

By Christine Auda

Paramus! Magazine recently caught up with Robert Damon Schneck, author of *The President's Vampire* and other books and articles covering strange-but-true tales in America. He shares his memories of growing up in Paramus and influences on his work. The next time you're at Villa Pizza, say hi to the well-fed, bearded man at the corner table, behind piles of papers, wearing headphones blaring Bach.

Digs Up Local Author Oddities

How long have you been writing in the pizza place?

I've been writing there for years.

Normally I don't give out too many details, what with all the autograph hounds in the world, but most days I am in Villa Pizza at Bergen Town Center. It's got everything a writer needs - tables, caffeinated drinks and pizza.

Where else do you write?

For some reason I need to be in a public place, preferably with some noise to concentrate. The only quiet place where I can work is the bathtub, and I've got a small plastic desk and pencils there.

Where do you live now?

I divide my time between Paramus and Brooklyn, where I live in a small cave-like apartment filled with books, papers, folders, filing cabinets, newspaper clippings, Ouija boards and computers. Location has little bearing on my work; one of my college professors said he never knew anyone who lived in their head as much as I do.

Do you use a laptop or pen and paper?

I do most of my writing with a fountain pen on unlined paper. The pen nib makes beautiful lines. Then I go home, type in the computer until sunrise, sleep all day and repeat the process. After a while, you have a book.

What Paramus schools did you attend, and did teachers influence your writing?

My schools were Ridge Ranch, Eastbrook, and Paramus High School, and I had some great teachers. One in particular, Robert Boyce, was an important influence on my writing. Mr.

Boyce loved language and insisted on the precise use of words; to this day I avoid using "thing," which Mr. Boyce considered vague. I could list a dozen more "Boyceisms" that

echo in my brain when I'm writing.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

James Thurber, Robert Burton, Robert Benchley, S.J. Perelman, W.S. Maugham, and my name-

sake, Damon Runyon and more. The single piece of writing that had the greatest influence on my writing, however, is George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language," which I would recommend to everyone interested in writing or reading.

When did you become attracted to the paranormal and urban legends?

I don't remem-

ber a time when I wasn't, and I'm not attracted to the paranormal per se, but to what deviates from the norm.

Have you ever investigated any Bergen County or Paramus paranormal happenings?

I'm not a paranormal investigator, but an historian of slippery subjects. In many ways Paramus is still a new town, and it takes time to accumulate stories and legends. In fact, the only Paramus ghost story I'm aware of, involved the old Tom Sawyer Diner. I'm interested in hearing from people about their strange Paramus experiences. There's got to be a ghost in one of these malls! That said, there is a local story I would like to explore about an 18th century poltergeist outbreak in Teaneck, N.J.

Are you a fan of Weird N.J.?

I am. The Marks [publishers] have shown the rest of the nation what we already knew about New Jersey, and the books in the *Weird U.S.* series have been written by many of my friends.

Tell us a little about your upcoming book.

Like *The President's Vampire*, it is a collection of unusual events that have occurred in the United States. It is somewhat different in that there is more speculation and interpretation than the first book. The working title is *Mrs. Wakeman vs. the Antichrist*.

Robert Damon Schneck is a freelance writer and contributor to *Fortean Times*, *Fate Magazine*, and others. presidentsvampire@earthlink.net

An Interview with Robert Damon Schneck

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