or excuses.



Tannia E. Ortiz-Lopés, author of *The Window To My Soul; My Walk With Jesus* (2004 Tate Publishing;). *El Espejo de mi Alma* (2010 Pleasant Word) .

Author's websites: timewithtannia.tripod.com., www.shoutlife.com/tanniaortizlopes,
and www.myspace.com/tanniaortizlopes **Professional Stock Photography Page:**
<http://www.bigstockphoto.com/search/photographer/Boricua63/>

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READERS' COMMENTS:

Date Received: August 7, 2010 5:02:22 PM EST

Name: John Haines

Email Address:(optional) johnhaines2004@yahoo.com

Web site URL:(optional) <http://www.lulu.com/kids-stuff>

Where did you hear about this interview? Angel Editing's Facebook links

Comments: Am I so glad to have read this. I am humbled by the obvious faith on show, I like the writing advice: clear, concise, realistic. Thank you.

Date Received: August 23, 2010 9:33:24 AM EST

Name: Gerard Webster

Email Address:(optional) websterjerry@hotmail.com

Web site URL:(optional) <http://outskirtspress.com/insight>

Where did you hear about this interview? Tannia

Comments: I've been looking forward to reading this interview for a long time. From what Tannia told me, your humor is legend. I was not disappointed. Thank you for a great (and encouraging--for another writer) interview. Look forward to reading your novels.