

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Stephen Boehrer, author of *The Purple Culture*

Start to finish, how long did it take to write *The Purple Culture*?

About two and a half years. However, I only began to write when I had the basic thesis formulated.

What part of the writing process was most challenging for you?

Connecting the components of the actual *The Purple Culture* to a story line. Once I decided that a court trial would enable me to do that, the writing flowed quite well. Equally challenging to me was the selection of abuse descriptions. I decided that 'middle' on a horror scale of actual abuses would work. I felt a need to have the abuses strong enough to balance against putting bishops on trial, but not horrific for the sake of horrific.

What part of the writing process was easiest for you?

I had listened to the voices of actual victims in various forums and could not forget them. That enabled me to write the sound of wounded children even when it emanated from the mouths of victims in their adulthood.

How did you get the idea for *The Purple Culture*?

The thesis crystallized after decades of observing episcopal behaviors that didn't seem consonant with the basic thrust of the gospels. My earlier novels were attempts to display those behaviors. My first novel flowed from an ugly scene where a bishop stonewalled and threatened unpleasant consequences to parents whose only fault was their request for help for their emotionally-damaged, abused son. My second novel dramatized the unequal treatment given to women in the church. The *Purple Culture* behaviors are apparent throughout history if we look for them, and I believe this novel can lend understanding to them.

Are any of the characters in the book based on people you know?

No. No single character is based on any single person I know. I hope the complexity of the characters captures the reality of the clerical sexual abuse scandal, its ugliness, and its causes.

You tackle a tough issue in *The Purple Culture*. Was the subject matter difficult for you?

More saddening than difficult. The factual details of the crisis are found in abundance, on the net, in scholarly non-fiction books, etc. It was sad, not only for what happened to the victims, but also that it took a crisis of this dimension to provoke an investigation into the sources of episcopal behavior.

***The Purple Culture* alternates between different points of view. Why did you choose this strategy for the narrative?**

I wanted to acknowledge both the conservative Catholic point of view as well as the liberal. Both groups hold wonderful, generous people who do approach their religious practice differently. I hope that the novel's depiction of episcopal behavior as stemming from the *The Purple Culture* will resonate with both groups and propel them to unite in demanding change in that culture.

Why did you choose a criminal trial as the primary setting for *The Purple Culture*?

The criminal trial provided a way to exhibit by way of expert witnesses the pertinent components of the *Purple Culture*. The only alternative I could imagine was to write a non-fiction work. I prefer storytelling as a vehicle for truth-telling.

Why did you write the book?

I think my motivation is a bit like that of a mountain climber who climbs a mountain because it's there. Once I had my diagnosis in place, i.e. that the anomalies in episcopal behavior arise from their culture, and not from ignorance or evil intent, I simply had to write this book.

What do you feel qualifies you to speak out on this subject?

My background, life experiences, and study. I'm a lifelong Catholic. I was a student in Rome for four years and a priest in the active ministry for ten years. I have a doctorate in theology and I had proximity to bishops in chancery work, etc. Importantly, I have been married for thirty-seven years and have experienced the remoteness of bishops from the faithful. Along the way I experienced the anomalies as contrasted with the gospel, and searched for an explanation. I'm convinced that when we speak of behavioral motivations, we can only posit causal theories based on observations -- in the manner of cultural anthropologists.

Which character do you find most sympathetic, and why?

It's a tie between the victims, Deenah and Jacob, one young, one old. Each suffered, each struggled, each survived. Both are developed sufficiently as characters to evoke genuine empathy.

Which character do you find least sympathetic, and why?

That would be Bishop Barieno, the bishop/defendant who is himself a pedophile. If there is any character in the story whose evil springs from his cold and calculating personality, and not only from the dictates of the The Purple Culture, it is he.

How did your background impact the writing process? Do you feel your experiences made the process of writing *The Purple Culture* more difficult, or less difficult?

I don't believe I could have written this novel without my background and particular life experiences. The Episcopal lifestyle and culture is simply too remote, I believe purposely so, for just anyone to parse it without considerable experience and study.

The *Purple Culture* could not have been an easy novel to write — – regardless of background. Did you ever wrestle with whether to write the book?

I did. I wrestled with whether I should write it every time I took up my pen to do so. And even now, I wrestle with whether I should have written it. I'm a relatively unknown guy from a small town in the Midwest. I feel at times it is the height of arrogance for me to assume a prophetic role in judgment of the institutional part of my own church. I often wake at night with that thought and need to run through the supporting data and validity of my conclusions before going back to sleep.

The *Purple Culture* is certainly controversial. Are you concerned about how people will react to the novel?

I'm sure there will be people who react negatively to the book and accuse me of church bashing. On matters of religion, just as with politics, many people seem to have knee-jerk emotional responses to opposing positions. These people will attack the book without reading it, and me for writing it. What forms those attacks may take are unforeseeable. So far I have not lost sleep over that possibility. I'm confident, however, that anyone who actually reads it will find a rational solution to questions they mull, but seldom express.

What is the significance of the title? Did you entertain the idea of a different title?

The novel presents a unique culture that took centuries to form. As with any culture, there is a process through which we become subject to that culture. It is out of their culture that bishops habitually act without further reference. It is a culture in need of examination and reform. My working title was "Cultured Purple." I wanted to emphasize the dynamics of the enculturation process as it takes control of the minds and actions of these men.

Did you ever consider writing a non-fiction book as opposed to a novel? Why did you choose a fictionalized account?

I did consider non-fiction, but I had made the decision to write truth-in-fiction with my very first novel. Jesus spoke in parables and stories. I think of the *The Purple Culture* as a parable for our times, a story that readers of whatever religious persuasion can read with spiritual profit.

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What do you hope readers will take away from *The Purple Culture*?

I hope that Catholic readers will remain faithful, but take away a sense of what needs to change in our church, and begin a discussion on strategy to effect that change. I hope that readers from other religious persuasions will find a paradigm to evaluate their own leadership.

Do you have other books in the works?

I do. I have completed a draft of a novel with the working title, *Whispers*. In this novel, a unique friendship between an older married man and a younger married woman evokes whispers of scandal in a small town. The pair suffer isolation and worse. As the story works its way through their troubles, friendship emerges as a paradigm for a spirituality. I will shortly begin writing a novel where the protagonist, a woman, constructs a spirituality inspired by the prevalence of predation in nature. I'm not sure yet how the story line will run, but I'm looking forward to the challenge.