

Anthony Y. Wai

Interview with R.L. Stine

"Reader beware – you're in for a scare!" was a warning familiar to many American youngsters during the 1990s. The message was emblazoned on the back covers of a certain book series that haunted shelves since its inception. Instead of staying away, readers embraced *Goosebumps*. Many children and young adults miraculously ignored their television sets and discovered a love of reading for the first time. It turned it into a literary phenomenon that spread across the world, with translated editions in at least thirty-two different languages.

All the credit goes to Robert Lawrence Stine, who is the author of *Goosebumps* and other literary series like *Fear Street* and *The Nightmare Room*. Over 300 million copies have been sold around the globe, convincing national newspaper USA Today to name him as America's top selling author in three consecutive years. His works have inspired several television series and amusement park attractions. He has also achieved critical acclaim: the Free Public Library of Philadelphia honored him with the 2002 Champion of Reading Award. Amongst his many honors, Stine most recently won the Thriller Writers of America's 2007 Silver Bullet Award.

To this day, bookstores continue to carry his works and find them in constant demand. Despite his already-enduring success, R.L. Stine has decided to resurrect *Goosebumps* for a new generation. On April 22, 2008, he discussed the new *Goosebumps Horrorland* series with former US First Lady (and retired teacher) Laura Bush on television's Today Show, as an ongoing effort to promote reading to young people. I had the honor of talking to the "Master of Scare-amonies" himself on June 24, 2008. While the experience was hardly frightening, we managed to have a few good laughs about his latest work, the writing craft, and Ohio roller coasters.

AYW: You've been pretty busy, with *Goosebumps* now making a comeback.

RLS: Yes, it's a lot harder on me. It's now two stories in one book instead of one.

AYW: Yeah, I've heard about that. The new *Goosebumps* is called *Goosebumps Horrorland*. So what's different about this one, besides the two stories?

RLS: What's different is that you have a complete *Goosebumps* story at the front of the book, with a lot of the old villains: Slappy the Evil Dummy, the

Haunted Mask, and Monster Blood. And there are a lot of new villains and stories as well. And then...just when you think it's safe to close the book: there's the second story, which is continuing. It's a twelve-part serial that continues from book to book and takes place in Horrorland amusement park, the scariest place on Earth. These kids from the first part of the book (the first story), find themselves invited to Horrorland as special guests. Then they find out that they've been invited there for a reason. It's a lot scarier than they thought it would be.

AYW: Is this going to be exactly like the Horrorlands from the past, or is this a new revision of it?

RLS: Well, it's a revision. The whole Horrorland has been redone. Some of the old attractions are there, and some of the old settings are there. But it's a whole new story. And these kids: every book, new kids join them from the first story. So pretty soon there's a big group of kids, they're in major trouble, and they don't know why.

AYW: So they all band together eventually?

RLS: Yes, they get together right from the start. They're like special guests. The first two arrive in the first book, then two more arrive. And then the story keeps continuing and getting scarier.

AYW: That's a very interesting concept you have, separating the two character arcs into two standalone stories within one book.

RLS: Well, no one has ever tried to do a serial for kids before. And I thought: 'Well, if we're going to do *Goosebumps* again...' And I wrote eighty-seven of them! [Laughs]

AYW: That is quite a lot.

RLS: I wrote eighty-seven of them! I thought that was enough, and I did other stuff for eight years. I thought: 'Well, if we're going to go back to it, we have to try something different. If we do it with twelve tied-in stories, something no one's really tried for kids, let's see what happens.'

AYW: Why did you decide to do the format of telling it separately, instead of completely weaving the narrative together into one story?

RLS: I thought, for one thing, it would seem like readers would be getting more. It would seem like they're getting something different, and it's a real challenge. I've never done anything that continues on for twelve books! It's a real challenge for me.

AYW: How did you decide to resurrect the classic *Goosebumps* series, and why are you doing it now?

RLS: Actually, Scholastic called me and it's been eight years. Now during all that time, half my mail has been kids saying: 'When are you going to do new *Goosebumps*?' Eight years later, there's a whole new generation of kids. And all they said in the message boards, my website RLStine.com, are 'We love *Goosebumps*!' And kids kept following it, even though there were no new ones. So I always think it's a pretty good idea to listen to kids. They were still asking for

it, and I thought: 'Well, let's try to do a new one.'

