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Extended Q&A With Author Carrie Vaughn

By Ensuing Chapters, Vince Darcangelo



In 2005, author [Carrie Vaughn](#) introduced the world to Kitty Norville, a Denver radio personality who hosts a call-in advice show for supernatural beings. After all, as Vaughn says, "if there really were werewolves and vampires in the modern world, they'd need their own advice show. Dr. Laura just wouldn't be able to handle their problems." Kitty, a werewolf herself, picks up the slack, and her adventures have taken her from Colorado to Chinatown, Las Vegas to D.C.

The series, which started with *Kitty and the Midnight Hour*, has become wildly popular, and has consistently landed on *The New York Times*' best-

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seller list. This summer, Tor released *Kitty Steals the Show*, the 10th installment of the series, in which Kitty goes transatlantic. Set in London, Kitty is the keynote speaker at the First International Conference on Paranatural Studies. Supernatural creatures from across the globe descend on the great city—and not all of them have good intentions.

Prior to her Aug. 15 reading, I sat down with Carrie Vaughn at the Boulder Book Store to discuss her new book, our cultural fascination with the paranormal and the design and evolution of Kitty Norville through the years.

Ensuing Chapters: You've described [Kitty] as *Bridget Jones' Diary* meets *The Howling*. Do you want to reintroduce her character for our listeners and readers?

Carrie Vaughn: Sure. The one-line description I've been using lately is the series is about a werewolf named Kitty who hosts a talk-radio advice show for the supernaturally disadvantaged. It's very useful having a one-sentence tag line, especially when it makes people go, "What? What are you talking about?"

Ensuing Chapters: What inspired you to set the novel in London?

Carrie Vaughn: I love London. I studied abroad in Britain when I was in college, so I've been to London before and a couple times since. Building the novel around the international conference, I knew I wanted to set it outside the U.S. so that I could take a look at what the supernatural elements look like in another country. I was familiar with London, so I knew I could do a lot with it there. I knew where I wanted to set scenes. I had some historical figures that I wanted to reference who are native to London.

And it's such an international city, such a multicultural city. I could set any kind of story I wanted to there. Basically anything I wanted to have happen could happen in London.

Ensuing Chapters: Were there any places in particular that really inspired you?

Carrie Vaughn: One of the places I had to have a scene was Hyde Park, because it's so incongruous. It's kind of London's Central Park, if you think of how incongruous Central Park is, that you have some of the most valuable real estate in the world smack in the middle of Manhattan, and just by force of will it has remained this amazing open space, open wilderness area almost. And Hyde Park is kind of the same way... There's a lot of history and a lot of incongruous wilderness area, and it seemed that if I was going to write a werewolf story then I had to put something in Hyde Park.

Ensuing Chapters: How important is setting to you when writing a story or writing a book?

Carrie Vaughn: It's kind of deceptively important, because it's not something I necessarily think about a lot. But it does end up anchoring the story. Initially, I wasn't going to set it in a specific city. I wanted to have it in an unnamed city that could be any city, and my editor said, 'No, you've really got to pick a city and have it be concrete.' I picked Denver because that was the most familiar, but on thinking about it, Denver's the perfect city for this kind of story because you have the very urban setting where you can tell urban stories. You're an hour away from the mountains where you can tell wilderness stories. I've got my werewolf characters who are both civilized and wild, and I can tell both those kinds of stories in the same setting.

And I like going to other cities because it lets me tell other stories. I personally like traveling, so it's in my nature to want to go to other places. But it also really opens up the kinds of stories I can tell. Las Vegas, especially. Making Las Vegas supernatural, I didn't have to do any work. It's already there. There actually is a production show based around vampires. It's called *Bite*. You see the billboards on the trucks driving through town, and it's topless vampires dancing on stage. If I had made that up, nobody would have believed me, but it's actually there. Things like that really add to the world. It makes the world of the novel have that much more depth.

The previous book before this I set in San Francisco's Chinatown, *Kitty's Big Trouble*, because I wanted to include some non-western mythology in the world of the novels. That was a really fun way to do it for me, to go to Chinatown and bring in some of the Chinese mythology. And it's fun. It means I'm never going to tell the same story twice.

