

HILL

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writer in 2006, the World Fantasy Award, and is a two-time winner of the Bram Stoker Award.

Hill will talk about his work at Saturday's Lee County Reading Festival, at 12:30 p.m. in room A1 at the Harborside Events Center.

It's fairly common knowledge now that Hill's one of Stephen and Tabitha King's two sons. (His pen name's an abbreviated version of his given name, Joseph Hillstrom King.) But he sold his work on its own merit, not wanting to ride on his parents' coattails; that's why he went with a pen name.

"It was easy when I first started writing as Joe Hill and no one knew who my parents were," he says. "I was very anonymous. And that was very powerful. I felt I could write anything I wanted, and I didn't have to worry about what people would say. If I wrote a bad story, it didn't get published. When a story was published and I did get something out, I did get a lot of confidence in it, because I felt it had been published for the right reasons, because the editor in question looked at it and said, 'I really like this story.'"

He's published a lot in small magazines and British fantasy magazines. He didn't feel much pressure because the markets were small and few people read them.

"Now I've have had a period of time where I've tried to mentally adjust to this idea that my pen name isn't really secret any more," Hill says, "that now when I write something, that people will draw this connection between me and my dad. That's actually been uncomfortable. It's taken a little bit of time to figure out how to adjust to that. But eventually I have to go back to what works and say, 'Well, I'm just going to keep writing the stuff that I have fun with, and hope that people like it.'"

Hill jokes that it showed a lack of imagination on his part that he became a writer.

"But it just made sense, it just seemed a natural progression to want to write myself," he says. "I'd come home from school when I was 12, my mom would be in her office banging away on her computer, my dad would be in his office, banging away on his computer, and I just thought, 'Oh wow, this is what you do; you sit in your room and write and make a living that way.' And so the idea of making stuff up and getting paid for it never struck me as a strange or different idea, until I spent three or four years failing to do it successfully."

Initially, Hill couldn't sell his book of short stories, "Twentieth Century Ghosts" in the U.S. A small British publisher, PS Publishing Ltd., accepted it. Then Hill sold a novel to William Morrow in the U.S., the rock 'n' roll-infused "Heart-Shaped Box." Morrow then released "Twentieth Century Ghosts" in the U.S.

But before making his first book sale, Hill wrote four novels.

"I was unable to find a publisher for any of them," he says. "And I wrote a lot of short stories that I couldn't sell as well."

Though it was tough to receive the rejections, he realized in hindsight it was a good thing.

"I was writing as Joe Hill — and I'm going to write as Joe Hill for the rest of my life — but I was writing as Joe Hill and people weren't aware of my family connections, who my parents were. And that was important to me, that was how I wanted it. And when I got a story turned down, sometimes I felt that that was actually a good thing: mission accomplished. Because if it wasn't good enough for it to be sold on its own merit, then it was better for it to be rejected.

"In some ways, that was hardest with a book I wrote called 'The Fear Tree,' which I spent three years on. And it got turned down in Canada and America and England. I mean, big press, small press.

And I was completely devastated. But over time, looking back, I kinda felt like it was a really, really good book, but if it had been published for the wrong reasons, that would've done more damage for me than good. It wouldn't have been a healthy thing for my development as a writer.

"And one thing that kept me going was that my mom and dad both write; they had seen plenty of rejection in their careers. They just encouraged me, and my wife as well. I felt like I was on the right track and to keep going. The book that I spent three years on, after it got turned down everywhere, after I was completely unable to make a go of it, I remember calling my mom up and saying, 'I don't know what to do. I spent all this time on it.'"

"She said, 'What you're going to do is, you're going to start a new book.' Which was really what I needed to hear. It lifted me back up, and I got started on something fresh. The other thing that kept it going was that I always found a way to keep it fun."

Hill also wrote screenplays with his older brother, Owen King (the author of "We're All In This Together.") The two wrote a screenplay called "Fade Away," which was sold but never got made. But for a number of years, Hill and his brother would regularly be called out to LA to meet a new producer. Each successive producer would give them a new idea as to who the murderer should be in their mystery, and the brothers would rewrite the script yet again.

