

[Music]

>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. Each year, thousands of booklovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the National Book Festival, sponsored by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady Laura Bush. Now in its eighth year, this free event, held on the National Mall Saturday, September 27th, will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact with the nation's bestselling authors, illustrators, and poets. Even if you can't attend in person, you can still participate online. These podcasts with well-known authors and other materials are available through the National Book Festival website at www.loc.gov/bookfest.

[Music]

It's now my honor to talk with the legendary children's author R. L. Stine. Since writing his first teen horror novel in 1987, he has sold more than 400 million books. His classic Goosebumps series became a hit worldwide, making Stine an international celebrity. The Goosebumps TV show was the top children's television program for three years straight. His awards and honors include the Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Award, the 2007 Thriller Writers of America Silver Bullet Award, and a Children's Choices Award. Mr. Stine is currently working on two new book series: Rotten School and Goosebumps HorrorLand: The Scream of the Haunted Mask. The latest book in the HorrorLand series is due out next month. Mr. Stine, welcome. It's a pleasure to talk with you.

>> Well, thank you, Matt. A pleasure to talk to you.

>> Thank you so much for your time. When did you know that you wanted to be a writer?

>> When I was nine years old. I was a weird kid, I think. When I was nine, I discovered the typewriter up in the attic, and I dragged it down to my room and I started typing a little joke magazine and typing out stories and things, and I don't know why I found it so interesting. My mother would be outside the door saying, "Go outside and play. What's wrong with you? Go outside and play," and I'd say, "Oh, no, it's boring out there." Type, type, type, type. And here I am, still doing it.

>> Now, we were talking about this before I rolled tape, but back when I was a younger person I actually bought a book called How to Be Funny by a guy named Jovial Bob Stine. Tell us about --

>> That was me; I was Jovial Bob. Most people don't realize. I mean, before I was a scary guy, I wrote about a hundred joke books and funny books for kids, but no one really noticed. I think I didn't really catch on until I got scary.

>> Well, I did. That book was dog-eared, I think, for quite some years in my house. Was it a difficult transition going from -- it almost seems like two ends of a pole -- jokes to writing horror stories.

>> Oh, I think they're very closely connected. Whenever I go to a horror movie or read a horror book or something, it always makes me laugh. I don't know. I never get scared. I think there's a very close connection. You know, when you go to an amusement park and you go up close to a rollercoaster ride, you hear people laughing and screaming at the same time.

>> Are there things that do scare you? And I'm thinking of, you know -- I mean, obviously there are things in the world that scare us all, but are there movies or books --

>> Yeah, it's a very scary world these days.

>> What drove you specifically to write horror stories for children?

>> Actually, it wasn't even my idea. That's the funny part. I was doing joke books and I was doing all kinds of books: Indiana Jones and James Bond for kids. And an editor said to me, "I'll bet you could write a good scary novel. Why don't you go home and write a book for teenagers called Blind Date?" And I said, "Okay, no problem." I didn't really know what she was talking about, and I went to the book store and bought a whole bunch of scary books for kids so I could find out what was going on and what she was talking about, and I read the books and tried to just figure out what I could do that would be different from them. And I wrote Blind Date, and it was an immediate bestseller. I'd always liked horror -- my brother and I went to every horror movie when we were kids -- but I never thought of writing it. And I did this book Blind Date, and it was immediately Number One on the Publisher Weekly Bestseller List, and I thought, "Wait a minute; I've struck a chord here. I've found something kids really like."

>> You said that when you yourself were a kid that you were shy and afraid of a lot of things. What were some of those things and do those translate into your books?

>> Well, I think that's why I stayed in my room typing all the time. I was a very fearful child and very shy. I had, you know, normal kid fears: afraid of the dark, afraid that if I put my feet down on the floor from bed something would reach out from under my bed and grab my ankle. And I remember being afraid to put my bike into the garage late at night. I'd come back, right, from bike riding and I had to talk my bike into the garage. I always thought something maybe was lurking inside the garage. Luckily, I have a very good memory and I can remember that feeling of panic. Now, when I write these books I remember what it's like to be a kid and have this feeling of fear, and I try to put that into my books.

>> Who were some of your influences, whether authors or other people, when you were a child?

>> Well, first, I guess, the EC Horror comics. They were very important to me. Tales from the Crypt and The Vault of Horror. I just loved those comic books; they were so well-drawn and the stories were hilarious. There was always -- they were very creepy, but they always had very funny twist endings, and they made a very big impression on me. Then when I was

about, I don't know, nine or 10, a librarian gave me a book and she said, "Here, Bob, I think you'll like this." And it was a book of stories by Ray Bradbury, and I read these stories and I couldn't believe it. They were so creative and so beautifully written and just captivating to me, even at age 10. And I think Ray Bradbury really turned me into a reader. Then I started reading Isaac Asimov and Robert Sheckley and all these other science fiction people and a lot more Ray Bradbury. And that's how I became a reader. They were very important to me.

>> Me as well; that's interesting. I read that you come up with the title of your book first and then you write the story. Is that correct?

