Local author and Davenport native Michael McCarty, who will be a guest lecturer at Rock Island's Midwest Writing Center this Saturday, has spent more than a decade conducting interviews with some of the biggest names in fantasy and horror. But he'll happily tell you that he's not yet used to having the tables turned.

Ask a general question – "What are some of your favorite horror movies?" – and McCarty stammers: "God, I've got ... oh, I have a ton of them ... oh, God ... I know so many of 'em ... uh ... um ... I dunno."

But ask a *specific* question and McCarty goes to town.

What did you think of *The Shining*? "He [director Stanley Kubrick] had these horrific images that were scary as hell ... . It's kind of like a small story but he made it so *huge*!"

The Blair Witch Project? "I'd seen it at the movie theatre and I was scared shitless, but then I saw it on video. ... I couldn't wait for them to kill those campers!"

Videodrome? "Oh my God! I *love* Cronenberg! He's one of my favorite directors!"

McCarty, it turns out, *does* know how to be an interviewee. He's gregarious and energetic – McCarty laughs heartily, and laughs often – and clearly relishes getting to talk about what he and thousands of fellow fans call "speculative fiction" – a blanket phrase referring to works in the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and horror.

The author's passion for his chosen milieu is a good thing, too, because these days, he's being asked to discuss it *frequently*. On October 8, McCarty will join friend and frequent collaborator Mark McLaughlin for the "Getting Paid to Write Short Stories" seminar at the Midwest Writing Center. On Saturday, October 15, McCarty will appear at the Davenport Barnes & Noble to sign his most recent publications: *More Giants of the Genre*, a collection of interviews with famed contributors to the field of speculative fiction, and *Dark Duets*, featuring 15 short-story collaborations between McCarty and fellow horror writers. (McCarty was paid by the Maryland-based publishing company Wildside Press for both books.) And on November 5, McCarty will be one of the local writers acknowledged at the Bettendorf Library's annual "Salute to Local Authors."

McCarty, who has been enamored with fantasy genres since he was a boy watching "creature features" on late-night television, is currently a contributor to the national publications *Science Fiction Weekly, Dark Crypt*, and *Hellnotes*, but as many a published author knows, writing doesn't always provide a regular paycheck.

"My day job is at Augustana College," he admits. "I'm what they call a storekeeper. I actually

work for Westerlin [dormitory] food service. I'm basically receiving. All the food that comes in, I receive. So that's my day job. When I get done with the day job, my writing job kicks in. I go from 6 in the morning 'til about 10 at night."

He laughs again. "I stop to eat between working and watch *The Daily Show*, and that's it."

A tight schedule, but one that McCarty has been accustomed to since he began interviewing horror icons more than a decade ago. Attending dozens of horror-novel and sci-fi conventions over the years, McCarty has had the opportunity to meet many of the figures he's idolized since his youth. And his tenacity in landing interview subjects through both persistent e-mails and conversations with entertainment and literary agents – "Dean Koontz took about four years to get," he says – has allowed him to speak with such national figures as *Night of the Living Dead* creator George Romero,
Halloween
director John Carpenter, and prolific sci-fi scribe Richard Matheson.

The author admits that he's continually amazed by his good fortune in connecting with his icons. "All these people I've been reading and admiring my entire life. ... The chance to actually meet 'em and get paid by magazines ... it's quite an honor."

Yet McCarty is equally effusive about his fiction collaborations in *Dark Duets*, an idea that came about by trying to glean what
hadn't
yet been done in the realm of speculative fiction.

"You look at all these short-story collections," he says, "and there are a *lot* of short-story collections out there, and you want to go out there and be
different
. You gotta have some kind of catch." The catch McCarty had in mind involved enlisting fellow writers of speculative fiction to combine their talents on short stories, and through letters, e-mail, and personal visits, McCarty convinced authors both local (Michael Romkey, R.L. Fox) and national (P.D. Casek, Bentley Little) to join him in his endeavor.

Some of the collaborations, McCarty says, "were like tennis matches"; with Romkey, McCarty says, "I'd send him 500 words, and then he'd send 500 back, and we'd go back and forth."

By contrast, "with some of them" – referencing *Dark Duets* collaborators Casek and Charlee Jacob – "the stories were completed, and they [the co-authors] would add a character, or sometimes they'd change the dialogue."

The resulting collaborative processes, McCarty says, were both enjoyable and a little frightening, much like the *Dark Duets* themselves; "Working on the collaborations was like walking a tightrope without a net," he says. Yet the task was never grueling, considering how consistently the authors blended their horror with comedy. Fear and laughter, McCarty says, "work really well together because they're extreme emotions – humor's at this end and horror's at that end – but they break each other up really well. I like working with extreme emotions."

McCarty's readers can plan on many *more* extreme emotions in the future. The author has already completed four other works: *Giants of the Genre: The Giant Edition*, which features 30 brand-new interviews; *Little Giants*, another collaborative effort, featuring 25 short stories; a full-length novel, *Liquid Diet*, which McCarty describes as his "vampire satire"; and *Monster Behind the Wheel*, a horror novel written with Mark McLaughlin.

"I have four completed books with four different publishers looking at them," says McCarty with a delight bordering on incredulity. "I feel like I went from a firecracker to a hand grenade to an atomic bomb."

And after that?

"I'm hoping to have my first best-seller," he says, revealing the grin of someone still astonished that a lifelong dream has actually come true. "I feel like I'm just taking baby steps. Sometimes I get kind of frustrated because I think I should be here or there, but really, I just came out of the womb."

McCarty laughs again. "I'm brand-spanking-new!"