

when Henry and Susan got up at seven or so, the family approached the hallowed tree together for the serious rituals of consumerism. Sometimes Hillary actually went back to sleep for a bit after delighting in the clever toys and unusual treats Susan had searched out for the stockings. As a teenager, Hank was now actually more interested in sleeping in than getting his stocking early. So, it was after eight by the time everyone was awake and supplied with cups of coffee or hot chocolate and pastries.

The Stewarts followed a strict protocol for opening gifts, one package at a time, youngest to oldest, then around again. Even with only five of them, the process could take a couple of hours, since Susan insisted on taking pictures of each gift opening – first the person holding the box; then ripping the wrapping; finally the appreciative smile or modeling of the gift.

Since the children had been posed this way all their lives, it seemed normal to them. Although lately, Hank sometimes complained about his mother's picture-taking when his friends were around. Henry had tried a few times to get Susan to put down the camera and enjoy the moment, but by now he knew better. She would have been disappointed not to capture the moment on film, even though she had given up scrapbooking several years earlier. She had boxes of unfiled prints and discs, and now computer space, taken up with snapshots, most of which would never be seen by anyone past the first obligatory clicking through the lot

when she sent them out. Many of them weren't worth a second look anyway.

When the living room floor was covered with wrapping paper and no one had another box to open, the beautiful mystery gift was still under the tree. No one confessed to know anything about it. Susan nudged Grandpa Herschel. "I think you should open it. Wait! Let me get a photo." Inside the elegant package were six smaller boxes, wrapped identically to the larger one, but each had a gift tag: Herschel, Henry, Susan, Hank, Hillary, and finally – The Stewart Family. Grandpa handed out boxes and remarked that each was pretty heavy for its size.

Each box contained a green velvet drawstring bag. Henry and Hillary both shook a dozen or more large, antique gold pieces from their bags and exclaimed in delight. Susan, Hank and Grandpa Herschel were eager to share the good fortune but found their bags each contained a heavy lump of coal.

Susan's face moved through an array of expressions as she struggled to keep puzzlement from turning into anger. Hank didn't bother making the effort and complained loudly, dumping his lump of coal on the carpet. Grandpa Herschel allowed as how it was a pretty poor trick alright, but quickly recovered, saying he had a diamond in his bag, it just wasn't finished yet. He handed the final box to Susan to open. She wasn't sure she wanted to.

All the pleasure and anticipation created by the beautiful gift had disappeared. Father and daughter were a little embarrassed to receive

riches when some unknown giver seemed to be scolding the other family members. Hillary began counting her coins into piles to share with her mother, brother and grandfather. Henry realized he would be expected to do the same. Susan untied the last tartan silk ribbon and caressed the luxurious special paper one last time, trying to recapture some of the excitement she had felt when the original box was delivered.

In the final green velvet drawstring pouch was a miniature bagpipe. Its plaid body was another example of the Royal Stewart colors. The mouthpiece and drones of the instrument were carved wood, lacquered black. Instead of a chanter, the last and lower pipe, was a small crank, the handle of a music box hidden in the woolen folds of the little bagpipe. Susan turned the crank and cocked her ear to the melody. "Listen."

The tune played several bars before anyone recognized it. "Amazing Grace," Hillary shouted.

"But, what does it mean?" Susan asked.

Henry held a stack of coins like oversized poker chips, ready to ante them out to the stacks Hillary started. "It means nobody gets what he deserves. No one. It's all grace."



## Widow Black

The filaments were fine and silky, like spider webs, and Marty thought that's what they were for a long time. Never a good housekeeper, she was no stranger to spider webs. Most of the time she told herself it was a good thing to have spiders. They caught flies and nasty bugs, didn't they? But, when she found herself grabbing at the silvery threads to get them away from her face one morning, she decided it was time to call an exterminator.

*Drat that George! He left me with more than one kind of mess.*

Marty Black was widowed in April. George always did the record keeping and bill paying, and six months later she was still trying to sort out his system. Why the spider webs were his fault she couldn't say, but she had a sort of permanent irritation with George now that he was gone, so it felt natural to blame him for the webs as well as anything else she had trouble with.

The exterminator said the filaments didn't look like any kind of spider he knew, but he was glad to lay down a toxic fog with the wand from his sprayer tank and charge Marty for it before he told her so.

