

Mountie Noir

MICHAEL SLADE

Profile and Interview

by *Bev Vincent*

A MICHAEL SLADE MYSTERY: Someone interviewing this author over the eighteen years since his first novel, *Headhunter*, could have faced one or more of five different people. Slade is more than a pseudonym; it is a collective alter ego. It's like the name of a rock group — the membership can change but the name persists.

The Slade concept originated at a meeting of Vancouver law partners Richard Covell, John Banks and Jay Clarke. Burdened with professional and personal debt during the early 1980s recession, the trio decided to write a novel to earn some extra money, splitting any proceeds equally.

They observed that Canada is known first and foremost for its police, yet every Mountie story until then treated the Force as "light-weight candy-asses." This inspired them to write a hard-boiled police procedural based on the tough realities the firm faced in court every day, where the RCMP was their primary opposition. Their law practice was a crash course in RCMP procedure. Many of their cases involved the insanity defense; defending unstable individuals would give the prospective authors special insight into the criminal mind.

First, though, they needed a name to represent the joint authorship. Clarke suggested DeClercq. He liked the capital letter in the middle and thought the name would stand alone, like Homer or Voltaire. Banks suggested putting that idea

on the back burner to bubble for a while, something he often said when he hoped an idea would boil away completely. Clarke's wife Lee thought shy readers unsure how to pronounce DeClercq wouldn't ask for his books. Clarke challenged his wife to do better. In seconds she came up with "Michael Slade." Michael had a certain sensitivity, she suggested, and Slade was tough as nails. Sensitive but tough. Clarke was outvoted, but got his revenge later when he chose DeClercq as the name for a major continuing character in the Slade novels.

An eerie sense of timing has contributed to Slade's success over the years. Just as the writers were beginning *Headhunter*, Vancouver's first serial killer, Clifford Olson, exploded into the press. Newspaper clippings detailing how the real Mounties got their man went up on the authors' strategy plotting wall.

Slade sent proposal letters to twelve British publishers. All asked to see the manuscript and three offered to buy it. The book was a smash hit in 1984. Continuously in print since publication, *Headhunter* had its eighteenth printing last year.

Slade's first five books were released over a twelve-year period, but the pace has increased to a book a year for the last four years. Jay Clarke, who does the actual writing, is the only author involved with all nine novels. Lee Clarke replaced Covell for *Ghoul*. The next

four books were Clarke-Banks collaborations and Clarke wrote *Burnt Bones* alone.

The current lineup consists of Clarke and his 24-year-old daughter Rebecca, an English Literature and History graduate of UBC. The only father-daughter writing team in the business, they co-wrote the bestseller *Hangman* (2000) and the newest Slade novel, *Death's Door*, released by Penguin Canada last December. They're currently at work on book number ten.

There is a distinctly Canadian "flavour" to the Slade books. South of the border, Slade's fan base is solid but less spectacular than in his homeland. Clarke's appearance at the World Horror Convention in 2001 was his first at a genre convention and the response was overwhelmingly positive, encouraging Slade to increase his presence. Both Clarkes will appear at the WHC in Chicago in April 2002.

One of the hallmarks of a Slade novel is the extensive research behind each story. Readers come away from Slade books not only entertained — and terrified — but also enlightened. *Hangman*, for example, in addition to being a harrowing tale of revenge, recounts the history of hanging as a form of state-authorized execution.

Jay Clarke himself once had a close encounter with the hangman. On the day Canadian Parliament was to vote on whether to retain the noose, Clarke and his partner argued

an appeal before the Supreme Court. If they lost their case and Parliament upheld the death penalty, their client – convicted of killing an RCMP officer – would likely hang. In Canada, lawyers who lost death penalty cases “saw their clients out,” witnessing the execution.

