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# Bunnicula: a rabbit-tale of mystery

by Deborah and James Howe

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## Summary

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The Monroe family finds a bunny at the movie theater. They are watching an old Dracula movie so they call the bunny Bunnacula. The Monroe family already has two pets, Harold the dog and Chester the cat. While Harold isn't bothered by the new addition, Chester begins to suspect that the bunny is a vampire. Bunnacula's markings make him look like he is wearing a cape, and he seems to have fangs. Strange things seem to happen around the house after Bunnacula arrives. So Chester, with a little help from Harold, tries to rescue the family from the vampire bunny.

Source: <http://www.easyfunschool.com/article1943.html>



## About the Author

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James Howe says he doesn't believe he was born to write. When he was seven or eight he would have told you he was born to ride. Back then, he wanted to be a jockey. Those dreams were dashed when his mother told him that she had calculated his adult height at 6' 4" (he turned out to be 6' 2"). She suggested that he become a writer. James thought that was something you did for fun, not for a living. So for years he wrote for fun.

When he was nine or ten, he wrote a play based on the "Blondie" comic strip. He also wrote short stories and self-published newspapers. His favorite was a newsletter for a club he founded: Vampire Legion. The newspaper was called the Gory Gazette.

At Boston University, where he majored in theater, he wrote more plays. He then moved to New York City and pursued a career as an actor and model, appearing in commercials. He also directed plays and worked as a literary agent for playwrights and other writers.

One day in the mid-70's he dreamed up the character of a vampire rabbit named Bunnacula. He thinks all the movie versions of Dracula might have been the inspiration for Bunnacula, but it was his wife Deborah who suggested he write a children's book about him. Sadly, Deborah died of cancer shortly after Bunnacula was published. Based on his experiences and observations during Deborah's illness, he wrote *The Hospital Book*. Since then he has written more books about the Bunnacula characters, including *Howliday Inn*, *The Celery Stalks at Midnight*, *Nighty-Nightmare*, and *Return to Howliday Inn*.

In 1981 Mr. Howe began writing full-time. Besides the Bunnacula books, he has written a series of mysteries featuring thirteen-year-old sleuth, Sebastian Barth. He has also created a series of short chapter books about two best friends named Pinky and Rex. Other works include picture books, novels, nonfiction, adaptations of classic stories, and screenplays for movies and television. Recently he published his first young adult novel, *The Watcher* followed by his second young adult novel, *The Misfits*. Over the years James Howe has learned that there's more to being a

children's author than writing books. There's the thrill of seeing each idea develop. There's the satisfaction of receiving letters from readers and the pleasure of meeting them face-to-face. He has come to realize that there's more to writing than his own amusement. There's the reward of fun that's shared. And you can make a living at it!

So, there's a moral to this story: except when she's telling you to eat mushrooms, listen to your mother!

Source: [http://www.bcplonline.org/kidspage/kids\\_howe.html](http://www.bcplonline.org/kidspage/kids_howe.html)



## Book Review

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This immensely popular children's story is told from the point of view of a dog named Harold. It all starts when Harold's human family, the Monroes, goes to see the movie Dracula, and young Toby accidentally sits on a baby rabbit wrapped in a bundle on his seat. How could the family help but take the rabbit home and name it Bunnicula? Chester, the literate, sensitive, and keenly observant family cat, soon decides there is something weird about this rabbit. Pointy fangs, the appearance of a cape, black-and-white coloring, nocturnal habits ... it sure seemed like he was a vampire bunny. When the family finds a white tomato in the kitchen, sucked dry and colorless, well ... Chester becomes distraught and fears for the safety of the family.

"Today, vegetables. Tomorrow ... the world!" he warns Harold. But when Chester tries to make his fears known to the Monroes, he is completely misunderstood, and the results are truly hilarious. Is Bunnicula really a vampire bunny? We can't say. But any child who has ever let his or her imagination run a little wild will love Deborah and James Howe's funny, fast-paced "rabbit-tale of mystery."

Miranda Doyle, San Francisco Public Library (Reviewed March 1, 2004) (School Library Journal, vol 50, issue 3, p203)



## Discussion Questions

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Warning! Some of the questions contain key elements of the plot. Do not read if you don't want to know what happens!

1. Who is telling this story?
2. Why did Chester think Bunnicula was a vampire?
3. Which character in the story did you like best? Explain your choice.
4. What do you think happened to the vegetables?
5. Some of the things in Bunnicula could happen in real life (reality). Some things could not happen in real life (fantasy).
6. Many different vegetables were mentioned in this story? Pick one that you have never eaten before and give it a try.