*What an idiot! George didn't leave enough insurance for me to throw money around for no reason.*

She thought about calling the Better Business Bureau but decided to settle for complaining about the company to anyone she knew. She muttered about the exterminator's incompetence as she padded around the house, catching dust bunnies on her slippers. At least she thought they were dust bunnies. After a while, she realized what was accumulating on her shoes was more of the web-like filaments. Bunched up like that, they were a soft, white mass.

Marty kept hoping her daughter would make the two-hour drive from Lewiston and offer to help with housecleaning. The apple had fallen very far from the tree in this case because Marissa actually enjoyed cleaning house. Marty was always happy to let her. But when Marty hinted, Marissa made excuses about her heavy schedule at the hospital. She was the new charge nurse in the cardiac unit and couldn't get away often. Marty tried a not-so-subtle appeal to guilt, but Marissa said she'd come over when she could and didn't succumb to her mother's manipulation.

*You'd think that girl would be more help to me, considering all I've been through and everything we did for her. George always did spoil that child.*

Marty's cousin Annette was always asking if she needed help with anything, now that George was gone, but she never climbed down from her

Cadillac SUV in Marty's neighborhood. Annette wasn't likely to pick up a dust mop or even bring over her fancy vacuum.

*Thinks she's really something because her husband's oil change franchise is raking in the dough. And to think George lent them money to get through the first year.*

Marty had worked as a clerk in the nearby pharmacy for several years and her manager was very generous with time off during George Black's final illness and death. Jim let Marty come in whatever hours she could and worked the rest of the employees around that. She knew he worked a lot of extra hours himself to accommodate her and she was grateful. Taking a few hours away from the hospital to work every-other day had been a relief, a kind of respite. And after the funeral, going to work gave her something else to think about. But now Marty was having trouble getting to work and Jim was growing impatient with her.

*So, what? I owe him because he helped me out before? He didn't really want to help me, he was just racking up I.O.U.s for my time? If George had worked for the city instead of White's Truck Repair – had some pension waiting – I wouldn't have had to work anyway!*

Whenever Marty entered the house, she kicked off comfortable leather clogs and walked into her house shoes. Web-like filaments continued to collect on the bottom and sides of the blue terry cloth slippers, eventually puffing up around the tops, too, so it looked as if she

were scuffing around in cocoons of a giant moth species.

Marty grew so used to seeing the dangling threads everywhere she stopped trying to brush away the filaments that grew down from the closet ceiling and rested on the clothes there. Individually, each line had a lot of tensile strength. When she pulled out a garment to wear, several of the thin, silvery threads dangled from the shoulders. If other people noticed them when she went out, no one commented.

When Marty hired a carpenter to make repairs to the back fence, he trampled the chrysanthemums. She was angry with him, of course, but also with George, again, and even dredged up some bitterness for her son who was killed three years earlier in Iraq. When they were thirteen, Alan and a friend borrowed some boards from the fence to make a skateboard ramp. Even after George put the boards back, that section of the fence was never sturdy.

*That boy could come up with more ways to torment me. And when he ran out of ideas, he joined the Army and went off and got himself killed. No consideration for his family at all. That carpenter should have joined the Army. They probably don't have flowers for him to step on next to their fences. George never liked those flowers there. It's a wonder they survived, the way he was always running the mower into that bed.*

Marissa called at least once a week to check on Marty, even when she couldn't visit. If she had come to the house that fall, Marissa would



have been alarmed. Puffs of the webby material were collecting in small drifts in every corner of the house. Marty's favorite robe, a match for the blue terry cloth slippers, had so many of the filaments embedded in the looped fabric it was starting to look like a giant cocoon, too.

Marty didn't tell Marissa when she stopped going in to work. She didn't tell Jim either. He let it slide a day or two, then called to see if she planned to come in. She resigned over the phone and was sure Jim's sigh signaled relief. After that, Marty started calling the SuperShop to deliver her groceries. It was amazing to find she really didn't need to leave the house at all, although the delivery boys from the market were often late or clumsy. Sometimes her order was incomplete, but at least the store never charged her for what they didn't send.