AYW: This generation is definitely different from the past. So had you had to change your writing in any ways to help relate more to today's kids?

RLS: You know, kids don't really change. I've always thought the original *Goosebumps* books could be written in say the '50s or the '60s. Kids are still scared of exactly the same thing: of the dark, afraid of something lurking in the closet, or lurking under the bed. You know, that kind of thing. That doesn't change at all; kids pretty much stay the same. The change is in the technology. When we first started doing *Goosebumps* in '92, kids weren't walking around with cell phones, for example. So that's one thing. We have to try to keep up with the technology: laptops, things kids use, and computer games they play. Now, I don't want to do too much of that because then it dates your book. And all the technology from today, with all the kids doing this, and typing on that. Then five years later of course, it would be totally out of date! So you have to be very careful and do it with real talent.

AYW: Speaking of the timelessness that you talk about, I went on your website and noticed "Rainy Night Theatre." I like the classic retro noir feel to it, like back when they had those radio plays.

RLS: Yeah!

AYW: Is that something you intentionally did to try to bring back the old art form?

RLS: Right! We did five of them. We've moved them all to AudibleKids.com. My son and I work on those; he's a music and sound producer. I write the scripts for them, and then he hires the actors and writes the music. It's like doing old-time radio, but kids of course don't know. They think it's something new because it's online. We're working on one that I hope to have up there in a week or two: a fifteen minute scary drama. And we've had great success.

AYW: And it definitely gives them a lot more room for their imagination. I mean not exactly as much as a book, but much better than just staring at a TV screen.

RLS: I love radio just for that reason. You have to have all the pictures in your head.

AYW: I also had a chance to check out the *Goosebumps* Horrorland website. It's supposed to complement the storyline that's in the books?

RLS: Yes. When kids read the Horrorland part of the book and the adventures that are going on, they can go to the website. As you saw when you went there, they can actually go into Horrorland. They can go in and experience the park. This is something we couldn't do back when we started *Goosebumps*. Nobody had websites like this back in the early '90s. They can play all the games, and they can take the rides, and also there are all kinds of clues all throughout the website as to what's really going on in the story in the book.

AYW: With all these mediums in mind, do you now write your material with the intention of having them used for a specific medium?

RLS: No. You know, I just write the stories. I'm interested in writing really good, scary, tricky, funny stories. With a lot of twists and a lot of turns. My main goal is always to get kids reading. That's what I'm most proud of: all the millions of kids that learned to read and have gotten into reading because of *Goosebumps*. So I keep the books very easy to read, very short chapters, and just try to encourage them. There's so many ways kids can entertain themselves these days, and I just want to say: 'Look, you can pick up a book! It's very entertaining! It's a lot of fun. Have a great time just reading a book!' That's really what my whole career is about.

AYW: Of course, your books are always targeted toward young kids and teen audiences. And you did start writing back when you were a young adult. And of course, as you get older we have different perspectives on things and your personality might change a little bit. Do you find that makes it more challenging for you to continue writing for kids these days?

RLS: Well, it's always been challenging. The real challenge is to try to keep up with kids. I have to keep up with their culture and pop culture. I do a lot of school visits, work very hard at making the kids sound the way kids talk today, checking out what they wear, making sure the kids are very real. I think it's very important in *Goosebumps* and in the other books I do, that the kids have to be very real. They have to be believable, mainly because the plots are so absurd. The plots are ridiculous! So you have to have something to hold on to, and I think it has to be the characters.

AYW: So how do you conduct your research to make sure the characters are authentic? Do you actually baby-sit kids or you just go to schools?

RLS: I do baby-sit, I love doing it. I have lots of nieces and nephews that are the right age. And when I started *Goosebumps*, my son was the right age. So I spent a lot of time spying on him and his friends, and listening to them talking about what they were into and what kind of music they liked. What else they read and that kind of thing. What kinds of video games they played, to stay current.

AYW: Was your son a big fan of your books back then?

RLS: Not at all. My son's claim to fame is that he never read one. Isn't that horrible?

AYW: I think he's missing out!

RLS: [Laughs] Maybe he has read them since then; he's twenty-eight now. So he's had time to read them. But no, this is his way to make dad nuts. He did not read any of the books.

He bragged about it! Horrible! He would take them in for his friends; he would bring them in to school, pass them out, and everything. He would tell me to put his friends' names in them. I think maybe he sold parts in *Goosebumps*. You know, they paid him like ten bucks.