Source: <http://www.easyfunschool.com/article1943.html>

1. Which character in the book was your favorite and why?
2. Why does Chester think Bunnicula is a vampire?
3. What would you do if you found out that your pet or a toy were really a monster?
4. What did you think was the funniest part of the story?
5. How did Bunnicula get his name?
6. What does Harold do to help Bunnicula?
7. Do you think Chester will be friends with Bunnicula?

Source : <http://k8talksbooks.blogspot.com/2008/02/bunnicula-by-deborah-and-james-howe.html>



# Author Interview

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The author James Howe was interviewed by Scholastic students.

## **Why did you become an author?**

I became an author because I love words. I enjoyed playing with them when I was a kid, writing stories and plays, and doing whatever I could think to do with words. I kept my love of them growing up and still love to see what they can do.

## **What kind of books do you like to read?**

I like to read fiction, and I particularly enjoy reading young adult fiction. But I also read children's books, adult books, current authors, and classics, but I like fiction the most.

## **What were some of the challenges you faced while you were trying to get your first book published?**

I was lucky in getting my first book published; my first book was *Bunnicula*, which I wrote with my late wife Debbie, for the fun of it. So I wasn't desperate to become a published author. I was working at another job, and I was lucky that the fourth publishing house that looked at the book took it.

## **How old were you when you started writing books?**

I was in my late 20s, I don't remember exactly.

## **If you could meet any author, alive or dead, who would it be?**

William Shakespeare. He's the greatest writer and he's such a mystery, we don't know a lot about him. It would be wonderful to find out the person behind all that magnificent writing.

## **What inspired you to write the *Bunnicula* series?**

Debbie and I loved vampire movies. This was in the 1970s when there were a lot of vampire movies shown on late night TV — we stayed up late many a night. Some of them were a lot sillier than they were scary. I don't remember the moment when the character *Bunnicula* came into my head. I suspect it came from the asking the question, what's the silliest least likely vampire I can imagine? It was never intended to be a series; it just grew out of the first book. I loved writing about those characters so much, particularly Harold, so I continued the story.

**Was Bunnacula always a rabbit? Or did you try out other vampire animals? Dogula? Catula?**

No, Bunnacula was always a rabbit.

**Are you going to make a sequel to Bunnacula Strikes Again?**

I don't have plans to, but I am launching a new series next summer called *Tales From the House of Bunnacula*, which are shorter chapter books written by Howie, who is the wirehaired dachshund puppy who came into the series after the first book.

**Are you a funny person in real life, or just in your books?**

That depends on whom you ask! (*laughing*) I think I am, but I'm also a very serious person. It depends. When I'm with other people who inspire my silliness or sense of humor, I'm funny. When I sit down to write, it's hard not to be funny.

**How did you get your ideas for the book *Howliday Inn*?**

I wanted to write a sequel to *Bunnacula*, but the idea I was working on wasn't working. I felt I was rewriting *Bunnacula* itself, so I knew I needed to make a big change somehow. I asked myself where else could animals go to have an adventure if they didn't stay at home. One of the first thoughts I had was a boarding kennel. As soon as I thought of a boarding kennel, I thought of the mysteries of Agatha Christie, where often a group of strangers come together in a holiday setting, one of the guests is murdered and the other guests become suspects. That gave me my basic plot structure for *Howliday Inn*.

**Who is your favorite character in Bunnacula?**

I would have to say Harold because I'm closest to him since I write as him. But in the series I also really enjoy writing Howie.

**Do you think *Bunnacula* will ever be a cartoon show?**

That's out of my control; *Bunnacula* was made into a cartoon special 20 years ago. Right now, I'm hoping it will be made into a movie.

**My students and I are just finishing up the story Bunnacula this week. Is there anything that you really hoped people would notice or think about when they read this story?**

I would hope they laugh a lot. I did have a young reader write to me years ago that what she learned from the book was to accept other people's differences — the way that Harold accepted Bunnacula into the home. And I liked that. That's become a theme in much of my work and it's interesting that it might have unintentionally been a theme in my first book.