When Marty stopped leaving the house, she also stopped changing into street clothes every day. She knew other people would find that odd, so she stopped bringing in mail until the following morning when she went out early for the newspaper. Neighbors never saw the woman in strange, puffy slippers and oddly padded robe who left the house for those brief moments every day.

As the neighborhood had changed over the years, George and Marty never connected with young couples who moved in around them. For one thing, Marty didn't like the camp trailer the family next door parked in their driveway.

*Can't they see that thing blocks my view down to the corner? Why do they think I'd prefer*

*a view of their metal box in place of a tree? I guess it's not as bad as those brats across the street who destroyed my front flower beds. Why wouldn't George sell this place and move into a condo after our kids were grown?*

The silvery filaments draped every doorway in the house by November. Sometimes Marty couldn't avoid getting some of the stuff stuck on her lips. When she tried to clear it away, making little spitting noises with her tongue, she noticed it was sweet at first but had a bitter aftertaste that lingered. The tendrils drooped from the hem of her robe and wound about her legs when she walked. Marty was fascinated yet repelled by its gentle stickiness, like cotton candy.

The recliner Marty sat in to read or watch TV began to accumulate the webbing in its upholstered folds. She didn't always get up from the chair at night anymore...just fell asleep there after the late news. She moved the telephone base to a table by her chair and stashed some snacks in a basket below it for those days she didn't feel like getting up at all.

Marissa worried about her mother. Sometimes, Marty didn't answer or return phone calls. If Marissa asked later where she'd been, Marty always insisted she hadn't been out, just couldn't get to the phone. Explanations were vague. Marissa made plans to bring a friend and everything needed for Thanksgiving dinner; Marty shouldn't do anything.

*How thoughtful. She couldn't be bothered to come and help me clean up this mess, and now*

*that I can hardly get out of my chair, she tells me not to do anything. As if I could.*

Friday before Thanksgiving was the last day Marty answered Marissa's call. Sunday morning when Marty woke up, her left sleeve was woven to the arm of the recliner by the accumulation of silver webbing. She thought about calling Marissa. She could almost reach the phone, but she was tired. There was a bottle of water with her in the recliner and Marty managed to get a drink. She couldn't reach a cracker or packet of raisins from her basket.

Marissa called again on Tuesday and got the machine. She was working overtime to have a couple of days off for the holiday and pushed her concerns to the back of her mind. She had watched her mother grow bitter after Alan's death and kept a distance to avoid the poison Marty often spilled out. After George died, Marissa felt an obligation to be a more attentive daughter but she was glad to have the excuse of her job and a two-hour stretch of highway to keep from being dragged into her mother's constant grievances. She tried talking to Marty about it once, suggesting her mother let go of some of the grudges she carried. Marty bristled at the idea she might not be completely justified in feeling mistreated, or at least slighted, by everyone she complained about. She pouted the rest of that day and refused to return Marissa's calls for a month. If she had known Marissa considered it a welcome breather, Marty would have been enraged.

Marty hardly heard her daughter's Tuesday call. She was very tired. The ringing of the phone and Marissa's voice on the answering machine seemed far away. She could not open her eyes to tell if it was morning or evening. She tried to lift the bottle of water and found her right sleeve was now in the grip of the webbing surrounding the chair. By the time the delivery boy from the SuperShop banged on the door, Marty understood she was finally, completely, enveloped by the softly sticky threads. She knew, too, helplessly, belatedly, that she had woven her own shroud. Her lips barely parted to form an involuntary "Oh!" of insight. With the sharp intake of breath, she felt the filaments fill her mouth and nostrils.

## *What Is Magic Realism?*

I've been calling these stories "magic realism" since I began writing them in the 1990s. The term is not familiar to everyone, although what I mean by it is not unfamiliar to any reader of modern fiction. It's the title I like to use for stories set in a recognizable scene – a familiar world, not a fantasy one – in which there's something going on beyond ordinary reality.

The following interview, conducted by Michael Parker may shed further light on the genre of magic realism and on what it means to me as a writer. The interview subjects are Neil Ellis Orts, editor and publisher of *Able to...*, (neoNuma Arts press, 2006) myself, and David Lemaster, another *Able to...* author. The occasion for the interview was a reading we did at Parker's West Edge Books in Shreveport LA, April, 2007.

