

# GHOST WRITING

Meet Lesley Pratt Bannatyne, an author who's made Halloween her calling card



right: Harvard's Halloween expert - Lesley

**Q** A quick glance at some of your journalistic writing activities sees you tackle topics as diverse as kilts, haunting, acting and baseball. One must ask, what IS your background? Did you begin as a journalism graduate or come to this wonderful career from another angle?

**A** My background is in both writing and theater. My first job out of school was in advertising and, for a solid year, I wrote about cheap shoes. Since then I've maintained a freelance writing career (fashion shows, TV commercials, brochures, then essays, articles, news stories and books) in tandem with co-founding a touring theater company, called Studebaker Theater, that performed original pieces from 1978 up until 2003 - a nice run.

**Q** If journalism is your background, did you write as a child or youngster? Is this a case of turning a passion or hobby into a career?

**A** Although I've come to newspaper journalism only in the last few years, I did write as a child. I wrote my first book, 'Flowers for Mother' (a shameless imitation of my kindergarten library books!) and submitted it for publication when I was in first grade. The publisher politely turned down the manuscript and, I think, sent me some nice pictures to look at instead. Writing

stories as a child turned into writing scripts for theater pieces which then morphed back into writing books (which I suppose can be seen as very, very, long stories). So yes, this is very much a case of turning a passion into a career.

**Q** Your books - 'A Halloween How-To: Costumes, Parties, Decorations & Destinations' (Pelican Publishing Co., 2001) & 'Halloween: American Holiday, An American History' (Facts on File, 1990; Pelican Publishing Co., 1999) plus 'A Halloween Reader: Poems, Stories and Plays from Halloweens Past' (Pelican Publishing Co., September 2004) - demonstrate a keen interest

Lesley Pratt Bannatyne is Boston Globe correspondent, co-founder of the Studebaker Theater and co-director of Invisible Cities Group. She has discussed Halloween on television specials for Nickelodeon and the History Channel and has given talks at venues as diverse as the 2000 Halloween Convergence in New Orleans and the St. Louis Art Museum. She contributed the Halloween article to 'World Book Encyclopedia'. Lesley lives in Somerville, Massachusetts and currently works at Harvard University.



in all things Halloween. Where does this come from? How does one become an expert in such a specific topic?

**A** I have always loved Halloween and still do. In New England it's almost physical: come late October the dark descends early and the air has its first real bite of cold. Wind scatters the leaves; people light their first wood fires. It's intoxicating. Research-wise, Halloween is like going down a rabbit hole; the more I know, the more curious it becomes. Researching Halloween touches on popular culture, history, folklore, religion, material culture, even the study of cults, myths (Irish, Scandinavian, English), or civic organizations. To think about Halloween in the late 19th century, for example, you have to think about its literature, the social movements of the times and the effects of industry (e.g., inexpensive printing for ladies magazines), the ethnicities and immigration patterns of the people who celebrated. I don't think any subject, no matter how small, stays small once you take a good look at it. Particle physicists don't get bored with their particles; I certainly don't get bored with Halloween.

**Q** You must have done mountains of research for the books. What were some of the most amazing facts discovered along the way? Have you ended up with some of your own spooky superstitions?

**A** Yes, I've been studying Halloween for twenty years now. Things I think are especially intriguing about Halloween? One is

reports find only a handful of executions, or England, which had four times the population of Scotland but executed one-third the number of people. Halloween in Ireland was more a homecoming (the men who had to work abroad returned at summer's end), a time of magic (tied to old Irish mythology), a time of loss (the Catholic All Soul's Day, 2nd of November, overlapped Halloween in

▼ That the majority of people in the US believe in ghosts and that real ghost hunters tell me that they do find real ghosts.  
▼ And that you can shoot a pumpkin out of an air cannon a distance of nearly one mile.

**Q** Describe your perfect Halloween? What happens at your house to mark this time of the year?

**A** A week before Halloween I usually hold a pumpkin carving party. The deal is this: I supply all the pumpkins but guests have to carve two. They take one and leave one for me. This guarantees I have a dozen or more jack-o-lanterns for the front yard come Halloween night. There are a few stuffed dummies here and there, a chandelier in the front tree and, come dusk, I kick on the fog

machine. I wear a costume (I've got a closet full of 'witch wear' - very handy) and dispense full-size candy bars on a silver platter. Oh - and we always pump great, creepy music into the front yard.

**Q** Halloween has its roots in other countries/civilizations. Have you ever celebrated Halloween overseas? What are some of the most impressive/memorable activities you have seen linked to Halloween?