AYW: Wow. So where can we find cameos like this?

RLS: I made him a character in a *Fear Street* book. He never even read that

one! Terrible! If you're an author, your kid is basically going to be a non-reader. Such an easy way to get dad.

AYW: Do you ever feel awkward when you have to read your own work in public?

RLS: No, I don't read too much. I have a talk that I do with kids. I love getting out and talking at assemblies, schools, and making those sort of appearances. What I usually do is write a ghost story with the kids, like this interactive thing where they help me write a ghost story. And then I tell them some stories, and I tell a scary story. Sometimes I read. I don't read that often. If I'm in front of an audience, I like to talk to them rather than read to them.

AYW: How did your hometown growing up influence your work? Did the people you grew up with or local legends you heard get incorporated in your writing? Or did you start getting really inspired when you went to New York after college?

RLS: Well, I think I was inspired by the things I've read. By Ray Bradbury, by Rod Serling of *The Twilight Zone*, and by the great horror comics that were around when I was a kid (*Tales From the Crypt* and *The Vault of Horror*). I loved all those comics and comics from *Mad Magazine*. Those were much bigger influences. Also all the funny stuff that I read.

I grew up in this little suburb of Columbus, Ohio, and that's sort of the setting of almost every *Goosebumps* book. I think back to my childhood, and what it looked like. It was a very fifties-type community, very pretty and quiet. Most of the stories take place in that kind of neighborhood, and I think that's probably the biggest influence.

AYW: One of my favorite books was *The Beast*, actually. And that's based off an actual roller coaster in Ohio.

RLS: Right, I've ridden that. [Laughs] I'm not a big roller coaster fan, but my son and I went to Cincinnati where they had "The Beast," which is actually a great coaster. It's one of the last all-wooden coasters. And it's a huge ride that goes back into the woods. It's the longest roller coaster ride. It's over four minutes long, which is very long for a roller coaster.

AYW: You use creatures like Bigfoot and ghosts: entities that are known to most people. It's often hard for writers to come up with new twists or angles with the classic myths and creatures. So what do you do to take those traditional elements and give it your own fresh take?

RLS: That's a hard question. I don't really know! I get these ideas and maybe I would be saying: 'Well, I need to do another Halloween book. Well, it's time—they need a new mummy book.' And then I've got to think back on all the stories I've done and what I know. That's the challenge: try to come up with some twist, something different. One of the new *Goosebumps* books is called *Who's Your Mummy?* And it's maybe the sixth or seventh mummy book that I've had to write. Trying to come up with something that's a little bit different: that's the hard part and that's the challenge. And who knows where the ideas

come from? A lot of times, I'd be walking the dog in the park and get an idea. Or taking a shower and get this idea. But other times you have to just sit at the desk and think for hours.

AYW: Sounds like a very consuming process.

RLS: Well, it is. Right now, I'm working on actually the tenth *Goosebumps Horrorland* book which is called *Help! We Have Strange Powers!* This is all I know about it: it's about these two twin kids who suddenly discover they can read people's minds. I've been sitting here all day, trying to figure and work out the plot to this. What happens to them because they have this new power?

AYW: So how long does it take from beginning to deadline, for you to conceive a new *Goosebumps* book?

RLS: The long part for me, the hard part: I do an outline first of every book. I do a chapter-by-chapter outline of everything that happens in the book. That's all the thinking. All the thinking goes in the outline. That might take me a week, maybe, if you have a twenty chapter outline. It's got all the chapter endings; it's got everything. Once I have the outline, the writing part is easy because I've done all the thinking. So I know how the book is going to end. I know the middle, I know everything. So that's much easier. Usually it takes me two weeks to write a *Goosebumps* book.

AYW: You have very vivid characters in your books. Do you ever sometimes have this set outline but then when you're writing out your characters, they take a life of their own?

RLS: No, they don't take a life of their own. I hate it when writers say that! 'I let my characters tell me what to do.' I don't believe that. I've never believed that for a second! [Laughs] My characters never told me anything. I've written three hundred books; no characters ever told me a thing. You have your outline. But the nice thing is while you're writing, you do get better ideas than are in the outline itself.

AYW: How, in the horror genre, do you find the right balance between being scary and being friendly to your audience, which is at a very young age?