Becky Haigler



## Interview by Michael Parker

1. *Able to...* is subtitled “a literary look at superpowers,” and the term is applied broadly, given the usual pop culture associations. What particular resonance does the theme of superpowers have for you as a writer, or even as a reader?



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Neil: I grew up on comic books and still have a deep affinity for many of the characters, even as I grow more and more uncomfortable with some of the subtle messages. I mean, at the end of the day, a lot of superhero stories end with a subtle “might makes right” message. I can’t get behind that one. Even more, I can’t get behind the notion that super-

heroes are supposed to “kick ass,” really give the bad guys what for with hard hitting action, emphasis on the hitting. I’m a proponent of non-violent resolution to conflict, so I have ideological issues with most superhero stories. But there’s a part of me that will always want to know what’s up with Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman. I know and have come to embrace my own arrested development that way.

When I started putting together *Able to...*, my notion, as I state in my introduction, was that if superheroes were adolescent power fantasies, as they’re often called, then what would grown up power fantasies be? I wasn’t really interested in the real world power fantasies we see played out in war zones and Wall Street, but the smaller stories. How do we use whatever powers we have at our disposal to manipulate – for good or ill – our surroundings? I find that sort of question infinitely more interesting than how hard Superman can hit.

**Becky:** I read Superman comics as a kid, whenever I found them at other peoples’ houses, but I didn’t choose them for myself. (I leaned toward Archie and Katy Keene.) I have vague memories of neighborhood games where someone was Superman and the bad guys could ward him off with a chunk of asphalt we deemed ‘kryptonite.’ I read a lot of fairy tales though, Hans Christian Andersen and Brothers Grimm, and there are plenty of examples there of events



that bend the usual pattern of the world. I majored in Spanish in college and had to read quite a few of the magic realism stories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin American writers, but I first felt I wanted to write something in that genre myself after reading and seeing *Like Water for Chocolate*. "Gates of Eden," written in the mid-'90s, was my first magic realism story. Since then, I have finished four others and have another simmering. After Neil's collection, I started to feel maybe there was an interest, a market for the genre.

**David:** I approached both of my stories by placing a character in a situation and then seeing what the character might do or say in response. The character comes first for me, and then the style in which the story is to be told. Each story has its own voice emanating from the voice of the character. Once in awhile I start with the style first, but that is rare. In the two stories in question, "The Mesmerizer" was inspired when my friends saw a professional hypnotist on a college campus and I began asking myself what kind of person could pass himself off in that role. "Ebony" started with a concept rather than a person, the concept of dark turning to light – and with a person in a Sprint store – I actually saw someone similar to the way I described "Ebony" as I waited for a Sprint technician to fix my phone. I asked myself why the girl was dressed that way (she carried a pocket Bible, too) and what she could

possibly think of herself. When the concept met the description, I put a central character into the story to be the reader's guide, and the story was born.

2. Neil, you wear a lot of hats regarding *Able to...*, as a contributing writer, editor and publisher. As an editor and publisher, did you send out a call for stories around the theme of superpowers, or did you see particular connections among stories or writers you were already familiar with?

Neil: I posted calls for stories about "people who can do extraordinary things" on various bulletin boards online. *Image Journal's* forum netted me Becky Haigler. I think most came to me via *Craigslist*. I'm not entirely certain where everyone came from, but those are the forums that I know generated some response. I knew Winston Derden before I started this process, and the rest were strangers off the Internet. (It's not all danger out there, kids!)

I kept watching for stories with similar themes, and didn't find any in that way. I did find a short-short story in the journal *Quick Fiction* that I liked quite a lot and would have worked in the book. I managed to find the author online, but he declined participation in *Able to...* Which was disappointing – as a writer, I get rejected all the time, and now I was getting rejected as an editor and publisher!

3. Neil and David, both of you have stories in the collection that deal with theological implications of superpowers and individuals affected by the “superpowered” beings. What makes such themes compelling to you?

Neil: All of my questions in life, on some level, are theological. I’m congenitally Lutheran and I’ve been to seminary. I’m eaten up with God-schuff. Even when I’ve tried to avoid the label, word has returned to me that I’m “that Christian writer guy.”

