

Aparna Mukhedkar interviews M Scott Craig

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M. Scott Craig, author of *Cacoethes*, was born in the Rio Grande near Del Rio, Texas, and broke a lot of piñatas while growing up. He is a helicopter pilot and currently in the Masters Publishing program through the University of Houston-Victoria. He lives in Central Missouri with his wife and still maintains that he is the archenemy of William Shakespeare. Learn more at www.mscottcraig.com

1. What inspired you to write the book? How did you come up with the title?

I learned of cacoethes as a word about three or four years ago, by chance, which is probably how most of us notice all great words, and it seemed tattooed to my brain for weeks. The word sounds beautiful as it is, but it stands for an insane passion or desire for something, anything. Imagine how more edible life would seem if we all took more risks and followed our passions, how ecstatic we might all be for living, for educational adventure, for our family and friends. Some people might get on our nerves, like the ones who already seem too invested with super-nauseating vigor, but, for the most part, we could all be kicking some serious butt in the world. That feeling we get when someone suddenly overwhelms our senses and we can't wait to feel inebriated by them again, and then again, and then we dream about that person and it feels like we have entered another atmosphere, how the world could leave us behind and we'd be just fine with that – yeah, that's cacoethes, and well worth it. The word summons internal fire, and let's face it, some of us need more fire.

My parents lived in a world of love for 44 years before my mother passed away recently of cancer. From the two of them, as they were a perfect example of great love, and from observing friends, I learned all the good things I wanted in a relationship. I also paid attention to my own thoughts, because admit it or not, we all want something great for ourselves. Instincts are there for a reason. We as a society don't take advantage of our instincts enough, and that's probably because we don't trust trusting others enough.

So love came about in a story I was writing, and then another, and in poetry came another free and open dimension of it, and then more, and then dreams, and before long, I started logrolling through the forest and cities picking up on all the lovely bits. I'd like to think I'm an optimist and a realist at the same time, but I know it's hard. Every union in the world is affected in some way by love, so it's out there, waiting for us, we're just afraid of fire sometimes.

2. The entire book to me is like a festival of senses. It is intriguing and also maddening, because at first you don't really understand what is going on. But, then it starts to make sense, as the short paragraphs are interlinked with ones that come later. Explain the process of how all the information from your mind was transcribed on paper.

That's tough to think about, huh? Imagine it in my head, because, when I was writing it, it came out the way it did all on its own. It made sense to me to scramble stories through the book

because, in real life, our thoughts in a relationship are not only scrambled, but they keep returning at other times, say three weeks or four months down the road. So it made absolute sense to me, but many people have said the same thing, that it takes just a little while to realize that all the stories work together.

When we date, we run questions through our minds like little microbursts. And that happens a lot. A month into a relationship we might start doubting what we're doing right or wrong. We may start thinking about the other person's background more frequently, and doubting what they're about. We interrupt ourselves and seem to destroy what the relationship is built on to see if the foundation is strong enough to continue onward. It's a self-defense mechanism most likely. I think most of us do it. Then after that interruption is out of the way, everyone goes back to feeling giddy or loving or lustful or crazy or renewed, and a lot of the early feelings in the relationship return to be used again. Or many relationships are built on the same arguments, so those same feelings keep popping up. Therefore, the book is organized in a manner so that all these feelings come together at different intervals throughout the book.

3. How did you arrive at the titles of each of the short paragraphs?

I like titles. I think they can offer a lot of the story before the story ever begins. How the title flows usually tells me how a story will flow. Same for poetry.

I wrote all the poetry and fiction with a theme in mind, but individually. The titles didn't have to relate to each other, just the works themselves since they're themed together, but I spend a great deal of time creating a title that I think perfectly fits whatever words it prefaces. One of my wife's favorite pieces is "Like To See You..." and that was a title that came naturally from the words in the poem. One of her favorite short stories in the book, "A Color The Sun Puts On A Woman's Skin," came from many drafts. That was a story I edited several times, and after each revision, I had a new title, or a variation of the final result. I think the title makes wonderful sense after you read the piece, but not at the beginning, or even halfway into it. You should see some of the titles in the third book, *Inhale*.

