

## Q&A WITH HARRISON DEMCHICK, AUTHOR OF *THE LISTENERS*

**You've been a working fiction editor for seven years. Why jump to the other side and write your own novel?**

*In fact, I've been a writer a lot longer than I've been an editor. I've been a writer, I think, since I was in kindergarten—short stories, longer stories, and even songs starting in high school. When I was in high school and college, I figured that editing would be the way I'd make a living and writing the passion I'd pursue. I was actually just an editorial intern when I first started what would become *The Listeners*, in the summer of 2005.*



**You've been working on *The Listeners* since 2005?**

*Yes I have, although it wasn't quite *The Listeners* then. What I was working on at the time was a series of interconnected short stories set in a borough quarantined due to a mysterious airborne illness that caused deformity, insanity, and death. I developed this during an independent study in fiction during my senior year at Oberlin College. The working title back then was *Ashes, Ashes*.*

**Were the stories always about Daniel Raymond, the 14-year-old protagonist of *The Listeners*?**

*One of them was—a short story called, appropriately enough, "*The Listeners*." But each story featured different characters. The first story was actually about a woman named Esmeralda, a journalist who's trapped in her apartment and essentially selling herself to a police officer to get food for her baby. Like most of the stories, this became one of the "respite"—the short story intermissions, essentially—that appear in the novel. It was called "*The Plague*" when I wrote it, but now it's called "*The Front Lines*."*

**And then you adapted the short stories into the novel?**

*Actually, I adapted the short stories into a screenplay. For years, I'd been adapting the novels I edited into screenplays, as we were very interested in marketing them to film, but publisher Bruce Bortz suggested I adapt my own work. I'd never done that before. But I absolutely love the screenplay format, and I spent quite a lot of time imagining how this would work as a film. The whole thing could easily have ended up as a post-apocalyptic *Crash*, but I decided not to maintain the feel of several different short stories. Instead, the screenplay wound up being about Daniel.*

**Why Daniel?**

*To me, Daniel's story seemed to have the most room for growth. I'd intended to write a sequel to it anyway, because there was so much more to Daniel and his development than the really, really rough situation in which I'd left him. Daniel was such an interesting character to me—a scared*

*kid without his mother, taken in by the only people who seem to want to help him: the one-eared gang/cult, the Listeners. But at heart, Daniel just wants to be reunited with the people he loves, most importantly his best friend Katie. I felt like there could be a much bigger story there. And I let the other stories and characters intersect with Daniel wherever I could.*

**So how did the screenplay do?**

*The screenplay was optioned, actually! It was my first screenplay to be optioned for film. We had a director and a producer, but we could never quite get the financing.*

**How did the screenplay become a novel?**

*Bruce Bortz again. He loved the story and thought it might be something he'd want to publish. And for the first time, thanks to the screenplay, I had a fleshed-out, developed story with complete character and story arcs. I had a novel-length story to tell. So I wrote it, and now, more than seven years after I began the first short story, here we are.*

**Why did you decide to write a dystopian story? Dystopian fiction is a major trend these days.**

*Yeah, but I don't think it was to quite the same extent in 2005—and if it was, I was too much of a publishing novice to be aware of it. Honestly, the fact that this book is coming out when dystopian fiction is so popular is mostly a lucky coincidence. As to why I started writing in this vein back in 2005, well, I wanted a scenario that could work as the backdrop for a series of short stories. And being me, it was always going to be dark, and it was always going to have some sort of supernatural element. A plague isn't exactly supernatural, but it conveys the same feeling. This dystopian world is really one that just happened to fit my sensibilities as a writer.*

**Speaking of dark: In *The Listeners*, Daniel joins the Listeners, a cult marked by the ritualistic removal of their right ears. How did you come up with the Listeners?**

*The Listeners were actually present in that very first short story, so they've always been a part of this world. I had read an article about someone who had removed, I think, a thumb. I don't remember why, and I don't recall the context, but it got me thinking about the removal of a body part as ritual. And I think I settled on the ear because there's a lot of symbolism to be drawn from that—and that sounds like a cop-out writer's answer, I know, but religion and cults are all about symbolism. An ear is something members of this group could spare, and it would mean something. As Adam, the leader of the Listeners, preaches, "One ear, so that we may hear only the voices of our brothers."*

**Of course, Adam still has both of his ears.**

*Yes he does.*

**What sets *The Listeners* apart from other dystopian fiction? Is it the Listeners themselves?**

*The Listeners are certainly a factor, but I think the primary distinction is Daniel. The Listeners is a horror novel, and a dystopian novel, but thanks to Daniel it's also a coming-of-age story, and that's what most excited me in the writing. The novel is about Daniel's desire to find Katie, and the horrors that transform him into someone who can define his own fate in this terrible world. To me, *The Listeners* is, at heart, a character story.*

**Is that why the book is being marketed as “literary horror”?**

*No, that’s because I’m terribly pretentious.*

**[Laughs]**

*Actually, yes, the character focus is part of that distinction. But mainly, I think I wanted to make it clear that this book is not about blood and gore, nor is it about jumps or scares. It’s a substantive and very personal story that happens to take place in this horror context.*

