

Justin Cronin Talks about his Book and the Ridley Scott Film

By A. Paul Myers

A group of about 50 people eagerly await the arrival of Justin Cronin at a Barnes and Noble store in San Antonio, Texas. Justin is expected to read excerpts from his wildly successful new novel, *The Passage*, answer questions and sign books. This is the ninth stop on his official book tour, and though he looks tired, Justin also appears genuinely excited to be sharing stories about his book, the clamor over movie rights and what it feels like having Ridley Scott fast-track a film based on the first of what is to be a rather lengthy book trilogy.

The Passage is perhaps best described as an intelligent vampire apocalypse. For those tired of the overly-sensitive, glitter adorned vampires currently dominating pop culture, Cronin offers a truly horrific and original experience. Compared to *The Stand* in its epic sweep, *The Passage* has not only won over the critics, but has made fan boys out of the likes of Stephen King, who surprised Justin by calling in during his television interview on Good Morning America to gush about the story. Justin has also managed to ensnare readers who do not normally veer into the realm of vampire fiction; the crowd tonight is as diverse as the characters that populate his book.

Justin admittedly frustrates his publicist by reading from a different part of the book at every tour stop, and does so again tonight. He insists it makes things more fun. After reading a unique passage, he spends half an hour answering audience questions before signing books. The following are a few of those questions.

Have they decided or have you thought about who you would like to play Wolgast in the movie?

The film is being made by Ridley Scott. And the screenwriter is John Logan, who wrote *Gladiator*. He also wrote a play called *Red* that just won a Tony for Best Play. He's a very talented guy and I feel really, really lucky to have him and of course, Sir Ridley Scott.

The question of casting comes up a lot. The good news is I don't have to pick. They have people who are very smart about this. But, the role of Wolgast... I do think if you take that particular team... you have Ridley Scott and John Logan... who's the missing person? Russell Crowe. He's been an action star, but he's also quite good at playing middle-aged angst, which is kind of what Wolgast is. I think he would be great in the role. So, that's my pick. The problem with the role of Amy is that she will be at very different ages. The first line of the book states that she lives for a thousand years. They will probably cast an unknown because she starts out so young. They usually cast an unknown and let her grow up with the story. My hope is that the three books will also be three movies. So, they have to think in terms of franchise where the actors will age. I've had to have these conversations with the movie people about the other two books so they can make appropriate casting decisions. They want to know how much time passes between books one and two so they know how to cast Amy. This movie stuff is all new to

me; I'm a novelist. Making a movie is like invading France. They have to have caterers. A million people. They build a city and then burn it down. It's amazing. I'm going to see the first screenplay very soon. I'm pretty excited about it.

How are you going to feel when they make major changes to your book for the movie?

Every movie has to be the vision of the director and the screenwriter, not the vision of the novelist who wrote the book upon which it's based. Usually when a movie slavishly tries to adhere to the book, it fails. In this case, there's no way they can do it because it's 760 pages long and has a cast of one million people and a hundred years of story in it. They have to make very careful decisions using the language of film. I use words, they use pictures. It's a very different art. I think every writer feels a bit vulnerable when what they do becomes someone else's art. I am experiencing this for the first time, so yeah, I am experiencing some anxiety. On the other hand... it's Ridley Scott! I know the people involved with this are basically geniuses, so I feel like I am in good hands.

Did you plot out all three books before you started writing?

In general, yes, but with greater specificity to the first book. "Outline" sounds like something you do in junior high, so it wasn't really like that, but I wrote out sort of a blow-by-blow information dump of the first book before I wrote the first sentence. There are writers who claim that they just sit down and let the words come. Well, good for them, but I think they're lying. It's a job and you have to plan it. And a book like this, where things that happen on page 10 are important on page 600... this is what happened on *Lost*... they didn't know what was going to happen. It's better if you know. So, I plan things ahead.

The second and third books I planned in a much more general way, but with rich specifics that I knew would make the story work. Book two now has four legal pads of notes of what's going to happen. But even when you do that, I'll often have a space in my book where I'm not sure what's going to happen. I know the *kind* of thing I want to have happen... so I'll just write, "...and the cool thing happens." You have to hope you have all the material in place that can make coolness occur. In my case, that usually happens if I'm really concentrating. My unconscious mind knows what's going to happen; my conscious mind just hasn't figured it out yet. So, my unconscious mind puts all the things within reach that I actually need. That's the mysterious part of what I do. The un-mysterious part is showing up every day for six hours. The first rule of any job is just show up. And that's what I do.

I donated my life to writing 25 years ago. I decided that this is what I'm going to do. I'll either succeed at or it I'll fail. It's one or the other.

I'm curious. So many people with medical training come up in the book. Is someone in your family a doctor or nurse?

My father flunked out of medical school. That's the closest we ever got. I'm a parent, so I go to the pediatrician a lot. No, I've become something of a generalist in my life. It's one of the pleasures of being a writer. For a long time, I was a gun for hire writer. Basically, I'd write anything for a dollar if you had it. I ghost wrote someone's memoirs, I was co-author of nine non-fiction coffee table type books. I did a ton of things. I had a family to take care of. It made me a sponge. I always had to learn things. If you don't know something as a writer, just go ask someone who knows and they would love to tell you. That's the rule. My agent's husband is a retired obstetrician. I gave him a scene to read and he said, "You need to raise her blood pressure." And he was right. It was a little on the low side for all the excitement the scene had produced. You rely on your friends.

Justin's presentation is rewarded with enthusiastic applause as he settles behind the table to sign books. Eager fans line up to get autographs and to hear more stories. When asked why vampire stories are so popular, he suggests it's because they deal with an essential question of human nature: "How much of your humanity would you be trading away in order to be immortal? Ultimately, they are fables to remind us that it's better to be human."

And being human requires patience. Justin says readers will probably have to wait two years for the sequel. For this crowd, it will be worth the wait. Especially considering there will be a feature film version to help pass the time in between.

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