4. The poems are absolutely brilliant! They are sensual, passionate, soul stirring and funny at times. What was the process of incorporating the poems into the book?

Thank you, I appreciate that. That comes from recognizing that love and sensuality can be funny, through awkwardness or curiosity, and what we think about even when we're in the middle of love. It's not always love we're thinking of.

Regarding placing poetry in the book, it came down to me considering the 'why vs. why not?' 'Why not' obviously won out, because the poetry enhanced the entire book's theme just as well as the fiction. Besides a few anthologies I've read, I can't really name you any books out there that have a collection of fiction and poetry mixed together except for a few that are discussing their own work or someone else's. I understand it's hard to mix fiction and non-fiction, but both

fiction and poetry can represent so many ideas, and can offer so much freedom and imagination. Both forms of expression can take you anywhere, everywhere, and in between.

A lot of my poetry met the theme of *Cacoethes* and the others as well, and...why not? I know fiction and poetry sections are split in bookstores, but there are plenty of men and women who have written in both styles. I guess if I was smart I'd write separate books so that my work could be represented on different aisles to match various tastes, but bookstores are already supposed to be that smart for us. They'll know what to do.

Plus I feel the combination of poetry and fiction somewhat symbolizes the contrast between two people trying fit their worlds together. Two people are naturally going to have varying solutions and plans and ideas, and things can occasionally get confusing. Going into the speed of one story, say "It Happened So Fast," into the poetry that follows it, and actually from that which precedes it, signifies the conflict of rhythm that two people trying to form a relationship often endure. I think rhythm is one of the least considered factors in what makes two people exist in beauty.

5. What is *Cacoethes* attempting to convey besides what I believe to be this fascinating journey into the physical, mental and emotional depths of human frailties and intense passion?

Actually, you just said it quite well yourself.

Frailty and passion cover the subject well. We all feel it, whether we admit it or not. I wrote the book essentially because that's the mood I was in, but maybe I think the words inside the book can help improve one's senses? I don't know. Wouldn't it be nice to say I wrote the book that changed the world? I don't think I did it with *Cacoethes*, but maybe one day. This book is for men and women of all ages, all adult ages anyway. It's not a self-help book, or an instruction manual. It's intelligent pleasure reading. I just want people to use their senses and explore people better. If the world isn't about survival, it's about love and recognition.

6. How long did it take you to complete this book?

I was traveling around northern California in the summer of '09 and started a few sprinkles of this book. Just some words as I sat along rivers and dams. I picked them back up in January of 2010 and started something new that I wasn't aware I was doing. I had been writing off and on for years without any true reason or identification, just getting ideas down I guess, but for some reason, when I picked it back up my voice had changed. I would wake up on some mornings and put two short stories down in a few hours, come back the next night and read them, and change very little. Some of the poetry I wrote long ago and I rewrote it simply to clean it up a little, but mostly everything for *Cacoethes*, and the two collections that follow, I wrote in 2010, from nearly the first day of the year to the last. It was printing material out and my wife making me look at book sizing that proved to me I had material for more than one book. I was writing on a full page and not considering that the book size of 5.25x8 inches instantly tripled the amount of

material I had. And it just kept coming out. It still is. It's like blood coming out of a tiny wound that won't coagulate.

7. You were born and raised in the Rio Grande and have lived all over the country. What elements of your surroundings are represented in the pages of *Cacoethes*? The descriptions and imagery particularly in the poems are stunning!