A judge they had hoped would be sympathetic interrupted their opening statement to criticize the size and form of their appeal submission. In true Slade tradition, the document was lengthy, annotated, with appendices. During this procedural argument, a runner arrived with the result of the Parliamentary vote on two slips of paper. The one for retention of the noose read 133. The one for abolition read 125. Based on the way their case was going, Clarke envisioned his client dangling at the end of the noose. As it turned out, no one was executed. The runner had mixed up the slips and consequently had reversed the results of the vote.

In real life and in fiction, the Mounties don't always get their man ... or woman. Loose ends from one novel are picked up in another. The series locks together to make up a larger story. *Death's Door* continues a plot started in *Burnt Bones* and the novel currently under way was inspired by a detail left over from *Ripper*. The police and the criminals are both part of this ongoing story.

Slade villains are among the most twisted, evil creations to adorn the printed page. Some can mask their deep psychoses and personality disorders. Others, like the megalomaniacal and murky Mephisto, DeClercq's nemesis, operate outside society, exploiting its weaknesses for personal gain. The crimes are brutal and vicious – beheadings and hangings. Victims are often mutilated before, during and after their murder. Slade, who calls his books 'horror whodunits,' has been described as Agatha Christie's bastard son.

The RCMP officers of Special X are the forces of good. Clarke works

closely with police officers to ensure that he uses state-of-the-art police techniques. Slade has been invited to speak at police conventions because he writes cop thrillers that cops read. Real-life psycho hunters Det. Insp. Kim Rossmo and S/Sgt. Christine Wozney have stepped into Slade's parallel world as fictionalized versions of themselves. Rossmo is the creator of geographic profiling, used to track criminals based on probabilistic patterns governing the locations where their crimes are committed. Rossmo hoped the novel would do for geographic profiling what *Silence of the Lambs* did for its psychological counterpart.

Rossmo allowed himself to be fictionalized on the condition that he not be murdered violently, a wise precaution given the way Slade treats many of his characters. Even the good guys suffer horribly. Before we meet Superintendent Robert DeClercq in *Headhunter*, his job has already cost him the lives of his wife and daughter. He loses another wife shortly into the series. Other Special X cops, such as Zinc Chandler, have been kidnapped, shot, tortured, and have lost limbs and loved ones at the hands of their adversaries. The nervous tension of Slade novels is enhanced by the realization that no one is safe – any character could be killed or maimed at any time.

CD *Headhunter* was written in response to a downturn in the economy in the early 1980s as a way to help save your law practice. At what point did you consider you'd succeeded?

JAY CLARKE When news of the sale broke in the press, a reporter did some research and found that – at the time – *Headhunter* was the second most successful novel written in Vancouver. Fact is, however, we felt successful merely by having it published.



All of the books made bestseller lists of one kind or another. I recall walking into a huge shop on Fifth Avenue in New York to see *Cutthroat* at # 3. The indicator of bestseller status is that Penguin – one of the big five – was Slade's publisher at the beginning and is still his publisher now.

Hangman went to # 2, was on the national mass-market list for over a month, and was one of the five best-selling paperbacks in all of Canada – competing with Grisham, Steel, Ludlum, Oprah's Pick – for the month of March, 2000. The best compliment I've had as an author is the fact that every one of the novels so far has a number of readers who think *it's* the best of the series.

CD Do you still practice law?

JC I have two professions that feed each other. I write psycho-thrillers, and I practice law with a focus on insanity. It is a foolish writer who cuts himself off from the source of his inspiration. The law gives me ideas, and writing makes me a better lawyer. What I no longer do is practice law as a business. Now I practice like Perry Mason – just one case at a time.

CD Did you always aspire to be a writer?

JC I began writing by drawing comic books. Great plot training. Then came stories. Then came *Thirteen Tombes* [a book Clarke wrote at age fourteen]. The practice of criminal law was just an extension of that. All courtroom lawyers are storytellers, and the one who tells the best story wins the case. It's like that writing exercise, where a class is given several objects and told to write a story about them. Pieces of evidence provide the same inspiration. Writing *Headhunter* was merely an extension of practicing law. That's why so many lawyers end up writing mysteries and thrillers.