"For years I was in the 'Fade Away' business," Hill says. "All Owen and I did was rewrite...By the time the film industry got done with us, by the time we got done re-writing the screenplay six or seven times,

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every single character in the screenplay got to be the murderer. It was the girlfriend, it was the best friend. The only person who didn't do it was the butler, because we didn't have a butler in the story. We could've written one in; we would've been happy to."

Writing screenplays was an educational experience for him.

"I think I learned a lot of what was possible with revisions," he says. "That you could reinvent. If you had a good idea, you could reinvent almost anything. That stories can be very elastic and mutable. And in some ways, I think I learned more about economy and focusing on dialogue and action from a few of the writers I was reading. I read a lot of Peter Abrams. I read a lot of Elmore Leonard. And also from the experience of writing short stories.

"I didn't write a lot of short stories at first; I was mostly a failed novelist. I had a couple books that didn't sell, and they were all long, and they took a long time to write. 'The Fear Tree' was 900 pages, the first draft. I began to think: I need to get small. I've spent all this time, I spent two years working on this novel and three years working on this novel, and I was unable to sell them. And I need to learn how to do something on a smaller scale. I can't keep investing two years into every project and then get nothing out of it."

So Hill turned to short stories. They were rejected too, but then a few began to click, including his story "Pop Art," about a sixth grader who becomes friends with Arthur Roth, an inflatable boy.

"It had this very light-hearted Steven Spielberg fantasy element, and it was tremendous fun to write," Hill says. "And there's a lot of dialogue in that story. It's very action-focused. And it sold in the third place I sent it. So I learned some from that...about economy and developing

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character quickly. And developing the situation quickly. One thing I learned from short stories is that you want to get the situation right up front, in the first page, first paragraph, first sentence. The editor needs to know what the story's about pretty quickly, or they're going to move on to the next one."

Some of his short stories threatened to grow into novels. He wrote one story that was 140 pages long. So he kept editing it, down to 120 pages, to 80, to 60, to 40, to 37, then finally to 34 1/2 pages.

"I would do things like take five pages and say, can I re-write this as a paragraph? Can I take this page and re-write it like a sentence? And in that process, I do think that I learned a lot about doing a lot with a little. Having a sentence that can carry a lot of weight, as opposed to multiple paragraphs that did the same thing.

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Film companies and screenwriters sometimes feel it's easier to adapt a short story than a novel, he says, and points to "Brokeback Mountain" as an example. Hill's short story, "Pop Art," about the inflatable boy, was made into a short film by British filmmaker Amanda Boyle and "Voluntary Committal" was just sold to filmmakers as well.

One short story, though, did turn into a novel: "Heart-Shaped Box." It was sold to Warner Brothers, with Neil Jordan ("The Crying Game") to direct.

"I haven't seen a screenplay; I don't have anything to do with it," Hill says. "I don't know when or whether there'll actually be a movie. It doesn't make too much difference to me, though. When we sold the rights, I was asked if I wanted to do the screenplay, and by then I felt that I had worked enough in the film business to be inoculated against it. I had so much fun writing the novel, it was time to let go and move on to something else."

"Heart-Shaped Box" tells the story of Judas Coyne, a heavy metal musician.

"He's been in the business a long time, he's had a 30-year career, a 30-year ride on the pop-culture roller coaster," Hill says. "When we meet him, he's this kind of bitter, furious person, a deeply angry and unhappy and isolated person."

A collector of macabre artifacts, he buys a dead man's suit over the Internet that the seller claims is haunted by a ghost. Coyne thinks it might be a joke, but when the suit arrives, he discovers that the ghost is very real, and that it intends to kill him.