RLS: I use a lot of humor. Whenever I feel like it's getting too intense, then I put in something funny. Or something crazy to lighten things up. I don't really want to terrify kids; that's not really what I'm about. And I think they like that teasing quality of *Goosebumps*. The fact that it's always teasing us, that they can't really figure out where it's going.

AYW: It's kind of ironic, because I remember you started your career writing jokes.

RLS: Yeah, it was funny. I wrote a hundred joke books for kids. No one wanted them. No one really noticed me until I got scary!

AYW: Which genre do you like writing more for? Humor or horror? Or is there something else you've always dreamed about trying?

RLS: Funny stuff is a little harder. I just finished a sixteen book series called *Rotten School*. It's this crazy series of funny books for kids, and I had a great time.

I loved writing it. But it's a little bit harder and a little bit slower than the scary stuff. I love them both.

The strange thing about me, and I don't know how strange it is: horror makes me laugh. If I go to a scary movie, or I'm reading a Stephen King novel, or something, it always makes me laugh. I never get scared!

I think there's a very close relationship between humor and horror. It's just like when you go to an amusement park and go up close to a roller coaster ride. You hear people laughing and you hear people screaming, all at the same time. It's that temptation. *Goosebumps* books are sort of like a roller coaster ride. You get on it, there are these twists and turns, it's very fast, and you know it's going to let you off safely at the end. And you have the same laughing and screaming.

AYW: Right. It's a funny thing about human nature: we're terrified of going on the roller coaster. But at the same time, we want to go on it. It's like we have an affinity for wanting to feel a sense of danger.

AYW: Now that I think about it: maybe it's like giving them sort of a life lesson that even though the world is a scary place, things work out at the end. Is that what you meant to do?

RLS: Yes. Never do an unhappy ending. They all have to have happy endings. I once did a *Fear Street* book where the bad girl, the murderer, won. And the good girl was taken off at the end. So I thought it was a very clever ending. Kids hated it. They hated that book! They hated that unhappy ending and they turned on me. And I started getting this mail: 'Dear R.L. Stine, you moron! How could you do that?!' Oh, it was incredible! 'You idiot! Are you going to write a sequel to finish the story?' They just couldn't accept an unhappy ending, and I never did it again.

AYW: Do you have any advice for writers?

RLS: What you should start out with is something you really enjoy. And you want to see how that goes. I'm just lucky that I'm writing stuff that I love. I love to read it and I love to write it. My advice for anyone who wants to write for kids: first thing is to pick out an age group. Pick out the audience that you want to write for; don't write for yourself. You've got to figure out which kids you want to write for: boys, girls, teens, younger kids. Then go to the bookstore and read everything for that age group. See what's out there. And then you have a much better chance once you know what kids are reading and what the limits are. It's very helpful.

AYW: I can imagine you like to read in your free time.

RLS: I read everyday; I read a lot. I love to read. I stay up late every night reading. I read a lot of mysteries and current fiction. And a lot of old mysteries, I like. And British mysteries.

AYW: When you have to write a scene with a particular feeling or mood, do you feel like you have to be sitting in that type of situation? Like if you're writing a depressing scene, you must be sitting in a very terrifying place?

RLS: Oh, I'm a machine. I'm really a machine; I can write anywhere.

AYW: Anywhere?

RLS: Yeah, it doesn't matter. I had a friend who wrote some scary stuff. When she had to write, she had a gloomy office. She wrote on a haunted desk, she had a coffin in the room, and she needed background music. I don't need any of that. I can write in a hotel room. I can write on an airplane. It's the only thing I'm good at, really.

AYW: Have you ever had to visit any haunted places that match the topic of your book?

RLS: Not really, except when I had to ride "The Beast." That was pretty good! [Laughs] Once we were in London. We went to the Tower of London, which has a real torture chamber in the basement. A real one! It was a place where people really were tortured, and it was on exhibit. And then there were these winding stairs that go up a tower. Up at the top, two young princes were murdered. So it had a great atmosphere. And it gave me an idea for what I think is one of the best *Goosebumps* books: *A Night in Terror Tower*. I actually had the idea for the book while we were in the Tower of London.

AYW: I suppose that since you've written so many horror books that if you ever got placed in a real horror situation, you'd be the first guy to survive. Right?

RLS: [Laughs] First guy to run! *R*