Probably more than I realize. My memory is quite potent. I remember certain bookshelves in Savannah libraries, homeless people living in Cadillacs in downtown Los Angeles, snow at the top of the tower I worked in Chicago and the girl in the blue skirt that stood at the window with me who I never saw again. I remember what books I read on what subways in which cities, though I only read underground. I remember random dogs and cricket infestations around Bakersfield and some random wild-haired gent who had an envelope of songs he wanted me to carry to Nashville, whether I lived there or not. I remember our Hungarian tour-guide on Cheyenne Mountain and that my horse was a follower, not a leader. Same for the horse that threw me in a thornbush in Palo Duro Canyon after sitting in bat guano in a cave we had a hard time getting out of. The ants there were as big as my thumbnail.

I could go on, but looking back on this list and your curious he-can't-be-serious-about-the-ants look, I'll just admit that a lot of my work is somewhat biographical. Writers never intend it to be, but it mostly always is. But, for me, I mean that in the sense of small things only. I don't believe I've written more than two or three stories total that are based on an actual event. I just mean the small things. No matter a person's depth of imagination, writer's still write to some extent, maybe even to a great extent, about what we know, even if it's just a small thing someone said in real life that inspired something in a story, or a backdrop, or a tree limb we saw on a trip, anything like that. Let real life be a basis, and writing will come endlessly.

8. What authors were you most influenced by?

That's always been an interesting question, one I'm not sure I have an answer for. There are many a many great writers out there who I love to read, but none that I like entirely. Is that mean? That's natural, just as I wouldn't expect anyone to like every little thing I write in my life. Lawrence and Joyce and Hemingway have some beautiful pages, filled with lyrical silk, but they have some other works I wouldn't care to read to my dog after dinner. David James Duncan and Donna Tartt each have a novel I simply get lost in and finish in a very short time because their characters and settings are so defined and contagious, but none of their other works really compel me to take a shower. Chekhov, Shepard, Williams, they can all write scripts, fiction, and verse that makes me want to play naked in sugar and cinnamon, and some other work that makes me feel like volunteering to get bucked off a horse. Reading Neruda to my wife before bed causes luscious moments, while reading Neruda to my wife outside is like instant citronella. The bugs won't come near us. Borges and Wilde and Dubus provide such eloquent dialogue and comfort, but I can only take them in short doses or I'll break out in a lovely rash.

So, all in all, the names I just mentioned are the ones that cause the most ignition inside me, more than any other I suppose. Perhaps I have literary issues. But there are many others too, such as Chandler, McMurtry, Hammett, and Miller. I loved a lot of the earlier work of King and Clancy. I read just as much about math and science as anything else these days, and biographies. Did I even answer the question?

9. What did the experience of writing this book teach you about yourself?

Perhaps that I'm just as inquisitive and curious and full of desire as a man as I would be if I were a woman, which means I'm probably just wanting and searching in general. I've been told by readers that I write equally well from a woman's point of view as that of a man's, and the vignettes I write are rather open-minded for the women as well as the men.

I used to think I'd never make the age of 40. Not necessarily because I was living in a den of drugs and vamps and recklessness, but because I participate in a lot of activities that are not always thought out. Someone says let's go skydiving, I'll say ok. Someone mentions diving off the coast with sharks, I won't hesitate. I fly helicopters, I hang from and jump off 80 ft. cliff walls (into water of course). I'm not bragging, and all of these activities are at least somewhat done carefully, it's just that I figured my lifestyle would catch up to me accidentally one day. I won't drag race or bungee jump because I just don't trust those things, no matter what the stats say.

But now I'm married. I have to live until I'm 40. 50 and 75 and 95 too. If I'm on machines at some point, I think she'd understand, but otherwise, we plan on going down many tree-blossomed avenues together. My wife is no one I could have imagined, only someone I could have hoped for. Luckily, she thinks I'm from another planet. So now, understanding a woman like her, I think I understand the character of a woman better and can sympathize with certain life lessons from a woman's point of view. I could write women before, but now I have a better edge.

10. Tell us about your upcoming projects. Will your other books be written in the same style as *Cacoethes*?

Yes, *Thoughtica* and *Inhale* will both be out, hopefully and planned, by the end of 2011. As the material for all three bundled high into the sky, I tried to recognize how the pieces could be organized. It worked its way out rather well. *Cacoethes* is a themed compilation, with all the work, poetry and fiction, arranged in an order from a relationship's beginning until the very end, with all the little highs and lows and interruptions in between. So it has a bit of it all, but mostly it's an emotional ride.

