

KELLI STANLEY

Q&A

(Noir and NOX DORMIENDA)

OK, let's start with the obvious. What exactly is 'Roman noir'?

Kelli (laughs): Good question. Here's a quick description: Roman noir begins with the premise that noir is an atmosphere. It's specifically an angst-ridden urban atmosphere, and I consider Rome the first real urban culture—they defined it for everyone else. I think Eddie Muller [author and founder of the Film Noir Foundation] mentions ancient Rome in his book *Dark City* in those terms. It's also a play on the French literary term for classic hardboiled noir fiction—Hammett, Chandler, Cain, etc.—*roman noir*. I decided to capitalize the 'r' and lift the expression into English.

So Roman Noir is 'roman noir' in an ancient Roman setting.

Kelli: Exactly.

You can guess the next question: how do you define noir?

Kelli (shakes her head): That's tough. For me, noir was born in the stress—and exhilaration—of a city environment—crime, overpopulation, corruption, economic desperation, obsession, speed, neon signs blinking 'open 24 hours' against a rainy, sooty backdrop. The city, in a vastly different and mostly rural America of the '20s and early '30s, promised opportunity and instant gratification to a lot of people. It signified sophistication, experience, a chance to shed your identity and start over ... look how many films exploit that idea, like the pre-code masterpiece *Baby Face*. A brilliant Barbara Stanwyck film. Anyway, the simple country life was usually held up as an innocent ideal and the city is seen as a corrupting influence. Think *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* as an archetypal example. But the *Black Mask* pulp writers started writing about a tough breed of hero who thrived on the speed of the city and didn't flinch from its ugliness. In fact, they tried to remake it into something aesthetically beautiful—especially Chandler, who was a poet and a Romantic—and a classicist, too.

Your biography lists him as one of your favorite authors. And I hear you have a Chandler artifact ...

Kelli: He's my favorite of all noir writers, and one of my favorite writers, period. He's also been my biggest influence. *Nox Dormienda (A Long Night for Sleeping)* is titled as a direct homage to *The Big Sleep*, his first novel. And I'm pretty sure, given his classical background, that he took the metaphor from the same place I do: Catullus [first century BC Roman poet]. Chandler inserted some psychological uncertainty and a crisis of identity into Marlowe—he's an emotional writer, and so am I. That tension, that imperfection and sense of torment prefigures the post-war paradigmatic film noir—the movies that led to the genre's naming. Now, as for my 'holy grail' ... well, yes. I own a hardcover copy of the works of Henry James—

Chandler's own favorite writer—that was given to him by John Houseman. The inscription says “For Ray, in the Year of the Dahlia. J.H.”

Wow! That's special.

Kelli: You're telling me. It's probably my most precious material possession. And of course, there's the black bird ...

Any relation to the one that used to be at John's Grill [restaurant in San Francisco]?

Kelli: (fake growl): You'd better say that with a smile on your face. (laughs). No relation at all. I hope that particular bird gets returned to its home. Although in a way it's kind of touching that even in the 21st century it would inspire a theft! I'm happy with my own, thanks.

So getting back to noir ... are there different kinds? And is noir always urban, or always bleak?

Kelli: (chuckles) I'm sorry, I was just thinking about the fact that I always call *It's A Wonderful Life* 'Christmas Noir.' Because it is, really. I think you can carve up noir in a lot of tiny pieces, and some historians do—but it remains hard to define because it's more about atmosphere than plot. Can a P.I. be in a noir? Of course—the literary genre began with the Continental Op and Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, and the film genre arguably began with *The Maltese Falcon*. Does that mean any P.I. story is a noir? No. There are “corrupt cop” noirs, “amnesiac veteran” noirs, “procedural” noirs, even “soap opera” noirs like *Mildred Pierce*—and I've just got to mention, in the same breath, how great an actress Joan Crawford was.

There is noir fiction and film noir, and films made from noir fiction. Some people privilege one form over the other, say this or that is noir or isn't noir. I'm more French in my approach: I think all hard-boiled crime is noir, but not all noir is hard-boiled crime. There are noirs for every occasion. There are even a few movies I'd consider noirs despite the lack of an urban setting: Robert Wise's *Blood on the Moon* is a western, but I think stylistically you could easily call it a noir. Same with *It's A Wonderful Life*—sure, it's a great film about friendship and family, but the guts of the movie is about desperation.

No, noir transcends content, and even form. The seeds of literary noir were planted, at times, in non-urban environments: think of Hammett's “Afraid of a Gun”, for example—it's basically a western. And “The Man Who Killed Dan Odams” is close to it. Chandler's “No Crime in the Mountains” and “The Lady in the Lake” [short stories on which the novel *The Lady in the Lake* were based] are also situated in the country. So noir has never been limited by physical setting. It's about style and emotion, and usually the sorts of emotions—like desperation, obsession, sexual arousal, ambition, envy, jealousy, uncertainty, insecurity, doubt—that most American entertainment tries to avoid a serious look at. You can see those emotions a little easier in the city, but you find them everywhere.

As for pessimism ... noir is generally pessimistic, but small dents can be made in the bleakness of the world. That's what Marlowe, the tarnished, tired knight-errant, was all about. And that's what the best of P.I. writing is about.