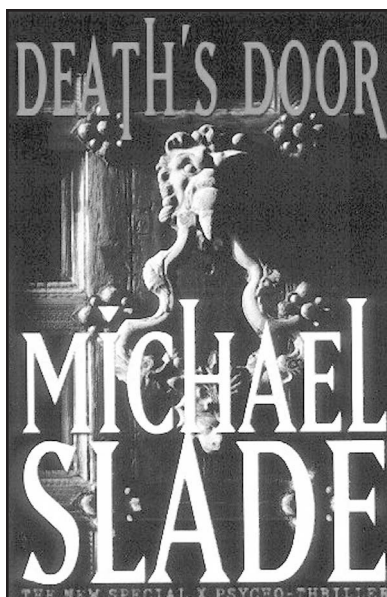
If you want to write, you must have something to say. Thirty years in the practice of criminal law and a lot of travel around the world have given me that. If you want to have success at writing, don't write for yourself, and don't write for the market, and don't write for awards and Canada Council grants. Write for the reader, and the reader only. To a writer starving in an attic, it must seem like Slade's had an easy go. I attribute that ease to the fact I don't have to write. If readers stop reading, I'll practice law. So that gets rid of all second-guessing and fear of writer's block, and the other psychological hang-ups that loom when life hangs in the balance. It frees you to sit down and have fun in the writing, because if you're not having fun writing it, who's going to have fun reading it?

I go out into the world to find things that interest me, and then use my training as a lawyer to string those disparate subjects together into a cohesive story that I hope will interest the reader. By far the most important component in plotting a Slade novel is the blessing of an overactive imagination. What if...?

CD Describe a Special X novel to someone who hasn't yet read a Slade book.

JC Each novel is a combination of mystery and horror. Each covers at least two genres. The good guys – the Mounties of Special X – advance the mystery, which is based on up-to-the-minute real police procedure. That's because cops work with Slade on each book. The bad guys – the psychos – sink to the realm of abject horror. That's because they distill what I have encountered while specializing in the law of insanity during my practice of law. Each book is a whodunit, a horror story, a thriller, a science fiction novel, a Western, a romance, erotica, a non-fiction piece, and whatever else I think will interest the reader.

I hope for high-octane prose. I hope it moves at lightning speed. I hope the mystery engages you. I hope the horror horrifies you. I hope the style is as immediate as a headline. The evil in our books is as evil as it can be. It's as evil as it actually is out there in real life. It has to be, or people won't believe it. The greatest sin of any writer is to write a boring book.



CD Where did Special X come from?

JC Special X is a fictional creation of Slade, but as the years have passed, the Mounties have developed a parallel in ViCLAS [the RCMP's Violent Crime Linkage Analysis Section at Vancouver headquarters]. *Death's Door* was written with the help of the cops who run it, and in fact, one of those real cops – S/Sgt. Christine Wozney – joins Det. Insp. Kim Rossmo as a character in the novel.

Recently a ViCLAS Mountie struck up an e-mail correspondence with a law enforcement officer in the southern United States. The U.S. cop's first request was to know about Special X. The Mountie had to laugh. His comment to me was: "Here we have dozens of real-life units to converse about, and a real cop's primary focus on reality was to find out about the one unit that doesn't exist."

CD How else has real life crept into Slade novels?

JC The Special X novels anticipate situations to come – like AIDS and the tainting of the blood supply in *Ghoul*, and the sexism Hilary Rand faced in the Met long before [the BBC series] *Prime Suspect*, and how Mephisto plans to spread ebola through smallpox in *Burnt Bones*, etc.

I don't tap the traumas of a messed-up life to inspire Slade's fiction ... though the dog attack on the boy in *Death's Door* happened to me, and the real dog was named Sparky, who became the psychotic personality in *Headhunter*.