Ensuing Chapters: And a clever title for that [*Kitty's Big Trouble*].

Carrie Vaughn: Thank you. I got asked a lot about whether I meant to do that. Of course I meant to do that. What do you take me for?

Ensuing Chapters: Let's talk a little bit about the area where you work,

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what a lot of people call urban fantasy, or a variety of cross-genres you can put it in with. When we spoke last time, vampires were really big, and now zombies have really taken over. What do you read into our fascination with these iconic creatures? Is it something that's always cyclical? Or is there something particular to the creatures we become fascinated with?

Carrie Vaughn: These creatures have been around a lot longer than we think, than a lot of people give them credit for. People talk about the current wave of urban fantasy, and I have entire rants about this because even the term urban fantasy has changed a lot over the last 20 years.

Twenty years ago, the term referred to Charles de Lint, and Emma Bull, Neil Gaiman's work that brings mythology and folklore into a contemporary urban setting. And now it's come to mean a lot more: These adventure-oriented, sexy stories about, usually, women, the kick-ass women with all the weaponry and the vampire romance on the side. But that's very restrictive, so I don't like to just focus on that.

But the thing is that vampire stories are not new. They've always been popular. They've come in waves in what they've focused on, but you can go back. Before Laurel K. Hamilton, there was Anne Rice. In between there was P.N. Elrod and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro and other people who were writing vampire stories. Before Anne Rice there was *Dark Shadows*. And then there were the Universal horror movies. You can go back and back and back and there have always been vampire stories.

Zombie stories, they aren't new, but once again it depends how you define zombie. That's where I kind of get tripped up a little bit because the modern, *Dawn of the Dead*, monster-type zombie is a really modern creation. The traditional folkloric zombies aren't anything like it, if you go to the origins of the Haitian folklore. I've recently re-watched *The Serpent* and *The Rainbow*, which does a pretty darn good job for all its sensationalism. In that folklore, zombie meant something very specific, and they weren't interested in eating brains.

That's a very new addition to the mythology. And I'm not sure where it comes from. I have heard lots of theories, and probably parts of all of them are true. Modern fears with things like radiation and food production and epidemics, disease. The mass-produced culture where we don't know where things come from, and we don't know how things spread. We can't trace the trajectories of that, and so the idea of the mindless monster that is a product of our own society coming back to destroy us all, that's the base metaphor and it's a very powerful metaphor. So I can understand why it's popular.

But as a cultural movement, the fact that there are people who are out there forming their zombie apocalypse plans and building their bunkers and stuff. I'm not sure what I think about all that.

Ensuing Chapters: What is the fascination with the werewolf? Maybe a theory on what, culturally, the fascination is, and personally, why you chose a werewolf?

Carrie Vaughn: I can tell you what traditionally the werewolf is, and the werewolf is interesting because for about the last 130 years it's been pretty much the same thing. It hasn't changed. The vampire has changed a lot. It's become this other creature representing sin and decay coming from outside the community, and now it's a symbol of power and immortality and forbidden pleasures and all of these highly sexualized, highly powerful metaphors. So the vampire has changed a lot.

Werewolf stories just have never gotten their time in the light. There have always been werewolves, but culturally, they've kind of been stuck in this 'beast within' type story. I've been calling it the Jekyll and Hyde story. With a few exceptions, every werewolf story—that has focused on werewolves specifically—has been the Jekyll and Hyde: Somebody who's been overwhelmed by their base instincts and the beast within bursts out and destroys everything and then it dies. The end.

There's just not a whole lot you can do with that. If that's the story you're focusing on, it always has the same trajectory and the same end. You can tell really good stories with that. I think *An American Werewolf in London* is brilliant, but it's the same. You get infected, you struggle with the beast within, which bursts free and does horrible things, and then you die. *Ginger Snaps*, which is another great, recent werewolf movie, the same kind of thing. Even though it kind of turns it on its head. I feel like culturally, people haven't gotten past the idea that werewolves represent the struggle with base nature, and it's always the struggle with the beast within. And the beast within always has to lose.