Having said that, I always make a point to write about people who are religious, not write religious stories. I do find the spiritual lives of people the most interesting part of them, generally speaking, even if it’s a lack of any overt spiritual life, but I have little patience for stories that are about the business of teaching a moral lesson, even as I realize almost all stories do that. I started out writing that sort of thing and quickly lost interest in it. Life is messy and a life of faith is messy, and I know of few people who have everything turn out just right because they prayed a certain way or kept a particular moral code.

That I’m gay also adds an edge to my work without my even trying, usually. Even if I wrote the most moral and moralizing story, Zondervan isn’t likely to be courting me for my next novel. And I’m okay with that.

David: Theological issues are quite compelling to me and take up the majority of my reading (I just finished Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Tabor's *The Jesus Dynasty*). I was raised Baptist and have seen my faith take an incredible journey over my lifetime. I'm interested in the metaphorical meaning and impact of religion, and although I'm willing to question and doubt my religious beliefs, I'm not willing to give them up. I've been inspired by several books on religion and metaphor, most especially Elaine Pagel's look at the Gospel of Thomas, *Beyond Belief*. One of the underlying themes in most of my work is that continual struggle to reconcile knowledge and faith. It's an ongoing struggle for me personally, and one that I don't anticipate ever fully completing – but that's the beauty of faith, isn't it? If it made sense, or if I could prove it scientifically, it wouldn't be faith? Despite my quest for logic (and more than a bit of skepticism), faith still holds me and refuses to let me go.

4. Becky, your contributions to the collection have a wistfulness to them that strikes me the same way as some of the best *Twilight Zone* episodes, or some of Ray Bradbury's stories. The characters with the "super" powers seem ambiguous, at best, about them and their application. Does this seem consistent with what you were trying to achieve as a writer?

**Becky:** Thanks, Michael! Just to appear in the shadow of Bradbury or Serling is high praise. I think the ambiguity, which I didn't know was coming through, probably is rooted in my own worldview. As a Christian, I hesitate to ascribe "powers" to people in a way that would be an infringement on the power of the Holy Spirit. If, for example, I had a character turn the world backward, Superman style, it would be hard for me to let him do that without directly invoking God. In the *Able to...* collection, Mr. Merrill's "superpower" is a grace that comes to him unbidden, and he has to decide what to do with it. Evita's gift, in "Gates of Eden," is a gift of creating with speech, an ability which mirrors the divine creation, wherein the worlds were spoken into being. Both Old and New Testaments tell us there is tremendous power in our words, so to show that power in my character is not an instance of a human being grasping for something God has reserved for Himself.

**Neil:** To jump in and talk about Becky's work a minute: Becky's stories were the very first I received. I was nervous about this, not sure what to expect. When I read the first line of "Gates of Eden" ("Flowers didn't actually fall from Evita's lips – not at first and not all the time."), I nearly dropped the manuscript. This was a completely unanticipated and original

"super power." I nearly accepted it on that line alone.

But her stories have a sort of fairy tale feel to them, at least for me. "Gates of Eden" more so than "Mr. Merrill's . . ." I guess, but still, they have a voice that carries you along a bit like a fairy tale, even as they're set in a recognizably real world. I think her sparse use of dialogue aids that feeling. My memories of, say, Little Red Riding Hood or Goldilocks and the Three Bears don't rely on dialogue but on a compelling sequence of "and then . . . and then . . . and then . . ." These sequences are punctuated with lines like "My, what big eyes you have," or "This porridge is too hot" but the story itself relies on a simple telling of events that draws you into the story. It's that tricky telling that is really showing, not telling. If that makes sense.

5. David, your stories contain some truly chilling moments, that come upon the reader very abruptly, almost cinematically. Are you influenced by some of the classic horror stories and movies?

David: I was trained in stage theater and film, and I do think cinematically. I'm influenced by Chaplin, Kubrick, Hitchcock, Foreman, Spielberg, Aronofsky, and a number of other directors. Most recently, I was awed by del Toro's Pan's *Labyrinth*, and Von Trier's works, *Dancer in the Dark* and *Dogville*. For me in both cinema and prose, a good story must be accompanied by well drawn characters and a

sense of style. There must be a complete commitment on the part of the author/director to that style. I don't see either of my stories as horror. I see them as stories about characters who respond to and interpret for themselves external events. As an audience, we are only privy to what the characters are thinking and must interpret the meanings for ourselves. I'm especially interested by how humans distort reality or what we perceive as reality to fit our needs.