**Tell me more about your new book *The Misfits*.**

*The Misfits* is my latest novel. It's set in the 7th grade and is about four best friends, three boys [Joe, Bobby, Skeezie] and a girl [Addie] who are "the misfits"

of the title. They are called names because they are different in different ways from the kids they call, "the fifths," or the popular kids. I wanted to tell their stories in a way that was fun and entertaining, but also get across a bigger message, which had to do with accepting differences and specifically ending name calling in school. There are a lot of other strands to the story that have to deal with the other characters and what is going on in their lives. I should mention that I think it's a really funny book. I've done other serious books, in fact, a couple that are much more serious. I'm known more for the *Bunnicula* books and lighter fare. But those themes of being different, being accepted, and accepting yourself does run through a lot of my books, like the *Pinky and Rex* series and a picture book I recently did, *Horace and Morris, But Mostly Dolores*. It deals with boys and girls who are different from the ways that boys and girls are told to be. For example, Pinky is the boy and his favorite color is pink. In *Horace and Morris* the boys and girls really like playing together and being friends.

### **Have you written other books for older kids?**

Yes, I've written a young adult novel called *The Watcher*, which is without a doubt the most serious book I've written. That is a psychological mystery about a girl who sits on the steps leading down to a beach and watches without ever saying a word. I also recently edited a collection of short stories for teenagers, called *The Color of Absence, 12 stories about loss and hope*.

### **Where did you come up with titles like *Celery Stalks at Midnight*?**

It came from a friend after reading *Bunnicula*, who asked what happens to the vegetables that *Bunnicula* attacks? Do they become vampires too? I thought that was a really funny idea and the title came into my head immediately it took me a few years, however to come up with a story to go with the title. In fact when I talked about the problem I was having writing a sequel to *Bunnicula*, it was that book, *Celery Stalks at Midnight* that I was trying to write. Once I wrote *Howliday Inn*, it was easy for me to write the next book. I like having good strong titles before I start writing a book, unfortunately it doesn't always work that way.

### **Do you ever dream about your characters?**

Yes, not often but occasionally I do. It happened to me with *A Night Without Stars*, a serious book I wrote about a girl who went into the hospital to have open-heart surgery. It happened with *The Misfits*. Oddly enough, it's never happened with the characters in the *Bunnicula* series.

### **Do kids ever send you ideas for more *Bunnicula* stories? Or for other stories?**

Yes, sometimes the ideas have to do with taking Harold and Chester and the other characters to the moon, or something else that is funny, but too farfetched. I can't recall an idea that I've actually been able to use, but I always enjoy hearing the kind of ideas that my stories inspire. The most frequently suggested idea is please put me in your next book!

**Will you ever make another book with a female Bunnacula?**

If you mean a female vampire rabbit, I don't think so, but I won't say no. I never know what I may do with my characters in the future.

Is there really a dog and cat boarder called Chateau Bow Wow? Not that I know of. I do like giving places and characters funny names, and sometimes I see funny names that I have to use in a book. I made up Chateau Bow Wow, but in Bunnacula Strikes Again I mention two stores Maison de Wall Paper and Amour de Hair, which are real stores I've seen.

**Is Bunnacula really a vampire?**

Of course! How else do you explain those white vegetables?! Just remember he's a vegetarian vampire.

**What is your favorite children's book?**

Charlotte's Web by E.B. White

**How many books have you written so far?**

I've lost count, but over 70.

**How do you write that many books?**

Good question! Writing is my work so it's what I do everyday. You'd be surprised how much you can write when you're writing every day.

**Do you have pets of your own?**

Yes. I have a cat named Freckle and a dog named Betsy.

**Why did you choose to write stories about animals?**

I've always loved animals. I had many pets growing up and I can remember even as a child imagining what my pets' inner lives and thoughts were, and what they might say to each other when I left the room. Charlotte's Web also influenced me, with its secret world of the animals, which Fern got to witness.

**Where did your inspiration for Howie come from? We love him!**

I'm so glad you love Howie. I take that very personally because Howie is me! Sometimes people think that because of his name, but in fact I wasn't conscious of naming him Howie because of my last name. I named him Howie because his father's name is Howard and Howard was named for one of my uncles. The character of Howie is very much like who I was as a boy with three older brothers who I was always trying to impress — especially with jokes and puns.

**Why do you often write about scary topics?**

I don't really think about the fact that I'm writing about scary topics, and in fact most of my books are not about scary topics. The best answer I can give is that I like to tell a good story, and good stories often involve suspense. Sometimes suspenseful stories are scary.