Why is noir so popular, as both film and literary medium?

Kelli: I think because it allows us to examine those universal, problematic emotions in a heightened, stylized manner. Noir is beautiful, in the same way that urban decay is beautiful. If you're in it, it's not beautiful at all—far from it. But—safe from your car, your bus seat, or inside a movie house—it's aesthetically compelling. We enjoy the ride, are titillated by it. Even the grotesques are fascinating ... look at how many grotesque characters there are in noir. That's why it's a genre that loves its character actors. In the '40s and '50s, I think noir allowed people to vent post-war doubts and dilemmas. America, as we know it today, was created in the '50s. Suburbia was born, the love affair with the car, the materialism. And the pressures to maintain that materialism exerted itself.

Robert Mitchum—one of the ideal noir actors—has a line in another Christmas movie called *Holiday Affair* where he discusses how he doesn't want to be President of the First National Bank. In 1949, this made him a rebel. Noir let people look at issues other movies ignored. What's the more effective film: *Crossfire* or *Gentleman's Agreement*? Both are excellent, both dealt with post-war anti-Semitism. But I'd still argue for *Crossfire*. The best moment in *Gentleman's Agreement* is John Garfield's scene, and he made every scene he ever played feel like a noir.

You've obviously watched a lot of films.

Kelli (laughs): I'm a student of popular culture. I majored in film, once upon a time. I think it's through the popular, as opposed to the so-called 'high' culture, that real history is evoked. That's why I collect comic books, and DVDs, and magazines, and why I have no room in my house. (laughs) But don't get me started on the '50s. I can talk about McCarthyism and American hysteria for hours. (laughs).

OK. Let's talk about writing. How did *Nox Dormienda* come about?

Kelli: Well, it germinated in a Classics class. I'd written three screenplays before coming back to school to finish my education. I'd had an agent, but in my experience, anyway, you couldn't get anywhere with a film script unless you were willing to knock on doors in LA. At least with my agent, you couldn't! (laughs). So I ditched it, and plunged into Classics, and in this class I saw that other writers—notably Steven Saylor and Lindsey Davis—had made great successes writing Roman mysteries. I've always loved mysteries. So I figured I'd give it a try.

How long did it take?

Kelli: I ignored it for a few years after my initial plot was drawn up. Then about three years ago, I said to myself, 'Either do it or quit thinking about it.' So I did it. And I found my 'hook', as it were, when I was at a Noir City festival in San Francisco, and I realized that what I really wanted to write was a historical noir. So I finished the book in a few months, found an agent on my first query letter, finished my graduate degree and secured a publisher.

Three years is pretty fast!

Kelli: I've been lucky. The test, of course, will be in the sales. I want Arcturus to live to a ripe old age!

Did you always plan for the character to continue?

Kelli: Absolutely. The books are about him as much as they are about anything. One of my philosophies as a writer is to make the characters as real and believable as possible. People

will buy into fantastic plots—not that my mysteries are supernatural, at all, but one of my screenplays was—as long as the characters are recognizable.

Did Arcturus—or any of your other characters—develop according to your expectations?

Kelli: Not exactly. That’s part of the exhilaration of writing. Sometimes characters force themselves into bigger roles than I’d planned for. Sometimes a character will come in that I’d never planned on at all.

Other than Chandler, who are your other influences?

Kelli: Catullus, for one. I love poetry, and he’s my favorite Latin poet. Not for the squeamish ... he can be very explicit and very funny and very raw and touching, all at once. Hammett. Lots of film noir scripts, from *Double Indemnity*—a Chandler script—to *Out of the Past*. I hope this doesn’t sound pretentious, but Shakespeare is always an influence, because his writing is, to me, the single greatest output in English. His metaphors—I mean, think about “sleep, that knits up the ravel'd sleeve of care.” Is that great, or what? And Thomas Hardy is another favorite writer—also another poet. I’m very influenced by poetry, by the lyrical. I write and translate poetry in what used to be my spare time, which is why I haven’t done anything lately! (laughs)

If Nox Dormienda was a film, it would be rated what?

Kelli: Probably PG-13. Maybe R. The Romans, like most people, were very profane. History was not polite.

Speaking of Rome and profanity, what did you think of the HBO series?

Kelli (laughs): Well, I was teaching a Latin class at the time it debuted, and I told them I called it “X-treme Rome.” They took the most sensational elements of the culture and made them seem ubiquitous. But it was very entertaining television, and anything that calls attention to history is serving a good purpose.

Any ideas for a film of Nox Dormienda?

Kelli: The film rights haven’t been optioned as of this conversation, but the frustrated director in me definitely sees one thing: Arcturus would have to be voiced as an American. I’d love to see the natives with British accents and the Romans with American accents.

That would be a switch on the typical convention! So what do you want the reader to get from Nox Dormienda?

Kelli: Ideally, a damn good read. I have a very high respect for entertainment. I’d be happy if he or she felt some reaffirmation, and maybe thought about Rome a little differently. And maybe thought about life a little differently. And of course, if they liked it well enough to demand the sequel I’d be very happy! (laughs).