

Monster Man

Christian thriller novelist Mike Dellosso knows all about living through nightmares. Here's the gripping story behind his stories.

Mike Dellosso believes in monsters. He's seen them. They've shown up in the eyes of an alcoholic loved one, a daughter battling a rare blood disorder and his own bout with colon cancer. He's had to fight them for his life, and he hasn't always been sure who was winning. But now that he's faced his worst fears and lived to tell about it, he refuses to look away.

For the last three years, those monsters have been showing up in his supernatural thrillers as beasts that roam dark woods (*Darlington Woods*), towns with dangerous secrets (*The Hunted*) and otherworldly screams that warn of untimely deaths (*Scream*). His fourth novel, *Darkness Follows*, about a heartless killer and the secrets unearthed through an old Civil War journal, released in May.

Dellosso, who turns 39 in June, insists he's not obsessed with the macabre; he's just willing to confront the frightening things in life. Drawing upon his own struggles and victories, Dellosso explores darkness, evil and sin in each of his novels, but he is unflinching in his portrayal of Jesus' love. Somehow, as reviewer Tim George of notes, "Dellosso manages to shine the light of God's grace into the darkest crevices of the human condition."

Dellosso, who is often compared with

authors Frank Peretti and Ted Dekker, hopes to do more than shine a light in the darkness. "Hopefully, if I've done my job well, you'll see a little of yourself there [in the novel]," he writes, "and discover a way to conquer your own fear and find your way out of the darkness."

Delloso was

always fiercely determined, but no one would have predicted a literary career for him. By his own admission, Delloso despised English classes and writing papers. "Don't know why. I just did," he says. "I never got it."

He loved sports, despite having an acute club foot as a baby. He was forced to wear a cast up to his knee for six months, and he wore corrective shoes for years. Doctors insisted he would never play sports, but he was determined to prove them wrong.

Delloso signed up for high school basketball, despite his mother's concerns, and drew a cross on the back of each of his high-tops as a reminder that he was dedicating his abilities to the Lord.

"He was nicknamed Air Delloso," his mother, Judy Delloso, says. "And when he joined the track team, he set school records in high jump, triple jump and long jump. That was Michael. With the Lord on his side, he could do it."

The Dellosso family did not always follow Christ. In fact, Dellosso's father was an alcoholic. His parents argued often, and the stress in the home accentuated another of his disabilities. Dellosso stuttered.

He had since the time he could walk, and it worsened when there was tension. Speech therapists helped him during his school years, and his humor deflected much of the ridicule, but he couldn't even utter "Hello" to answer the phone. His mother says:
"He soon took that monster by the tail too. He learned if he simply said 'ello' it sounded right through the phone."

When Dellosso was 9, his father encountered God. The Holy Spirit grabbed hold of his heart, and the elder Dellosso accepted Christ and gave up drinking on the spot. Every evening afterward, he sat at the kitchen table and taught his family from the Bible. Then during a visit to a local church called Calvary Tabernacle, Judy Dellosso was overwhelmed by the music and preaching, and she too got saved. The next Sunday, young Mike made the same decision for himself.

Soon after, the family moved to Hanover, Pa. A club foot had not held Dellosso back athletically, and he wasn't going to let stuttering keep him from higher education. He earned a diploma from

Messiah College and later received a master's degree, with honors, from International School of Divinity. He gave required speeches during his college days, and although privately he hated to sound and look stupid, he publicly embraced the challenge.

Still, signs of a future career as a novelist didn't surface until 1998. Dellosso had fallen in love and married his sweetheart, Jen. Soon she was pregnant with their first child.

But in the midst of this joy, they received word that their brother-in-law, married to Dellosso's sister for only two weeks, had been in a horrific motorcycle accident. Darrell slipped into a coma, with little chance of pulling out. Angry and distraught, Mike turned to writing "as an outlet for my grief."

On the page, his words flowed. He did not have to worry about stuttering. His brother-in-law survived the accident, and Dellosso discovered a freedom he'd never known.

