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First novel depicts frightening but feasible real-life scenario

by Brooke Kenny | Staff Writer

The idea behind John Darrin's technological thriller "Screenshot" is voyeuristic, haunting — and perhaps not that far-fetched.

In the novel, courtesy of an extremely wealthy and disturbed entrepreneur, individuals pay to participate in interactive online executions of criminals. A writer and a rogue FBI computer geek set out to put a stop to the practice.

Darrin attributes the idea to a real story his son Josh told him about a Texas rancher who set up a remote-controlled rifle and a video camera and sold time on the Internet to people who wanted to shoot wildlife that passed by. Participants could activate the rifle from their computer.

In an age of increasingly interactive entertainment, Darrin fears we are moving in the direction of the audience in his novel.

"...This kind of spectacle has always had its fans," Darrin says. "You look at what professional wrestling has evolved to, and even that is not enough. Now we get ultimate warrior-type contests where there are no rules. Someone has to give up or be knocked unconscious. The Internet, with its anonymity and access, makes this even easier."

Darrin, who moved to Montgomery County at age 13, has lived in Bethesda, Chevy Chase, Potomac and Rockville. For now, though, his home is the 36-foot travel trailer he drives through the country.

After Darrin's wife Anne died of a rare neurological disease in late 2007, he gave away all their possessions and bought the trailer, a truck to tow it and a motorcycle. He hit the open road in May 2008, and has been all over the U.S. on what he calls his "Go Places / Meet People / Do Things Tour."

"I knew if I stayed in our home after she died, I would hibernate, doing my consulting work from my home office and leave only to get groceries," Darrin says.

Darrin wrote the book during his wife's illness, but considers fiction writing entertainment rather than a form of therapy. He describes the stories he creates as movies in his head.

"The way I write is that I create an exciting scenario, populate it with interesting people, and report what happens," he says. "I am often surprised by the directions the story takes, or the actions and feelings of my characters."

The author is pleased at the realism of his characters, events and technology.

"My hero is no hero. He's just a good man who perseveres in the face of some pretty difficult situations that he gets pulled into," he says.

A sequel to "Screenshot" called "The Rocket's Red Glare," about the coordination of simultaneous dirty bomb attacks, is in the works. He is also writing a non-fiction book, with five short biographies of people he has known, and ghostwriting on another project.

In the fall, Darrin plans to get married and live in Frederick. Currently employed as a consultant on response preparedness for nuclear and radioactive emergencies, eventually he hopes his writing will pay the bills.

"Screenshot" is available for purchase at major online booksellers and by visiting www.johndarrin.com.