**A** I've never had the chance to be anywhere but plunked on my porch on 31st of October but when I'm able to, first on my list is Oaxaca, Mexico for their 'Days of the Dead'.

Salem, MA is always impressive around Halloween. It's a great city to



its age. Irish monks in the middle ages wrote down sagas that talk of Samhain, summer's end, when creatures from the otherworld could trespass in the world of men. Give or take a few years, this has been with us - in spirit, pardon the pun - for a thousand years.

It's fascinating to me how different cultures attach different values to Halloween over time. Take witches, for example. Witchcraft and Halloween was a largely Scottish association until the mid 19th century, largely because fear of witchcraft was a powerful force in Calvinist Scotland. During the witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries, an estimated 4000 souls were accused, and about half executed. Compare that to nearby Ireland, where most

the popular imagination both poetically and emotionally).

**Other interesting things:**

▼ That the treat-toting Halloween psycho who puts razor blades in apples and hands them out to innocent children is an urban myth created out of the generalized fear of strangers/drugs/violent crime that took over America in the 1960s.

▼ That American trick-or-treating is such a recent phenomenon; it wasn't really widespread here until the mid-to-late 1950s and then only when sanctioned by UNICEF with its house to house, 'trick-or-treat for UNICEF' Halloween charity drives.

▼ That there are people in this world who truly believe in vampires and those who believe they ARE vampires.

## I love to create human-sized ghosts out of cheesecloth and liquid laundry starch

visit for people-watching and, although the city would now prefer to be known for its historic seaport, it still goes full-out for Halloween. Where else could you attend the Halloween ball of the 'Official Witches of Salem'?

One of my favorite destinations is John Reckner's Jack-o-lantern Spectacular (it was for several years in Rhode Island, once in Salem, and many years in Reckner's hometown of Oxford, MA), a display of 5,000 carved, lit pumpkins laid out in 'scenes' across the landscape. John adds music, lighting and fog and the whole thing is breathtaking.

**Q.** Do you have some favorite Halloween crafts and, if so, what are they?

**A.** I love to create human-sized ghosts out of cheesecloth and liquid laundry starch: You simply soak the fabric in the starch, ring it out, then suspend it from a clothesline and shape the 'arms'. I use clothespins and string to make the arms stretch out wide. However you shape the wet figure, it will dry very, very stiff. These ghosts make great indoor decorations, and outdoor, too, provided it doesn't rain (soggy mess).



**Q.** If people wish to capture the true spirit of Halloween in their lives, what are some of the easiest ways to do it?

**A.** Halloween is really contextual so how it's celebrated depends on who you are, how old you are, and what thrills you. For my daughter at ten, Halloween was all about the freedom of running from door to door as fast as she could; at thirteen it was more about what she'd wear. For some of my friends, it's about theater and performance: they work for months decorating their yards with fake tombstones and mechanical monsters to entertain

**Q.** Why do you think Halloween has enjoyed such longevity and popularity in North America in particular?

**A.** Depending on which century or even decade you're thinking about, there are a myriad of reasons. A few examples:

- ▼ High society in America used Halloween as the occasion of the first party of the winter social season and debutantes often danced their coming-out waltz at a Halloween party. When American culture focused on children.
- ▼ After WWII, Halloween was retooled as a children's holiday.
- ▼ As more and more gay Americans became visible in the 1960s, 70s and later, they had a big hand in

*Halloween is the only holiday we have left when we open our doors to strangers: carpe noctem - Seize the night!*



the kids who come trick-or-treating. For other friends, it's a spiritual time to remember the dead. If there is any essential Halloween celebration, I think it must have two elements: It must involve the supernatural in some way and it must involve the community somehow. All Hallow's was originally the first of the winter begging days, where folks went to those richer than they to ask for food or drink. It's a way to redistribute the wealth; to strengthen the community. It still can be. Halloween is the only holiday we have left when we open our doors to strangers: carpe noctem! (This means, 'Seize the night'!)

resuscitating Halloween as an adult party holiday.

- ▼ In America, of course, you can't talk about the 20th century without talking about the merchandising of Halloween, which probably contributes quite a bit to its ongoing popularity; buying, collecting, and decorating for Halloween makes it that much more visible. It's fascinating that the categories for Halloween merchandise have followed the same paths as for Christmas here: lights, ornaments, cards, even Halloween (black and spindly) trees! 

### How to find Lesley's books

See [amazon.com](http://amazon.com), most online bookstores, or direct from the publisher at [www.pelicanpub.com](http://www.pelicanpub.com).