Thoughtica follows the same formula, only the poetry and fiction contained in this volume are arranged to make your brain suffer surrender. *Thoughtica* pertains more to the physical aspect between people, albeit of the intelligent nature. It's not dirt and smut. It's stimuli for the brain. And then comes *Inhale*, which is primarily what's left: the grit. Not every bit of love can end happily. In fact, probably 98% of all relationships end with separation. Think about all the people

you've dated, even just once, and then magnify that by the world's population, versus the average amount of times a person gets married (or devoted without marriage), which we'll say in this day and age is probably around 1.4 times. It can't be just an average of 1 time anymore, can it? So between the three we have love, lust, and despair, with all the adjectives and adverbs and delightful bullshit that can be adjacent to all three. Love can be a massacre, or it can be brilliant. It's rarely both.

Coming up in 2012 is my first novel, *Conscious*, a story set against the Italian backdrop of World War II. Does that sound familiar? I hope not. I don't believe in rehashing or reinventing old stories.

11. What is the best advice you can give to aspiring writers?

In addition to reading tirelessly, if for no other reason than to find out what you don't like to read, and to place yourself in an environment conducive to writing, and to hang out with people who are smarter than you, or those who are at least trying to improve your intelligence, my advice would probably be to work for yourself. I could easily say when I wake up tomorrow that the hot market is teenage vampires and magicians. I don't know a damn thing about teenage vampires and magicians, or adult ones even. I don't really want to write about that subject, no matter how much money that market seems to be offering. In fact, I wouldn't mind writing about flawed vampires and werewolves and their demise just to mess with the laws of fantasy, but in 2012, no one would probably buy the book. Maybe in 2018. I have several children's stories in the mix, but none that are follow mainstream subject material. That they aren't mainstream isn't the reason why I haven't finished them. I'm not close to finishing them because those books aren't my main focus at the moment.

This is what's key for me. As I said before, it wasn't until the start of 2010, when I started rewriting some of my older work, that I found the voice with which I wanted to write. Now I have it, and the voice matches the material of these books and the next several books I have ready to publish. I have several books lined up after that. It's not a problem of ideas for me, it's a ratio issue. Writing all day long I still couldn't keep up with my ideas. I just can't write as fast as my mind is producing the material. Now in five years, or maybe ten, my voice might change, like mid-life puberty I guess. I might be ready then to take on these children's books I have half-written and finish them into something I'm extremely happy about. But at the moment, my mind isn't organized for that type of fiction.

We have to follow our voice and our strengths, and especially when we feel they're changing. Our voice is the verbalization of our mind at work, spoken or written. Our strengths serve our voice, so why betray ourselves? We should write what's comfortable, not to what the market says we should be comfortable with, otherwise we'll always be staying up late at night thinking that what I really want to be working on is *this*, yet I'm actually working on this. Isn't that like most of life? Why like her, when I could love *her*?

My degree was in acting. My parents advised me to at least minor in something else, but at the time I knew 100% I was going to be an actor, and that's exactly what I did for ten years. I was

fortunate to work on stages all over the country, but I was doing a show in Chicago, a five-week run, and during the third week, sitting backstage at intermission, a wall of bricks and plaster fell on me, and I realized I was done with acting. There just wasn't any challenge in it for me anymore. I wasn't the perfect actor by any means, but the thrill of the challenge of acting had somehow been stripped away, and that was the last show I ever did. A couple of times shortly after that I thought about it, but I didn't feel it strong enough to pursue a return. Instead I learned to fly, and continued to think of character origins rather than how to act characters out. That's probably how I came to be an author. It was my travel through the world of performance that brought about my real desire to create the story instead.

My voice in college gave me the opportunity to act, and then it changed. I had to follow it.