He dedicated himself to God's service, whether that meant using his pen, playing sports or speaking in front of crowds. Disabilities would not stand in the way. No sooner had he made this declaration than his speech became more fluent. He still stuttered, worse in some situations than others, but now he could string together entire sentences without a single slip-up.

Jen gave birth to a daughter, who was followed in time by two more. The youngest was diagnosed with a rare disorder in which the platelet count drops steeply and hinders the blood from clotting. This led to constant bruising on her small legs, and she was at risk of spontaneous hemorrhaging.

The Dellossos were terrified. Their family, friends and church prayed, and in a matter of weeks her platelet counts normalized—to the astonishment of the specialist. Years later, the same daughter was diagnosed with juvenile arthritis, but medication keeps the condition at bay. Again, doctors are amazed at how well she is responding.

In 2008, Dellosso crossed a huge hurdle of his own. After submitting his stories to publishers and receiving numerous rejections, Dellosso released his debut novel with Realms, an imprint of Charisma House, owned by Charisma Media, the parent company of *Charisma*.

Titled *The Hunted*, the novel tells the story of one man's battle against small-town demonic forces. Dellosso's dream was finally coming true. And then came the nightmare.

Rectal bleeding prompted Dellosso to

visit a doctor, and a colonoscopy revealed he had stage 3 colon cancer—in his words, “The biggest monster of them all.” The tumor was the size of a golf ball.

A few days after the diagnosis, the realities of upcoming surgery and chemotherapy struck him. Fear descended, and Dellosso sobbed as he drove to work. “Lord,” he cried, “I can’t do this on my own. Carry me through. Let it be as uncomfortable as it needs to be, but please spare my life.” From that point on, he knuckled down to face this foe.

“He seemed to look at it as an adversary, a bully, like an antagonist in one of his books,” says his longtime friend and prayer partner, Teque Harman. “He told me: ‘I’m not scared of dying. I’m scared of leaving my girls without a daddy and my wife without a husband.’”

Harman says it is typical of Dellosso to show more concern for others than for his own mortality. “Mike’s ability to crawl into his characters and think through them is a product of his own life—steps he has taken, not alone, but with God. He would never pretend to be Superman. I can almost hear him humbly questioning, ‘Are You sure You got the right guy, God?’”

Dellosso was attending Calvary Bible Church when he learned of the cancer. He asked for prayer, and the pastoral

staff

rallied in support. Pastor Mike Osladil recalls: "At the next elder

meeting, we gathered around him and his family. We anointed him with oil

and prayed over him. Throughout this testing, Mike demonstrated a strong trust in the Lord."

Even amid personal trials, the Dellossos looked to serve others. Saturday evenings, Mike and Jen picked up goodies from Panera

Bread. After each Sunday morning service, the pastor says, they quietly

made their way to the back of the sanctuary to oversee the distribution

of bread and baked goods to those in need. It's a ministry Dellosso

initiated years ago after his affirmation to serve on the elder board.

During chemotherapy Dellosso lost

weight, and his clothes hung from his body. He turned pale. He was

hospitalized again when scarring appeared in his colon, yet he got back

on his feet, trained for an upcoming 5K run for colon cancer awareness,

and completed that event during a weekend in Philadelphia.

"The best

kept secret about Mike Dellosso," says friend Joe Henry, "is that he's a

genuine tough guy ... who's on your side."

Though Dellosso continues to work

full-time for a health care company, he is writing his fifth novel,

carving out time in the early mornings. He is an adjunct

professor at Lancaster Bible College and a faculty member at Greater Philadelphia Christian Writers' Conference. And despite his ongoing struggle with stuttering, he speaks at schools, writers conferences and library events.

In March, Mike and Jen welcomed another baby girl into the Dellosso family. After staring down cancer and death, the Dellossos are experiencing new life.

"Some would have retreated," Osladil says, "but Mike has courageously faced this challenge and seen God graciously equip and use him."

Eric Wilson is the *New York Times* best-selling author of *Fireproof* and nine other Christian novels, including *Dark to Mortal Eyes* and *Field of Blood*. He lives in Nashville, Tenn. To learn more about Mike Dellosso's fiction, visit [mike](#) or [erickwilson.com](#).