In Grade 3, my teacher took her class on a field trip to the Vancouver Museum. I recall only three exhibits from that trip. One: the shrunken human head, which inspired *Headhunter* and *Primal Scream*. Two: the mummified baby, which inspired *Death's Door*. And three, a picture

of Jesus with the eyes painted in such a way that they followed you no matter where you walked in the room. Now that was spooky. And it's because I remember just those three things that I write what I do. I want the plots remembered.

Katt's climb up the Great Pyramid of Cheops [from *Death's Door*] is a climb I took. I too set a honey trap to distract the guard, then spent hours climbing those 201 blocks in the blazing sun. The idea was that I would sit up there all day and let the mysteries of Egypt inspire me. When I reached the top, what did I find ... a gang of Cairo street urchins waiting for me. They demanded that I take their pictures by making muscleman poses, and when I tried to explain that I was short on film, they made joint motions of tossing me off. One push and I would tumble all the way down, and no doubt would become a poster boy for what happens to tourists who break the law and slip during the climb. Given the right incentive, you'd be surprised how fast you can climb *down* the Great Pyramid. In later years (I was thirty then), I would read about Egyptian terrorists killing tourists to undermine the government, and would wonder if those street urchins grew up to join the Big Time.

CD Any plans for movie adaptations of Slade novels?

JC There have been several options, and there are several screenplays floating around. There's another currently on the table. The Mountie movie goes back to *RIDERS OF THE PLAINS* by Edison, who invented movies, in 1910. Slade brings the concept up to date. Mountie film *noir*. I envision something along the lines of *SEVEN* or *TOUCHING EVIL*. It's a question of waiting until the right producer who shares that vision comes along. We're patient.



CD Rebecca Clarke refers to herself as the “frilly pink half of Slade.” You were quite young when Slade was born. What are your earliest memories of Slade?

REBECCA CLARKE When I was young I don't think I ever really appreciated what it was that my father did for a living. I do remember thinking that his den was a bit unlike my friends' parents' offices, however — it featured a considerably larger number of severed head portraits, monster models, shelves lined with books about slasher films and famous serial killers, etc. Oh yeah, and I wouldn't want to forget the coffin (a rather unique book bin used for the *Ghoul* promotion). Needless to say, I had a sneaking suspicion from early on that my father wasn't quite ... uh ... shall we say, “typical”?

CD Were you allowed to read Slade books as a child?

RC From my earliest days, I had been exposed to most everything. I was never really censored. My dad would read me *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* and *Grimm's Fairy Tales* as bedtime stories. I went to see *ALIENS* with my parents when it came out in the theaters. In my early years of elementary school my favorite television shows were *Scooby Doo* and *Miami Vice*. I accidentally saw *PSYCHO* at a friend's house at age six — she was terrified under the covers while I stood on the bed, clicker in hand, watching in awe. What can I say? I'm a product of

my environment. And yet, I find it so amusing when people finally meet me and seem almost disappointed that I'm not some deranged, freakish being. I'm really quite normal, truth be told. And why shouldn't I be? I may have been raised by a horror writer, but I was always loved and cared for, and my interests — all my interests — were encouraged. If I was being taught the harsh realities of the world in which I lived at the same time, then — the way I see it — that only served to better raise me because I knew that not everyone could be trusted. And, unlike most kids who were simply told not to talk to strangers, I knew why that was a dangerous endeavor. I knew exactly what they were capable of.

CD How did you come to join Slade?

RC It was a natural progression of events that I came to join Slade. I've always shared my dad's love for the macabre — perhaps more so than any of the previous members — and I love books and the idea of weaving something tangible from pure imagination. I've actually been putting in my proverbial “two cents” for the last several books, but I officially joined Slade when I did (with *Hangman*) because I was finishing my university degree and also because Slade had been whittled down to a sole member by that point.

CD Did you have any trepidation about working so closely with your father?

