Robison Wells Interviews His Brother, Dan Wells

Dan Wells is the acclaimed author of the John Cleaver series: I Am Not a Serial Killer, Mr. Monster, and I Don’t Want to Kill You. He has been nominated for both the Hugo and the Campbell Award and has won two Parsec Awards for his podcast Writing Excuses. Robison Wells, Dan’s younger brother, is the author of Variant, which Publishers Weekly called “a chilling, masterful debut” in a starred review, and its sequel, Feedback (available Fall 2012). Here, Robison interviews his brother about Partials, Dan’s pulse-pounding first book in his post-apocalyptic series that questions the very concept of what it means to be human.

Robison: Dan is my brother, exactly 13 months older than me. He and I shared a room our entire childhood, took the same classes, even dated the same girls. Dan got me into writing about twelve years ago, and ever since we’ve critiqued each other’s work, brainstormed new ideas, and told each other how terrible he is. So, with such a long background together, I’m particularly interested to see if I can learn anything new in this interview.

I’ve read so much of your writing over the years, from your poem about turkeys in the fifth grade to your first epic fantasy to your literary farce to your horror, and now your YA post-apocalyptic Partials. Is there anything you’ve written that I’d be surprised to hear about?

Dan: I wrote some Rifts fan fiction in high school—I don’t know if you knew about that. I actually reused a part of it for Partials.

Robison: What part?

Dan: I won’t say, but it’s in the first third.

Robison: You’ve written in all these different genres: Is it because you’re still looking for the perfect fit? Or are you just interested in writing lots of different things?
Dan: Almost every book I write is a new genre, or a weird combination of genres, because I like to branch out and try new things. I never would have imagined that I’d write a horror series, but that was the first book I published. I never would have found that character, or the audience that loves him, if I’d forced myself to stick to one thing.

Robison: How was the transition from supernatural to sci-fi?

Dan: Not too bad, since I see them as very connected—the only real difference between fantasy and SF is the explanation of where the weird stuff comes from. SF ended up being a lot harder, in some ways, because I had to make those explanations scientifically sound. In my horror series I could just say, “It’s a monster!” With SF I had to do a ton of research into genetics, biology, and the science of decay.

Robison: How did you do your research?

Dan: A lot of my research started online, including Wikipedia—people make fun of it as a research tool, and I admit that it’s a terrible place to end your research, but it’s a fantastic place to start. From there I found more detailed websites, and eventually some great connections to books. One of the most useful books I read was The World Without Us by Alan Weisman, about what would happen to the things we leave behind if we suddenly weren’t there to take care of them. It’s a very detailed combination of scientific research and thought experiment.

In Partials, the apocalypse wasn’t a bomb or a war or anything physically destructive, just a disease: We died, but all our stuff is still just sitting there. It was a fun situation to study, and a blast to depict in a book.

Robison: So, having done all that research, what tips would you give for surviving an apocalyptic pandemic? Let’s assume you’re immune to the virus.

Dan: I don’t know how you’re going to work that out, but there you go. Once you have that taken care of, you live in a combination of paradise and medieval squalor. You will have no electricity or running water, but almost everything else will be free. Canned food can last for a decade or more before going bad, so you can live at a subsistence level just by scavenging the local stores.

Robison: Why do you think your society of survivors ended up being organized and civil and less Mad Max-ish?

Dan: A big part of it is the scarcity issue. Mad Max and similar apocalyptic scenarios start with the premise that everything is destroyed. The survivors have to fight tooth and nail for what little resources are left. In Partials, everything you could ever want is just there for the taking.
Robison: What books/movies/music/TV influenced Partials?

Dan: Some of the influences are obvious, like Battlestar Galactica and Children of Men. Others are harder to spot. I listened to a steady diet of protest songs and revolutionary music while writing, stuff like “Uprising” by Muse, because they got my blood going and helped me get into the main character’s fiery personality. And some of my influences didn’t really end up in the book, though I still count them—things like Mad Max and A Canticle for Leibowitz that inspired my love of post-apocalyptic stories, but which didn’t really apply in this case.

The biggest influence may have been our own history and current events. Partials is, at times, a very angry book, and that’s a reflection of my own feelings about a lot of the stuff I see going on in the world.