One of the reasons I decided to make the main character a werewolf was to

try to get past that metaphor. We can have good stories about werewolves if we'd just get past the idea that werewolves are always doomed to fall victim to this beast within dichotomy. Let's pretend that you can actually be a well-balanced, functional werewolf who is in control of the beast within and you can actually function in society. What happens then? That just opens it up. Werewolves can then become characters rather than these metaphors, which is what they end up seeming to be in most of the stories that you see them in.

Ensuing Chapters: And we've seen not only the difference with the Kitty character from the old storyline, the old metaphors, but also her evolution through the series. She started off more reserved and behind the microphone to becoming the alpha of her pack. You've done a great job of balancing those different sides of her. What do you think of her evolution and how she's progressed over the years?

Carrie Vaughn: That was pretty intentional. I get asked about that a lot because one of the big complaints with the first book, *Kitty and the Midnight Hour*, is that she's so passive and she's so submissive and she's not very powerful. People say it like it's a criticism, and then I come back and say, 'I actually meant to do it that way.' I wanted the first book to be a story about someone without very much power learning to take care of herself. That seemed to me to be a really powerful story that would resonate with people.

Back to the urban fantasy thing. That's so far outside the normal trope in urban fantasy, where you start out with the powerful kick-ass woman who spends the first chapter strapping the stilettos onto her forearms and sharpening her katana, and going out and kicking ass. And Kitty doesn't do that at all. I think it was just something that people weren't used to seeing.

But as the series has gone on, it's been my intention to have her power, her sphere of influence, I guess, increase. It's expanded just a little bit every book. She learned to take care of herself. Then she has to learn to stand up and declare how she stands on certain issues. Then she has to learn to take care of the people around her. Then she has to learn how to take care of the pack and her family and as her power has grown, her responsibilities have also grown. Those have gone hand in hand. First it was her pack, and now she's become the spokesperson for supernatural creatures everywhere in her world.

Is she going to rise to the occasion? That's been a lot of her arc. It's not, 'What is she going to beat up this time?', but, 'What is her responsibility this time?' Will she be able to handle it? I've wanted to have her grow in strength so that she can handle it each book.

Ensuing Chapters: How would you describe *Kitty Steals the Show* to folks who haven't picked up the book yet or heard you talk about it?

Carrie Vaughn: So there's this international conference, and Kitty has been appointed to give the keynote address because of her notoriety with the talk show. She's become well enough known that she's seen by the international community as a spokesperson. This is her chance.

One of the shticks of the book is that she doesn't really know what she's going to say at the speech until the very last minute. And that's one of the themes of the book: What is she going to say? She faces all kinds of conflicts. She gets a front-row seat. She gets to see really what's at stake here, and then she has to stand up and try to rally people to seeing things her way. It is kind of a political book, as you might expect. It really is trying to move her up to the next level. Now she's on the stage, and she can't step back off again.

Ensuing Chapters: There's a passage in the opening chapter that I really enjoyed. It's after the hunt, and everyone's waking up and Kitty says: 'I stretched, straightening legs and arms, pulling at too-tight muscles, reminding myself of the shape of my human body after a full-moon night of running as a wolf.' We get this discomfort in her and the others as they're returning to their human form, which I think captures a lot of those dichotomies or the dissociations that we've had with her struggling with assertiveness. Could you talk a bit about the inner conflicts and complexities of Kitty and how you portray these? Does it feel schizophrenic when you're writing her character and dealing with the transformation from wolf to human?

Carrie Vaughn: Not really because that's been part of my point, to depict her as fairly well integrated. To me that was one of the problems with the werewolf as a creature. It was always either-or. They're either a person or a monster, and the struggle was between the two. But in order to be a functional werewolf, you would have to, at some point, integrate the two of those. I've always seen it as a scale. No matter what form they're in, a werewolf is always going to be a little bit of both. The challenge is to write a

scene like that with language that isn't necessarily negative or positive, that's just a neutral description that doesn't see one form as negative and one form as positive, but sees them both as part of the same being.

And the other thing is having her be part of the pack and bring in some of the wolf biology, actual research into wolf behavior to think about what a pack would be like. Ultimately, the pack is something that helps them all stay human. They're acting like wolves, but it's enough of an anchor that it keeps them from becoming monstrous.

