

ROBERT CORMIER
The Best Stop – Scott, LA

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Location: The Best Stop – Scott, LA
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 36 minutes
Project: Southern Boudin Trail - Louisiana

[Begin Robert Cormier]

00:00:00

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Friday, October 13th 2006. I'm in Scott, Louisiana, at The Best Stop with Mr. Cormier. Would you please say your name and your birth date for the record please, sir?

00:00:16

Robert Cormier: My name is Robert Dale Cormier—November 16, 1946. I'm from Scott, Louisiana, and I'm half-owner of The Best Stop. We've been open this—twenty years November 1st since 1986 and it's been—we've been blessed. It's been good, and people just come to Louisiana to enjoy the food and the people and the music, and they keep coming back for more and more. And I always say for—you can fool most of the people most of the time, but you can't fool their taste buds. If they like something, they'll come back and the best advertisement is—is the word of mouth. So the Cajun food—it's gone over good; the restaurants all in South Louisiana are doing well and—and the stores. That's—it's putting out the real Cajun meats and food and—and only in South Louisiana can you get this flavor—nowhere else in the world. I've traveled a lot through the United States and just come back from Ireland this week, and the food is good wherever you go, but it doesn't compare to South Louisiana; and that's what's bringing all the tourists and people to South Louisiana and they keep coming back.

00:01:52

AE: Can you talk about growing up here in Scott and what that was like and what the Cajun culture was like back then?

00:01:57

RC: Well we were farmers. My daddy was a farmer and my grandfather was a farmer and he also had a—a butcher shop and, you know, this is maybe sixty years ago or so and he would butcher for—for people, the farmers and—and it was—everybody would come help and everybody would get there package of meat—whatever it was—the beef or the pork and—and then we'd farm with my daddy and we'd pick cotton, potatoes, so we were brought up the old Cajun way. It was a lot of hard work but it—it taught us how to work, you know, and—and growing up we were always involved in the butchering and making of the sausage and the—salting the meat and we just kept on the tradition. And about twenty years ago my cousin and I decided to open this place here that was vacant. And it just grew every since, so—.

00:03:18

AE: And your cousin's name is Mr. Menard. Can you say his whole name?

00:03:22

RC: His name is Lawrence Menard, and he's sixty-two years old and we're first cousins; we've been together here for twenty years. And I had another store before, and he worked for me there and over here we partnership(ed), and it's been a beautiful partnership. And we're honest with each other and we do all our work we're supposed to do, and it keeps going on and on. We had all our kids working here at one time. We each have—he has three and I have four and they all worked—they all came through The Best Stop. They all learned how to—had to learn how to work and today we have two of the managers—one is my daughter, Dana [Cormier], and the

other manager is his son, Farron [Menard], and they're doing a good job and as you can see, Miss Amy, it's—it's very, very busy and—okay.

00:04:20

AE: Well when you say you had another store before, was it also a specialty meat market?

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RC: Yes, it was—that was in 1979 and '80. It wasn't—people wasn't—didn't know the Cajun culture back then like they know it now. And we done the boudin and—and some specialty meats but it's not only until we opened here that we really, really took over and made all the Cajun specialty meats and sausage and andouille and cracklings with the—it's—pork cracklings is pork skin with a lot of meat on it. It's—*[Sighs]*—okay.

00:05:07

AE: What was the name of your first store?

00:05:09

RC: Robert's Super-Rite—it was in Lafayette, Louisiana.

00:05:15

AE: Well I'm curious because you just said that Cajun culture was not really known in the late '70s, but can you talk about when families and communities were having their own boucheries? And then when these retail markets started selling boudin in retail, do you—can you mark when that change really happened and—and the retail sale of boudin really caught on?

00:05:36

RC: We—we grew up doing the butchering. But I went to barber school, and I was a barber for seven years. And Mr. Maynard was a butcher most of all his life. And in the—in [nineteen] '75 I had a chance to open the store and I did. I left barbering and I started with the meat market and groceries. And it wasn't until the [nineteen] '80s that really the specialty meats and—and the boudin and the cracklings started and it just kept growing you know. Every day a little more and a little more and better and better. And that's when in 1985 and '86 it was like people just wanted to come visit and taste and see the—the Cajun people. They thought we were—we used to ride alligators and go down the bayou in our pirogues [*a Cajun skiff or small boat*] and it wasn't that necessarily true. We—we just had a—we spoke French and we still do and we were better off than a lot of people thought we were, you know. They thought we were backwards, which is not so. We just have our own culture and people are interested in coming to Louisiana—South Louisiana to see us and visit and they love the music and the food and okay—.

00:07:23

AE: So would you say that the—your market really took off and other specialty meat markets when people stopped having their family boucheries and then also tourism and the popularity of Cajun culture was starting to take off. That's what I'm understanding you're saying kind of—?

00:07:39

RC: Yes, the Cajun boucheries at home was mostly for—just for the families. But in the '80s when the—the specialty meat stores started to open then we could sell it you know—we could market it and sell it and it just kept growing and growing. Before that it was just a family and friends and—and neighbors that would participate in the Cajun culture and the boucheries and—

but now we can market it and we—we ship a lot of stuff all over the United States that people that just can't come down and get it so they—they pay the price to ship it, so it's growing every day. It's growing and we have different stores opening that specialize in Cajun specialty meats and they're really helping us because we cannot keep up. We've got so busy that it's—it's just almost too much and I hate to use the word *too much* but it's—it gets out of hand you know, which like I said, we've been blessed.