>> Yeah, it's correct. I don't know. I think that's backwards for most authors, isn't it?

>> Have you ever gotten in to a situation where you've changed the title once a story's evolved, or even perhaps you've kept a title with a story that had evolved?

>> Well, I have changed, you know, I change stories. I have to have the title. I have to know the title first. I can't write. And the title's usually -- you know, kids have always asked, "Where'd you get your ideas?" That's there number one question: "Where do you get your ideas?" And I mostly get my ideas from titles. Once I have a title, it sort of leads me. I did a Nightmare Room book called Locker 13, and I just knew. I knew this was a good title. I thought, "Well, what would happen to you if you were this kid in school and you were assigned locker 13? Would your luck suddenly change? What would happen?" And it led me to the story. And that's usually how I write these things: I get the title, and then I think of the story.

>> Hmm. Now, in your stories, do you feel that there's a need to find a balance between what is scary and maybe what's too scary?

>> Yeah, I'm very careful, and I, you know, having done this, I've written now about 220 scary books for kids. So I pretty much know what the limits are. I might -- I'm pretty conservative. My editors always say, "Make it scarier. Hype it up. Make it scarier," because I tend to be pretty cautious with kids because I don't really want to terrify kids, you know. I hate it when parents say, "Oh, your books gave my kids nightmares." I don't like that.

>> When their own sleep patterns are disrupted, huh?

>> Yeah, right. So, you know, I'm very careful. My one rule, my main rule -- first of all, whenever -- like a Goosebumps book, you know, I'm doing 12 new Goosebumps books. I'm doing these books called Goosebumps HorrorLand.

>> Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that.

>> Yeah, but anyway, whenever I feel that it's starting to get too intense, I throw in something funny. I make it a tease, or I throw in a funny chapter ending, just so it never gets too intense. And I try never

to put the real world into these books. I want kids to know that they're fantasies. They're just creepy fantasies, and so I don't do any real problems that a kid might have. You know, divorce and family problems or drugs, I don't do any of that real-world stuff ever.

>> Well, tell me a little bit about the new series Goosebumps HorrorLand.

>> Well, these are the first new Goosebumps books in eight years. I did 87 of them before. I thought maybe that was enough, right? But eight years later, half of my fan mail is from kids saying, "Are you going to do more Goosebumps?" And all the emails from my website, RLStine.com, the message board: "When are you going to do new Goosebumps books?" So, I thought I'd better listen to kids. So I'm doing this new series, Goosebumps HorrorLand, which is a little bit different from the old books. The new books have two stories in every book. There's a Goosebumps story right in the front. The first one is called Revenge of the Living Dummy. The second one is called Creep from the Deep, and you get a complete Goosebumps story, and then, just when you think it's safe to close the book, there's another story. It's a continuing story that takes place at HorrorLand amusement park, the scariest place on Earth, and this is a 12-part serial that continues from book to book, featuring the kids that are in the first story. So it's kind of an experiment for me. I don't think anyone has ever done a monthly serial for kids before. Maybe there's a reason why they haven't done it, but that's what we're trying to do: a 12-part continuing story.

>> Well, obviously, your track record's amazing. I'm not sure I've done 87 of anything, but what can readers look forward to in the soon to be released, I guess, The Scream of the Haunted Mask?

>> Well, this is Carly Beth, you know, who originally found the haunted mask and put it on and the mask stuck to her face and became part of her, and started to turn her evil. And now in this one, Carly Beth is reunited with this evil mask and some horrible things happen and some things that - evil things that didn't happen before. It's a sequel to the original one.

>> You mentioned that you're often asked where you get your story ideas from. How often do you have the opportunity to interact with your readers? And do they at all influence your writing?

>> Well, I interact a lot. I do a lot of school visits. I love seeing my readers, I love getting out to bookstores and seeing kids and talking to kids, but also there is this message board on RLStine.com. That's my website, and I get hundreds of messages. I read all of them. I'm just very interested in what the kids are saying, and I think it's very important for me to keep up with them.

>> And did you ever offer them advice if they perhaps want to become a writer or pursue other talents of their own?

>> I do. I have very boring advice for kids who want to be a writer. A lot of kids want to say, "I've written a book; how do I get it published? Help me get this published." And I always have to be very disappointing

and say, "You know, no one's really interested in publishing kids. You can't concentrate if you're a kid on getting published. What you have to concentrate on is writing and writing and writing and getting better." But, you know, they don't want to hear that. My main advice is to read all kinds of authors, you know, don't just read me, or don't just read one kind of book, because if you want to be a writer, this way you absorb all the different writing styles from different people without even realizing it.

>> I don't want to get too psychological, I guess, with this question, but what do you think it is about the human psyche -- and in particular kids -- that makes us want to be scared?

>> Yeah, I think we all do. My theory is -- and especially with kids -- is that we like having these adventures. We like having these really, you know, tingly, creepy adventures if we know we're safe at the same time. So, the kids reading my books are going out and they're fighting this hideous monster-blood substance, or they're battling vampires and they're on their own trying to do this stuff, but at the same time they know they're safe in their room reading. And I think that's the exciting part.

