

Ten Questions

GMM: Welcome to *Girl Meets Monster* and thank you for being part of my first Women in Horror Month series, Valjeanne. What projects are you currently working on? Is horror your primary genre, or do you write in other genres? If you write in other genres, which do you feel most comfortable writing, and why?

VJ: Hi Michelle, thank you for having me. I've just released the 3rd novel of my *Mona Livelong: Paranormal Detective series: The Case of the Vanishing Child*. It's a horror/steamfunk novel based in an alternate world, and the main character, Mona, is both a sleuth and a sorceress. I'm also working on a screenplay of my novel, *The Switch II: Clockwork*.

Horror isn't my primary genre, but it's one of my favorites. I write under the broad umbrella of Speculative fiction, so I also write science fiction/ fantasy, which is also described as Afrofuturism. I feel comfortable writing in almost any genres, and I tend to mix them. *The Switch II: Clockwork*, for example, is a steamfunk novel, but it is also Afrofuturistic.

GMM: When did you first know that you were a horror writer? How did you develop an interest in the genre? What initially attracted you to horror stories? Which writers influenced you then? Which writers influence you now?

VJ: I actually didn't think of myself as a horror writer until Author Sumiko Saulson featured my writing in 100+ *Black Women in Horror*. Sumiko told me that my readers had approached her and asked that she include my *Immortal* series. I was both amazed and honored. That's when I decided to add horror to my writing menu, and I went out of my way in my *Mona Livelong* series to scare my readers.

I've always enjoyed reading and watching horror. I can remember watching horror movies with my parents (for example, *The Shining*), and as a little girl, I was addicted to *Dark Shadows*. The first horror writer I fell in love with was Stephen King. Of course, when I first began reading horror there were no writers that looked like me. All of this changed in the 1990s. I discovered Octavia Butler, and later Nalo Hopkinson, Brandon Massey and Tananarive Due. These are writers, along with Richard Wright and James Baldwin, that I credit as my earliest influences. They continue to impact my writing, as well as Keith Gaston and N.K. Jemison.

GMM: The documentary, *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror* (2019), explores Black horror and the portrayal (and absence) of Black people in horror movies. As a definition of what Black horror means begins to take shape, Tananarive Due says "Black history is Black horror." What do you think she meant by that? Can you give an example of how this idea shows up in your own work?

VJ: I'm sure she meant that African America history is one of trauma and violence: from our being kidnapped and dragged to American shores, through the Jim Crow and the Civil Rights era, our history is filled with tales of horror. Our stories are often those of pain and trauma.

Richard Wright, in *Black Boy*, says, “This was the culture from which I sprang, this was the terror from which I fled.” Yet our stories are also those of incredible victories because we refused to submit, to give up. Instead, we pushed on. We blossomed, and we continue to blossom like a garden of black roses.

As a black woman, I am grappling with issues of those that came before me, and those that we face in present times. This may find its way onto my pages. But I write with optimism and hope. And I always strive give my readers an exciting tale they can sink their teeth into.

GMM: As a WOC writing horror/dark speculative fiction, do you feel obligated to have a deeper message in your stories? Can writers of color write stories without broader messages about identity, class, and racism? Is it possible to divorce yourself from that ongoing narrative within our culture when you set out to write a story?

VJ: I don’t feel obligated to include a deeper message in my stories, and some of my favorite authors write without doing so. I’ve certainly never started one with this intent. Sometimes a story is just a story, meant to entertain and nothing more. But I do find myself writing about flawed heroines and heroes, men and women who are fighting to save themselves and their worlds. Often the demons they’re fighting are personal ones; life is always in session. There are no perfect people, and so my characters are imperfect as well. Who you are, and what you’re battling, will always find its way onto the page, and this where I find myself writing, too, about larger issues of race, gender and class.

GMM: What are your top five favorite horror movies, and why? Top five horror novels? Which book or movie scared you the most?

VJ: My top five horror movies are: *The Shining*; *Tales from the Hood*; *Get Out*; *Dr. Sleep*, and *When a Stranger Calls*. I like horror movies with well-developed plots and characters, and layers of suspense that build to a nail biting crescendo. I also prefer horror flicks with a racially diverse cast of characters, which is a lot easier to come by nowadays.

My top favorite horror novels are: *Wild Seed* (Octavia Butler); *Into the Dark* (Brandon Massey); *The Good House* (Tananarive Due); *It* (Stephen King) and *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* (N.K. Jemison). I’d have to say *Into the Dark* scared me the most.

GMM: How do you feel about white-identifying writers who write stories about non-white characters? What problems have you encountered? What potential issues do you see with white-identifying writers telling BIPOC stories? What advice would you give those writers?

VJ: There are some white authors who are very skillful at creating “flesh and blood” non-white characters. One writer in particular, who is also one of my favorites, is Tad Williams; his *Otherland* series is brilliant. What I mean by “flesh and blood,” are well rounded characters, who black and brown folks can identify with. In contrast, there are other white authors I’ve encountered, whose non-white characters are cardboard cutouts, overlaid with stereotypes.

My advice to these authors is: if you don't have black and brown friends, *real* friends mind you, perhaps it's best if you don't write about people of color. This might sound harsh, but one of the first pieces of writing advice that I received was: "Write what you know." Every character I've created is a compilation of diverse men and women I've met, studied, or both, and myself.

GMM: All writers have experienced some form of impostor syndrome. What has your experience with impostor syndrome been like? Did you ever have a particularly bad case of it? If so, what caused it and how did you manage it?

VJ: I have experienced feelings of self-doubt and feelings that I don't "measure up" as a writer. But when I'm at my lowest, my readers, and other writers, often help me get through it. I've received uplifting emails from folks who love my latest project, and sometimes even a post on my Facebook page. I think I speak for most authors when I say: we write for ourselves and for our readers. I cherish every one of them.

GMM: Tell me about Mona Livelong. What or who inspired this character? Without too many spoilers, can you give some insight into her backstory, and why she became a detective? Why a paranormal detective as opposed to a detective who solves basic human problems?

VJ: Mona Livelong sprang the same inspiration as Karla, the main character of my *Immortal* series. Both characters are based upon Carla, a young woman who babysat me when I was living in Los Angeles. Carla's mother, as well as her youngest brother, died and she was raising her two surviving siblings while attending college. I remember her as an intelligent, compassionate young woman, who was determined to achieve her goals.

Mona is cut from this same cloth. She's strong, but also vulnerable, and she's known tragedy. She was born a sorceress and decided to use her gifts to help her community, solving cases regular detectives can't solve. As to why she's a paranormal detective, when I create a character, he or she will almost *always* be supernatural. I love Speculative Fiction just that much.

GMM: Some writers work best in silence, and others prefer to listen to music when they write. How has music influenced your work? What kinds of music do like to listen to when you're writing? How does it help with your process?

VJ: I can write in silence, but I prefer listening to music when I write, especially if I'm working on character or plot development. If I'm doing either one, I usually listen to jazz or R&B (for example, WAR and Barry White). If I'm writing an action scene, I'm definitely listening to Hip Hop or Classic Rock. I've actually acted out action scenes while listening to music; it helps me visualize what's happening to my characters, and if the scene will "work."

GMM: If you could go back in time, what advice would you give your younger self? How would you have approached becoming a writer? Would you have done anything differently, or would you have followed the same path?

VJ: If I could give young Valjeanne any advice I would tell her, "Keep writing Speculative Fiction, sweetheart, and don't stop. No matter what anyone says." I began writing poetry and

stories as a young girl. My only regret is that I took a hiatus and didn't dive back in until years later. This is the only thing I would change.