**So what horror writers have most influenced your own work?**

*This is going to sound terrible, and it actually speaks to what I was just saying, but I didn’t grow up reading much horror fiction. When I was a kid, there was Goosebumps, the R. L. Stine series, and I loved those books, but after middle school, I read virtually no horror. I’ve been getting into it again—I read my first Stephen King book about two years ago, I read Richard Matheson’s I Am Legend last year and loved it, and I’m currently working on a collection of H. P. Lovecraft short stories—but I already had most of this book written before discovering any of these authors.*

**Who are your favorite writers, then?**

*I’m a huge fan of Douglas Adams. I love Salman Rushdie and Kurt Vonnegut. I’m a lifelong fan of Spider-Man, and my favorite comic book writer is John Marc DeMatteis. All of this, and yet I wrote a horror novel. Go figure.*

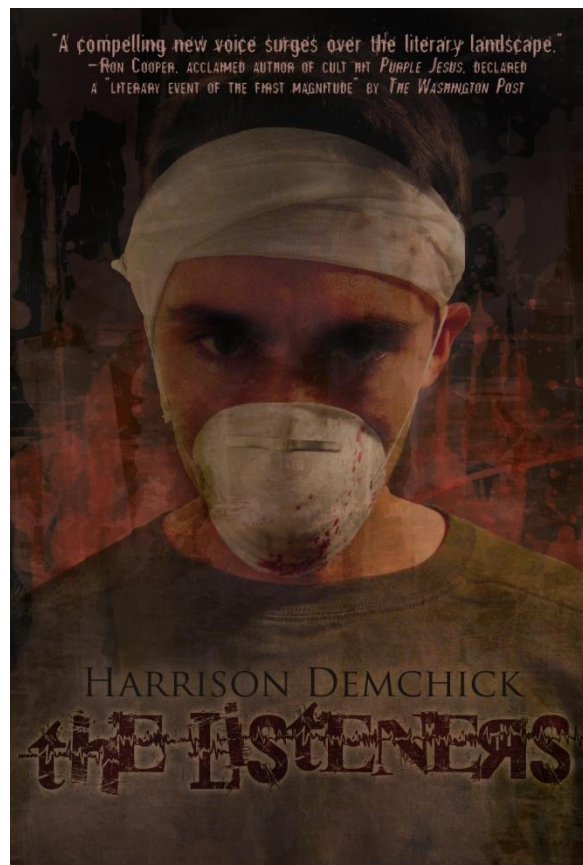
**How do you feel about the response so far to *The Listeners*?**

*Response so far from readers and reviewers has been really good—honestly, a lot better than I expected. That’s not to say I don’t believe in my own novel. I do, absolutely. But I thought the strangeness of it, and some of the structural and stylistic choices I made, might turn off certain readers. But so far, people really seem to be enjoying it. And that’s a huge thrill.*

**A couple of reviewers, though, have taken issue with the number of questions *The Listeners* raises but doesn’t answer.**

*That’s gotten a bit of attention, yes. And it’s actually quite intentional. To me, one of the most frightening things about the scenario of *The Listeners* is the not-knowing. Daniel can try to find a place for himself in this world, but there is something much bigger going on than he can understand. I wanted to put readers in the same position.*

**How did your career as an editor help you craft your novel?**



*Well, that's a bit of a tricky question, because naturally, I'm not the editor of my own novel. An editor can never edit his own work, because he can never have the objective eye an editor needs. But naturally, I do have a serious and professional understanding of the craft of novel-writing, though whether that's because I'm an editor or what makes me an editor, I couldn't tell you. Probably a little of both. Either way, it helped a great deal with the writing, because I knew what my novel had to do and what steps I need to take to accomplish what I wanted to accomplish.*

**What do you think makes dystopian fiction so popular? Do you see the situation of *The Listeners* as an inevitable reality?**

*I don't, and I don't think such a belief is what drives dystopian fiction. Really, dystopian is just another form of the same sort of story people have always told: survival stories. Survival stories have often taken place in unexplored lands. In science-fiction, they may take place on other planets. But they can also take place here, in our own world, and what makes that frightening is our knowledge, as readers, of what used to be. The distorted familiarity is what makes dystopian fiction so compelling, but fundamentally, it's just another way of finding out what people do when everything they depend upon is taken away.*

*I certainly don't think such a scenario is inevitable, or even likely. Honestly, you'd never guess it from my writing, but I'm very much an optimist. But I do think that it's the nature of certain people to try to take advantage of whatever terrible things happen, and *The Listeners* very much deals with that.*

**What do you want readers to take away from the book?**

*I really don't know. I didn't write this book with reader reaction in mind. I certainly hope readers are moved by Daniel's story. It would be interesting if they thought about how they would handle a situation like his. But one of the really amazing things about having this book out there is that people are reading it, and every one will come away with something different, if only slightly. That's fun for me to see.*

**What's next for you?**

*I'm working on a couple of screenplays in very different genres. I'm also working on a horror comedy musical, actually.*

**How about a sequel to *The Listeners*?**

*No comment.*