>> Now, you have another series, Rotten School, which is about a boarding school that is rotten to the core. Why the departure from horror stories?

>> Well, I thought I'd give the kids a break, you know, and not scare them for a while.

>> And the parents, too?

>> So, you know, these books are just crazy. They're just funny, and they have wonderful cartoon illustrations by a guy named Trip Park who's just hilarious drawings, and it's about this insane boarding school and this conman, this fourth grade conman Bernie Bridges, who can con anyone out of anything and convince anybody. He convinced the chef at the school that Milky Way bars were a vegetable, you know, that kind of thing. So it's just, you know, I had a great time. I've written 16 Rotten School books, and now they're all coming out in paperback, and it was just fun to be, you know, let go and just be crazy for a while.

>> You mentioned earlier on, we were talking about coming up with a title first, and one of the questions I always like to ask authors is, if they could just talk a little bit about their own writing process, and I mean the mechanics of it -- you know, some people like to scrawl things on a piece of paper when they wake up in the middle of the night or they go off into a cabin or something. How does R. L. Stine write?

>> Well, I'm basically a machine. I can write anywhere. I treat it as a full-time job. I have, you know, a room in my apartment that's just for me to write, and a lot of atmosphere. I have a skeleton in there and some eyeballs, and I write, you know, I pretty much sit down from 10:00 to 3:00 every day. It's just like a full-time job. Kids always ask me about process and writer's block and that kind of thing and, you know, they don't want to hear this, but I outline every book that I write. I do a very complete -- before I start to write anything, I do a very complete

chapter-by-chapter outline of every book with all the action in the book, some of the dialogue, every chapter ending. So, that's the hard part. That's where I do all the thinking. So when I sit down to write the book, I've done all the hard work. I've done it all, and then I can just enjoy the writing and relax and use the outline and fill it in and have a good time with it. And also, kids ask -- you can't have writing block if you know how the book is going to end and you know the middle and you know everything. There's no way to have writer's block. You've done it all.

>> Now, at the end of your books, quite often it seems the characters end up safe and happy and back with their families and maybe they've learned a thing or two along the way. Do you think it's important to have a happy ending and maybe to impart a moral?

>> Kids demand to have -- there's no morals. The only morals in these books, really, is kids have to face these horrible things on their own. Their parents are useless in the books, and they have to use their own wit and imagination and, you know, to triumph. But kids demand a happy ending. It's amazing. They have to have it. You know, I did a teen series called Fear Street, and I tried -- I did one book called The Best Friend, and it had an unhappy ending, where the good girl was taken off as a murderer and the bad girl triumphed, and kids hated this book. They turned on me. I got all this mail: "Dear R. L. Stine, you moron! How could you write that?" "Dear R. L. Stine, you're an idiot! Are you going to write a sequel to finish the story?" They absolutely couldn't accept an unhappy ending, and I've never done one since.

>> Well, whatever it is, you seem to have hit a sweet spot with your reading audience. We're obviously very excited to hear from you and to see you at the National Book Festival.

>> I'm really looking forward to it. This is my favorite book festival. This is my fourth time.

>> Excellent.

>> And I just always have a wonderful time and get to meet hundreds and hundreds of readers, so this book festival is a lot of fun for me.

>> Why is it important for you to have participated so often?

>> Well, I go anywhere where, you know, they're promoting literacy. I went to Moscow with the First Lady Laura Bush a couple years ago. Mrs. Putin was having a book festival for kids over there, and I'll just, you know, my whole career really has been about getting kids to read, and that's the thing I'm most proud of: the millions of kids that I've gotten to read through my books. And, you know, the National Book Festival really promotes literacy and promotes the fun of reading, so I'm always happy to be there.

>> And what can we expect to hear from you there?

>> I usually write a ghost story with the kids. We write one together, and then I tell a few ghost stories and just talk to the kids.

>> Do you put those on the web or do you file those away or are these things that you save?

>> No, that's my talk.

>> Yeah.

>> That's my talk; it's what I do.

>> Great, and we'll have a webcast of those as well, so I look --

>> Oh, that's great.

>> I look forward to seeing that and in perpetuity actually. Before I let you go, what is next for you? What's on the horizon for R. L. Stine?

>> I don't know. I've got these 12 Goosebumps HorrorLand books to write, and I'm right in the middle of that, and I'm really enjoying being back, you know, doing Goosebumps books. And then we'll see. Maybe we'll do more, or maybe I'll go on to something else. I don't really know at this point.

>> Well, R. L. Stine, thank you so much for your time today.

>> Thank you, Matt. I really enjoy talking to you.

>> Very much appreciate it, and as I said, we'll be hearing more from R. L. Stine at the National Book Festival. That's on Saturday, September 27th on the National Mall from 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM. The event: free and open to the public. For more details and a complete list of the participating authors, you can visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. From the Library of Congress, this is Matt Raymond. Thank you for listening.

[Music]