"I actually thought that he'd buy the suit online, and realize that he made a horrid mistake, and by then it would be too late and the ghost would eat him for breakfast," Hill says. "And it would be 32 pages long and I'll sell it for 500 bucks to The Third Alternative in England, an English fantasy magazine. But what happened was two things. Jude refused to die on my schedule. I thought I could kill him by page 30, but he had this nasty habit of figuring out ways to stay alive on me. And in a way, it made sense, because the one thing I knew about him was that he had this kind of survivor mentality. His bandmates had died because of drug abuse and had overdosed, another one died in a fire car wreck. But Jude just lived on. Just kept going.

"And so he was more resourceful than I had expected. And the other thing that interested me was the question of who he was. I got really curious about how he wound up this angry, isolated person. And even stuff like his name. I mean, what a joke, what kind of name is that? It's a rock star name. It's a made up name. I got curious about who he really was before he

became this famous figure. And it took me about 350 pages to find out."

Initially, readers probably won't think he's a nice guy, Hill says. But he hopes people keep an open mind.

"One of my favorite things as a reader is, I love the reversal of expectations," he says. "I love when you think you know who a character is, and then something happens mid-way through the story, and the character takes a surprising action, and is actually revealed to be quite different than what you first thought. But you still believe him. It can't be phony, it has to be authentic. I love when that's pulled off successfully."

Charles Porter and Peter Abrams, two of his favorite writers, are skilled at such reversal of expectations, he says.

The novel is a road story.

"But road stories are always metaphors for inner journeys," he says. "Heart-Shaped Box" turns out to be a road story. And I love road stories, because that's what you want out of a story, you want a character to go from Point A to Point B, for them to take a trip, and discover something about themselves and be something different when it's over."

The novel was originally called "Private Collection" until Hill was writing the scene where a UPS truck delivers the suit to his protagonist. At the time, he was listening to iTunes on random, and Nirvana's "Heart-Shaped Box" began playing.

"Soon as I heard the song, I thought, 'Wouldn't it be funny to stick the haunted suit in a heart-shaped box?'" Hill says. "So that's how it became the title of the book. And it kinda makes sense, because the Kurt Cobain song, the Nirvana song, 'Heart-Shaped Box,' is a song about feeling desperate and trapped. It's the song of a famous musician who...is absolutely desperate for a way out of the trap in his own life. And in some ways, I feel that's reflected a little bit in Judas Coyne's story."

Music plays a big part in Hill's life.

"It's the highest art form," he says. "It's usually what I do to lift myself up when I'm feeling low. And it keeps me writing. A lot of times when I'm working on a story, stories will develop, will attract certain songs, and I will find myself listening over and over to the same set of songs while working on a specific story. Of course, then when I'm done with the story, I never want to listen to the songs again because I've heard them so many times."

Hill puts the playlists on the Web site for his readers. He also put on a Judas Coyne mix tape which includes songs he listened to while writing the novel. Personally, he likes the music of Hank Williams III, James McMurtry, and Matthew Ryan whom he says sounds like "Springsteen's angry, drunk, younger brother."

Hill has another novel in the wings, as well as a young adult novel scheduled to be released. He's also working on a comic book series called "Locke & Key." The first issue sold out the day it was released.

"I'm experimenting with the form," he says. "Most of the time, when I've published stories in the past, they have been complete, fully revised. There's a middle, beginning and end, and a comic book isn't like that. It's more like a live performance because it comes out month by month, and you have to keep it going and things change as you go along. It's really like writing a story in public.

"Serialized fiction is a fascinating thing. The great thing about whether it's a TV show or a monthly comic or some other serial form is what it offers a reader. It makes the reader a collaborator with the writer. Because in-between episodes, you have weeks or months to daydream about what's going to happen next. And you begin writing your own story or you think about the relationships between the characters and the trouble they're in, and you begin to invent your own stories about those characters. And I think that really brings the reader into the process in a fun way.

"[Writing] is sort of a strange thing to do," Hill says. "It is sort of a strange thing to get paid for. And I'm very lucky to get the chance to do it." ■