Robison: Let’s talk about that. You’ve said before that you think one of the reasons dystopia is so popular right now is because our world is becoming more dystopian. What current events influenced you in Partials?

Dan: For example, the story is set eleven years after a devastating catastrophe—and in 2012, my readers are also eleven years after their own devastating catastrophe. The events of 9/11 changed the way we do almost everything in this country, and to a lesser extent the rest of the world. One of the things I tried to do in the book was show that the adults, who remember what life was like before the end of the world, have a very different attitude about it than the kids who’ve never really known any other life.

I also tried to throw in a lot of the extreme measures our government and our culture in general have taken in response to terrorism—reduced privacy, indefinite detention, torture, and so on. I think there are arguments on both sides of all these issues, and I tried to give each side a fair shake. Kira, the main character, has very strong ideas about what’s justifiable and what’s not, and just because she’s the main character doesn’t mean she’s always right. If anyone’s actually “right” at all.

Robison: So, on a happier note, why do you think I’m so awesome?

Dan: Because you take after your brother.

I’m really not into dystopian/post-apocalyptic books (unless they feature zombies...go figure) but I decided to give this one a try when the pickings were slim on the most recent Vine newsletter. At roughly 472 pages, this is a hefty read and the subject matter is rather intense/dark at times so if
you're looking for something light and upbeat, look elsewhere. This is an ambitious book and for the most part I really enjoyed it....but it did have its flaws.

The Good:
- Had it not been for the cover blurb and the cover illustration, I wouldn't have realized this was a YA-targeted book until a good portion of the way into the story. First off, the characters are expected to behave and act like adults in this brave, new world...so most of the teen angst nonsense so prevalent in many YA books is simply not here at all. Also the author presumes the intelligence of his readers...nothing gets dumbed down and the science and technology in the book are fairly detailed and sophisticated. The author also doesn't pull any punches when it comes to presenting the reality of a world in which the human race is rapidly heading towards extinction...there are some uncomfortable truths the characters (and readers) will face but I think this adds to the richness of the story.
- Kira is a very smart and easy-to-like heroine. In fact, most of the key young adult characters are multifaceted, richly layered, and given a level of complexity not often found in books for teens. Not all the main characters are likeable....but they are presented in such a way that you can at least understand where theyre coming from even if you dont like them very much.
- When the suspense starts, its action-packed, full of tension, and pretty awesome. It felt cinematic at times....which made it easier for me to picture the scenes in my minds eye.
- I love how the book starts out with a very tight focus and then expands to include all the details of Kiras world (and beyond) as her understanding of the world she knows and herself begin to change. The world building is detailed and nicely done...especially the attention to detail surrounding the aftermath of the virus and how everything fell apart.

Needs Improvement:
- Many of the adult characters came off as two-dimensional, especially the ones involved in the political spectrum. One of my pet peeves with regards to YA books is when the majority of adults get portrayed as losers. I dont think it does young adults any favors to reinforce the stereotype that grown-ups are complete idiots and unworthy of respect. I think a story can explore the idea of an empowered teen without having to turn the over-thirties into cartoon characters or buffoons.
- At times I found it difficult to keep track of the numerous characters. I also felt the author/editor could have easily trimmed or even cut an entire chapter or scene and the story wouldn't have suffered as a result.
- I liked where the story went in the last third of the book.....but Im not sure I fully understand why it happened, nor did I find some of the revelations believable. It seemed to me the author could have used some additional foreshadowing to at least hint at some of the things we discover, especially in the final two chapters. As it stands, Kiras discoveries about herself and her family seemed totally out of the blue given what we already knew of her and of the Partials.
One thing to keep in mind, while this book does feature a relationship between Kira and her boyfriend, Marcus...the whole romance thing takes a big backseat and this is most definitely not a book in which the romance is a main part of the story. The two characters feel like very old friends and clearly have a deep feelings for one another...but there is zero romantic tension. Possible this will be explored further in the next book, especially with regards to Samm...but for now, don't buy this book if you're looking for a strong romance angle.

PS for those of you who are fans of the most recent Battlestar Galactica series, the underlying themes--especially with regards to the Partials vs. the humans (think Cylons vs. humans)--are quite similar.

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