Ensuing Chapters: What are the political themes that you've really been passionate about, that you've explored, and how do you balance the politics with the entertainment and the narrative story line?

Carrie Vaughn: Once again, I do have an intention. I have an agenda with some of this. The whole thing has kind of grown out of some of my observations with other vampires and werewolves in the real world-type stories. One of them is the real world in a lot of those stories doesn't actually look like the real world. They didn't tackle politics. People didn't have jobs. If I was going to set stories in the real world, I wanted to have them be about the real world, and I wanted to have it be recognizably our world.

Part of that was having the crazy politician who has their pet thing that just sounds absolutely crazy to everybody else, and yet somehow they manage to keep getting elected and keep trying to pass legislation. I have that kind of character who shows up every now and then. There's not one topic that I'm necessarily passionate about, but I do want to bring in as much of that as I can because it makes the world seem more real.

Kitty Goes to War was one that I wanted to do for a long time, and I finally got to do it. That was the issue of war veterans, returning veterans with some post-traumatic stress issues. And just the idea that if there are vampires and werewolves and supernatural creatures, the military is going to find a way to use them. That seemed to be a really obvious thing to deal with. And other writers have dealt with that. The typical way is to deal with them in the field. What would a troop of werewolf soldiers look like and set the story there? Well, Kitty is my main character. I can't send her off to Afghanistan and have her embedded. Maybe I could have, but I don't think that would have been as good of a story.

The story I wanted to tell was bringing these soldiers home and their struggles with trying to reintegrate when they've got not just the post-traumatic stress but being a werewolf. Having been out of regular, normal society, how do they integrate all these different aspects? That's the story I ended up telling. It was a more meaningful story to me, really, than actually showing the battles.

Ensuing Chapters: A lot has been made of the presence of [supernatural] characters in fiction, historically, as a representation of people who feel, or are, outside of regular society, be they in some way different or as an example of a war veteran who's been changed by a certain experience. How do you feel about that as a psychological deconstruction of these characters?

Carrie Vaughn: It's an obvious metaphor, so I think it's perfectly good to tackle that metaphor and tackle those issues. As a writer, it's useful for me to use some of that as a model. In Kitty's world, the existence of the supernatural is slowly being revealed to people, and politicians are slowly getting involved and awareness is coming about slowly.

One of the models I used for how that would actually work is AIDS awareness in the early '80s, which was a really kind of fraught thing. It wasn't something that people even bought into for a long time. It was something that the government didn't want to acknowledge for a long time. If you were directly involved, you knew everything there was to know about it. But if you weren't involved in the community, if you didn't live in one of the major hot points where the disease was really gaining ground, you wouldn't know anything about that.

From the writing side, that's where it becomes useful. We actually have real-world examples of what it's like to be an outsider or what it's like to be an object of hate. And from the other side of it, it would be really nice if writing about it could give somebody from perhaps a community that's looked down on, if it could give them something to relate to. That's a plus. It's representation. You have to try to represent as much as you can in the world, because you never know who you're going to be talking to, and who you might relate to, who might see themselves in your books. You want to be as truthful as you can.

Ensuing Chapters: Have you been surprised at all, or touched in any

particular way, by some of the responses from fans?

Carrie Vaughn: I think 99 percent of the responses I get are great. One of the things that surprised me is, I don't know if you've heard of something called therianthropy, or therianthropes. It's a condition where people believe that they are more canine than human. There are people who really do identify more with dogs and wolves than they do with people. They see themselves that way, and, as much as they can and still function in society, they model their lives that way.

I've gotten several e-mails from people who identify as therianthropes, and one of them I got said that reading the Kitty books was the first time he'd ever read a book where he related to the main character, which blew me away. I know how powerful it can be to read a novel where you identify with the main character. To never have that in your life until my book came along, that was just astonishing to me. And I felt very humbled. I've gotten several, and it's really interesting because you can sit here and think well, that's kind of weird, people thinking that they're canines, but when I get the e-mails, they all start off the same way: You're going to think this is crazy, but, I identify as therianthrope. They're very aware that they don't fit into people's normal conception of what people should be, and they're very touchy about that. So it's just really great to be able to talk to them and say, 'That's really cool that you're reading the books. I'm really glad that they speak to you and that's great.'

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