

# An interview with Ron Tanner, author of *A Bed of Nails*

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Interviewed by Emily Iorg

*Q. Every book has its own story about how it came to be conceived and written as it did. How did this collection evolve?*

A. I wish I could say that I had an over-arching design when I began writing stories. But, generally, story writing doesn't work that way for me. Stories often come to me as visitors once came to distant farms: unbidden passersby who ask to stay for a while. So you could say that my collection is that farmhouse full of strangers whom I have made into acquaintances. They tell me of their disparate lives and struggles and I try to do justice by their stories. That's a long, too-arty way of saying that my collection is eclectic. For the longest time I had trouble making it "hang together," which is what marketers really want. Ultimately, I had to wait until I had published a pile of stories before I could assemble just the right mix.

*Q. You have described A Bed of Nails as "stories that show how much pain people will bear in their search for love, happiness, and a life of reasonable expectations." What expectations are reasonable?*

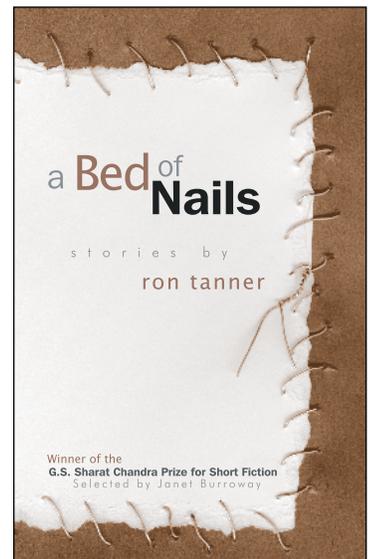
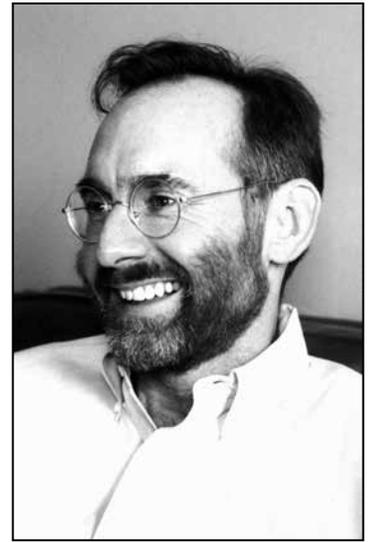
A. Life--experience--shows us what is reasonable. Sometimes we don't agree with the lessons experience imparts; as a result, some of us grow bitter. The problem--our collective problem--is that we live in a country that fills us with great expectations: our culture compels us to want lots of things. Children, for instance, want to become movie stars instead of presidents; and now, with the rise of reality TV, it seems that anybody can reasonably expect such a possibility. Stardom seems to guarantee wealth, and wealth is our doorway to happiness. Or so it appears in this glitzy amusement park of a nation. My stories attempt to show how life tamps down our great expectations and how, as we realize our constraints, we learn to make the necessary compromises. Which means no wealth, no stardom, no million-dollar jackpot.

*Q. Several of your stories deal with the theme of loss, ranging from loss of health to loss of material possessions to loss of a father. Do you see loss as a requisite component of your stories?*

A. Yes, loss. Every writer, or almost every writer, has a limited set of themes and those themes will continue to surface, even if we're writing sci-fi or fantasy. One of my major themes is loss because my father died when I was in college—just as I was getting to know and appreciate him as a grown-up. I've also been through my own painful divorce and near-tragic brushes with a loved one's illness. It's hard to escape the impact of events like those.

*Q. Your title story, "A Bed of Nails," addresses the emotional complications of health care for particular patients and their families. What sources did you draw on for this story?*

A. As I said, my own experience relates both to my father's cancer and to my former wife's sarcoidosis, which was misdiagnosed as AIDS or Hodgkin's disease. Experiencing a harrowing illness--or sharing that experience--is like visiting another country, as Susan Kenney puts it in her story collection, *In Another Country*. One of my favorite stories is her "The Death of the Dog and Other Rescues," which does an excellent job of depicting how the promise of death alters our lives. Though I didn't draw on Kenney's story, I do appreciate her treatment: she deals with this heavy



topic in a complicated way, offering much humor and close attention to daily life. More important, though, she shows that in fiction writers can't deal directly with the Big Problem; it's more effective to go at it indirectly. That is, a story of death can't be only a story of death.

*Q. I noticed that more than one of your characters has an absent father. What significance do you find in this element?*

A. The absent father is a handy device because Dad is so important for all of us; to remove him is to pressurize the story: without a father, the child (whether small or grown) has a lot more to lose because he/she has already lost so much. It makes the fatherless character more vulnerable and, perhaps, more sympathetic. There is too the tension created by the promise-or threat-of the father's return, which energizes the situation further.

*Q. Several of your stories, "A Handful of Nails," "Loaves and Fishes," "You're a Sergeant" and "Red Shoes," are set in a war-torn scene in the future. Explain how this future setting connects to the collection as a whole, most of which is set in the present.*

A. It would be more accurate to say "near-future" so as to distinguish these from sci-fi. The near future is useful because it dislocates a story, allowing the writer more freedom. My eldest brother is disturbed by these stories because he can not fix them in a place or a time. But that is precisely the point. They are meant to be familiar in some but not all ways. As a result, they kind of free-float, so that you can read them five or ten years from now and say, "Hmm, that sounds like a recent war," instead of saying, "Oh, that was Kosovo in 1994." If your reaction is the latter, then you may be inclined to box up the story too easily as something that has passed and is not worth much notice now.

*Q. You've worked in another form of creative expression as a musician for several years. In addition to writing a story from a musician's point of view, how does music influence your writing?*

A. Composing in writing or music is an attempt to make things come together, to symphonize events into a coherent story, in my case. I don't pretend that my writing is musical but I do appreciate the need to make something whole out of the pieces of experience a story calls forth. When the writing is going well, it is like performing music well, especially in a band, when everyone is playing just the right thing at just the right tempo. When that happens, the whole thing rocks--or swings.

*Q. Art is a recurring theme in your work. What is your personal interest in this form of creation and how does it inform your writing?*

A. As a child, I wanted to be a visual artist but I didn't have the talent; I was often frustrated by my attempts to make things with construction paper or draw things from my imagination. Nothing felt right. But I couldn't shake the compulsion to make. I took art lessons for a number of years and still doodle and paint when I have time, but I'm still no good at it. As a result of this background, it was inevitable that I'd draw [pun!] on art in my writing.

*Q. How does your role as professor of writing at Loyola College in Baltimore shape your own writing?*

A. Teaching writing has made me hyper-aware of writing as craft, and over the years I've developed better ways to explain the techniques and strategies I see working in the kind of writing that I admire. I ask my students to do the same because we can improve as writers only when we make clear to ourselves what good writing does.

*Q. Tell me more about your current project, a novel about the Marshall Islands.*

A. Called *A Nation of Children*, my latest project is a novel about Americans living on Kwajalein, an island in the mid-Pacific. I lived there as a teenager, then returned some years ago to teach for a summer. The clash of cultures out there is both fascinating and disturbing, as the Americans live segregated from the Marshallese and the Marshallese have fared so poorly as a result of their exposure to the Americans. The Marshall Islands are where all the atom bomb testing occurred and it is now where America operates a missile testing range, which includes one of the largest radars in the world. In short, it's a strange place filled with interesting people. I hope I can do it justice in this book.