RC It's great. He respects my opinion when I give it, and I respect the fact that the Slade formula works just the way it is and, therefore, I try not to impose my own style too heavily. To do so would be to make it something other than what readers have come to expect it to be, and that's not my purpose for being here.

CD You have a reputation for wielding the mighty red-inked pen — do you edit as your father writes or do you wait until a draft is finished to give editorial input? Do you get involved in the extensive research?

RC I like to explain my part in the production of a Slade novel by breaking the process down into three steps. The first step is the plotting, the researching and the overall structuring of the novel. The second step is the actual writing. The third and final step is the tightening, editing, restructuring and promoting of the novel. I'm heavily in the mix for steps one and three, while I pull back and let dad work his magic during the actual writing portion of the process. After all, two people cannot successfully divide the actual fleshing out of a novel between themselves — the final product would be disjointed and the voice in which it was written would suffer from a kind of split personality disorder. Too many cooks spoil the broth, as they say. As for the editing, the rumors are true — I am as ruthless as my father says. By the time I'm done with it, a Slade manuscript has more red ink on the pages than bloodletting within them! Most of the editing I do is towards the end of the drafting process. We find that criticism during the writing can sometimes threaten writer's block — the black plague of the profession! As for the research, yes I do help in that capacity. Sometimes we'll go on fieldtrips to locations that are going to factor into the book and I'll man the camcorder while dad maps out the scene. We've done that for some of the car chases in the past books. For *Death's Door*, we did a lot of the footwork together. For instance, we went out to the airport to get a grip on how the coffin would be brought into the country, and we also went out to Wreck Beach to figure out how the body would wash ashore. The Fragonard stuff was a discovery of mine. A lot of the Mummy info

came from a book I bought dad for Christmas last year.

CD What's it like promoting a book — something you look forward to or dread?

RC It's fun. I'm a bit of a ham, so there's never much of a problem as far as nerves go or anything. Besides, it's great to meet the fans after all these years. I've always wondered what kind of person reads a Slade novel. After going out to the signings I've learned that there isn't one kind of person — a Sladist is just as likely to be a fourteen year old boy into Goth as he or she is an eighty year old tea-drinking grandmother of twelve. You just never know.

CD Tell me your thoughts about the female characters in Slade books.

RC They reflect real women about as well as is possible under the circumstances. Let's face it — that book about men being from Mars and women being from Venus was dead on. A man can only create a female character from the point of view of observation, not understanding. But I think that women are represented fairly — there are good ones and bad ones, strong ones and weak ones across the nine-novel span. If that doesn't mimic life, I don't know what would. I can't stand thrillers where all the male characters end up

either being the bad guy or catching him, while the only female characters are those ending up on the dissection table at the morgue. This isn't 1950, after all.

CD How do you feel about the violence in Slade books?

RC My response to those who criticize the supposed excess of violence in the Slade novels is this: go down to a morgue for the day; read a ViCLAS questionnaire; try defending over 100 murder cases or specializing in the law of criminal insanity for a living as my father did. Once you've done all that come back and try to tell us that what we write about doesn't take place every single day in the world in which we live. The violence in our novels isn't gratuitous — it's realistic. To tone it down is almost to glamorize it — to make it more palatable to the average person. Murder should never be made palatable; it should be shown as it is — ugly as hell.

CD What does the future hold for Rebecca Clarke?

RC Currently, Slade is promoting the latest book, *Death's Door*, as well as plotting and beginning to write the next one. In addition to that, I'm also one-third of the way into writing my own novel — a thriller — which, with any luck, should be slated for release in conjunction with Slade novel number ten. As for dreams of a future career in writing back in the days of being a wet-behind-the-ears university student, well, I would have had to be nuts not to make use of the great teacher and mentor I have in Slade. Besides, if I didn't have some sort of creative release valve for my overactive imagination I would probably be in a padded cell by now. Come to think of it, maybe Slade's child isn't so normal after all.

See the official Michael Slade web site at www.specialx.net