**Neil:** To speak about David's stories briefly: I tend to not respond to horror. I read David's stories, found them compelling and well written and fitting the theme and that was that. A little dark, yes, but okay. It wasn't until I started to set up the book and figure out the order of the stories that it really hit me how dark David's stories really were. I like to think they add a dimension to the collection that would be lacking otherwise, but I also had a moment of worry that they may be so much darker than the rest of the stories as to stand out unfavorably. Maybe they do stand out, but I've only had people tell me David's were their favorite stories, never that they were out of place or too different from the rest of the collection.

(And so none of the authors get anxious – every author has been cited as someone's favorite.)

6. None of you inhabit your stories with characters leaping over tall buildings or moving faster than a speeding locomotive. Were you ever tempted to write about such “superheroes,” or did that seem limiting or overdone?

Neil: During the submission process, I started noticing that the stories I liked best were not really about the powers, but about the relationships around the characters. I think to a large extent, that’s what made it into the book. The powers instigate or complicate the conflicts, but the stories aren’t really about the powers.

And I think that sort of story requires a more subtle sort of power. I received one story about a guy with super-speed and there were kernels of really good things in it, but in the end, the story was too much about the power and the interesting, troubled relationships were left under-developed.

But I can’t lie. If DC Comics were to call me up and say, “Hey, Neil, write us a few issues of *Wonder Woman*,” I’d be all over it. I’m just not likely to pursue it at this point. Superhero comics have always been driven more by plot than character and they’ve become so confined by convoluted histories that there’s a certain level of craftsmanship one can attain in the genre, but not much above, artistically, that craftsmanship level. I think there are some fine writers working in comics. I also think there are comics writers, who are superstars in the field, who couldn’t write a character-motivated



story – maybe wouldn't even recognize one – if the fate of world depended upon it. They're superstars because they know how to write the corporation's icons in the formula expected. More power to them, they're making a lot more money as writers than I do, maybe more than I ever will. That's just not how my writing interests developed.

**David:** I'm not interested in superheroes. My best friend growing up collected comic books; I collected baseball cards. He played role-playing games, but I liked Risk and strategy/war games. He reads sci fi, and I read psychology, history, and theology. It's all a matter of interests. As I said in the first question, my approach to both of these stories (as well as to my other work) is to put an individual (realistic) character in a situation and see how he or she responds. My characters often misinterpret the world around them out of idiocy, senility, or stupidity – or sometimes out of maliciousness – and the reader is left to interpret what's really happening.

**Becky:** In a couple of my later stories, supernatural abilities are exercised by secondary characters to effect change in my protagonists. However in my *Able to...* stories, the "powers" affected bystanders secondarily but had the most impact in the lives of the characters who exercised those powers. So interior action, or psychological drama, is more interesting to me

than stopping trains. I think Neil expressed that idea in his introduction of *Able to...*, and that's probably why my stories found a home with him.

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**Editor's note:** Michael Parker is currently an independent bookseller in the New Orleans area. He has a literary blog called the Abomunistic Review of Books, which can be accessed at [abomreviewofbooks.blogspot.com](http://abomreviewofbooks.blogspot.com).

## About the Author

Becky Haigler is retired after 24 years of teaching Spanish in Texas public schools. As an Air Force wife, she lived in Spain, Germany, Japan, Hawaii, New Mexico, and Texas. Her poetry has appeared in *Cappers Magazine*, *Christian Single Magazine*, *Jack and Jill*, *Writer's Guidelines*, *Devo'Zine*, *Caprock Sun*, and *Lubbock Magazine*, as well as the anthologies of Silver Boomer Books. Her short stories for adolescents have been published by several denominational presses. All work before 2000 appeared in her previous name, Becky McClure, and some recent work has used a pen name, Mary Carter.

In retirement, Becky has become an editor/partner in Silver Boomer Books. Currently residing in Shreveport, Louisiana, with husband Dave Haigler, Becky participates in several writers' groups and has been named to the Shreveport Regional Arts Council's Artists Roster in the literary category. She has two daughters and three granddaughters.