**Did you always know you wanted to be an author?**

No, first I wanted to be a jockey because I loved riding horses. From the time I was ten, I wanted to be an actor and I studied acting in college. But from as far back as I can remember, I loved to write, and I was lucky enough to end up doing what I love doing best.

**What would you have been if you didn't become an author?**

A director.

**Where do you do your writing, is there one place in particular you like to be?**

I write at home, right now I'm sitting where I do my writing, at my desk. I sometimes write on a laptop on my porch if the weather is nice.

**How do you get your creative thoughts flowing?**

Wonderful question! Sometimes I read for a while before I start writing. I always give myself time to play with thoughts and ideas before trying to write the first sentence of a story or book. Sometimes I do this just by sitting and letting my mind float. Sometimes I do it by writing and letting my thoughts just go out onto the paper or computer screen as I have them. I ask lots and lots of questions about who my characters are and what might happen. I try not to get stuck on a particular idea or a particular way of seeing things too early on. I want to stay open to where my characters and new ideas might take me.

**Do you ever get writer's block? What do you do if you get it?**

Yes. When it's small writer's block, meaning I'm stuck while working on a story and don't know what to do next, I sometimes go for a walk, but what I find most helpful is to sit down and read. This opens my mind to the way another author is writing and gets me thinking about solving the problems I'm having with my writing. If it's big writer's block, by which I mean, having difficulty with writing at all, I either take a break or I try to write something completely unexpected. In other words, I try to find the spontaneity in my writing again.

**How do you know where to stop a story?**

Good question. Picasso was once asked how he knew when he was finished with a painting and he said, I put down the brush. I usually have a good idea in my head of how I want my book to end, but what the exact moment of ending is, is as much a mystery in some ways as what the exact moment of beginning is. Usually I just feel it and I know this is the right place to leave these characters.

**How many times do you revise a story after you write it?**

That depends on the story. It can be anywhere from one or two times to 10 to 15 times.

**Have you ever read a book that gave you great ideas for a story of your own?**

Yes, I was inspired by Charlotte's Web in how I wrote the Bannicula series and I know I've been inspired by many other books over the years. I think that reading is one of the greatest ways we learn how to write. Reading is the best way to learn how to write.

**What part of a story comes to you first?**

That varies from book to book, but usually it's a character.

**When you are a published author, do they [the publishers] take every book you write, or have you written some that have yet to be published?**

I usually write books under contract, which means the publisher likes the idea and has agreed to publish it once it is written. So, more often than not, it's an idea rather than a book that's turned down by a publisher.

**Do you think you will ever stop writing?**

I can't imagine not writing. Having written over 70 books, I look forward to taking a little time off sometime in the next few years to give myself the chance to think about new things I would like to write about. However, it's hard for me to imagine going for very long without sitting down and playing around with words. I hope I'll be writing the rest of my life.

**What advice would you give a student that wants to be a writer?**

Two words: read . . . write. Reading is the best way to learn to write, but the way to get better and better as a writer, is to write, write, write. Write what matters to you, write what makes you laugh, write what makes you cry, write in order to get a reaction from the reader, write because you have to, and write because it is fun for you.

Source:

[http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/collateral.jsp?id=1297\\_type=Contributor\\_typeId=3599](http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/collateral.jsp?id=1297_type=Contributor_typeId=3599)



## Further Reading

If you liked **BUNNICULA: A RABBIT-TALE OF MYSTERY** by Deborah and James Howe you might like to read the following books, too!

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***BUNNICULA STRIKES AGAIN*** by James Howe

***THE CELERY STALKS AT MIDNIGHT*** by James Howe

***DON'T COUNT ON DRACULA*** by Dan Greenburg

***FANGS FOR THE MEMORIES*** by Bill Myers with David Wimbish

***GHOULS DON'T SCOOP ICE CREAM*** by Debbie Dadey

***THE INK DRINKER*** by Eric Sanvoisin

***HOWLIDAY INN*** by James Howe

***NIGHTY-NIGHTMARE*** by James Howe

***RETURN TO HOWLIDAY INN*** by James Howe

***SCOOBY-DOO! AND THE VAMPIRE'S REVENGE*** by James Gelsey

***VAMPIRE STATE BUILDING*** by Elizabeth Levy

***VAMPIRES DON'T WEAR POLKA DOTS*** by Debbie Dadey

***THE WEREWOLF CLUB MEETS DORKULA*** by Daniel Pinkwater

Website for Bunnacula Jeopardy:

<http://missryan.matt-morris.com/bun.htm>