00:08:49

AE: Well how does it make you feel to know that something that you grew up with is a—a family—part of your family's culture is now such a booming business in this area?

00:09:00

RC: Yes, it makes us feel real proud that something that we have that people want—it's not every day you can—you can open a business and really from day one it just started booming and it—it makes us feel proud to have something that people really, really want and they don't ask the price. They just pick it up and they just pay whatever the price is, and we really feel proud about our product that we have is very good and it keeps people coming back. People come from Texas or Mississippi just to drive and pick-up specialty meats here at The Best Stop in Scott and they tell us we drove from Texas or Mississippi or New Orleans just to pick up some of your products because we can't find it anywhere else. It's imitated all over the world but you can't—you can't fool the taste buds.

00:10:05

AE: So what is it about the boudin here at The Best Stop that stands out?

00:10:09

RC: It's the pride that we put in our work and quality meat and we do it the same way every day—every day for 20 years. We've never changed anything because people—the customers tell us not to change anything because you might mess it up. So we just keep doing the same thing over and over and it's good quality stuff we use in our—in our product. In all our products we use the best that we can buy and try to make it the same way every—every time and people love it and they just keep coming back.

00:10:50

AE: Is the recipe a family recipe or something that you and your cousin came up with?

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RC: It's—my cousin had come up with the idea and we have—we had Miss Jeri Prejean that worked with us and we worked together the first few days to get this recipe and we come up with it and we had—we had help with other people, the Cajuns, the old Cajuns that would talk to us about it and—but once we had this recipe, we wrote it down and we for 20 years we've been faithful to it and it's the quality of meat you put in and the care of—of doing it the same way every time and try to get the employees to do it the same way and it's been great. It's been great; thank God.

00:11:49

AE: Can you talk about what your boudin is like and the ratio of meat to rice and the amount of liver and the spiciness of it?

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RC: We have a recipe and it's I would say 60-pounds of meat, 5-pounds of liver—pork liver and we have onions, bell pepper, and salt and a little black pepper and red pepper—cayenne pepper and—and—and about 20-pounds of rice and—and one batch of 60-pounds makes about 100-pounds of—of boudin and each specialty store has their own recipe and they all love their own recipe but we've—well we have the best. We average about 10,000 pounds a week every week and about 200 batches of cracklings every week. So the amount that you sell—you make and you sell well it lets, you know, who has the best product, and I don't think there's anybody else around that sells this much product in South Louisiana. And we're proud of our—our store and our people and—and we love the people that come by and they love for us to speak French to them because they can't hear it nowhere(s) else and we do speak French as—as much as we can in the store. So they just keep coming by.

00:13:28

AE: You were talking about how you're, in a way, kind of relieved that other specialty meat markets were open to take a little bit of the burden off of you because you're so busy, but how is it do you think that this area in Scott and Lafayette and—and this specific area of Louisiana can support so many businesses like this?

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RC: I guess I-10 is a big—big reason, Interstate 10; people come from Texas, Mississippi, Florida—all over the United States and you have to travel I-10 and we're just seven-tenths of a mile off of I-10 and people just—no advertising; it's just word of mouth. And they just—once they try the Cajun product, they just can't believe how good it tastes and how it wakes up the—

the taste buds and they keep coming back. We're famous here for the gumbo also—South Louisiana for gumbo and we have all the products for the gumbo and—and—and nowhere else can you buy stuff that really, really enhances your gumbo and makes it better and from—from the andouille to the mixed sausage and pork sausage—smoked pork and we have like nine—twelve different kinds of sausage that you can put in gumbo and barbeque and everything else. It's just this area is growing and the population is growing and people are coming from all over the world. Like this weekend we have the Cajun Festival in Gerard Park; we'll have people from England and France and—and all over—Spain and wherever they may be and we'll have a big—big amount of people coming in from out of the states this weekend because of the festival that they're having. And most of the time in September until Christmas they have festivals almost—two or three festivals a month and that brings in a lot of people, so I have to give credit to the people that runs the festivals and whatever. It brings in a lot of people and they—they really love to—to taste the Cajun cuisine—restaurants and—and the—all the Cajun products and they just—when they go back home they call—they call in for—for shipments of stuff to be shipped to them. It's very expensive to ship so—but they—they pay for it; they—they want it. They can't get it nowhere(s) else; so—.

00:16:11

AE: And The Best Stop has been named best boudin by the *Times Acadian* for six years?

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RC: Six years in a row and I think our cracklings probably four years in a row. And it's people that taste it every year and they—they go by different locations and Cajun specialty meats and they—they actually do the tasting every year and they have—I'm not sure how many in the—in

the *Times* that does it for the *Times of Acadia* newspaper we have—does a beautiful job of—of promoting the Cajun culture, and we've won it six times in a row. And it makes us feel proud that we have something that people really wants every day of the week.

00:17:01

AE: Have you heard some comments of people as to why they think yours is the best?

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RC: Well I'll go back to the taste buds; you can't fool the taste buds and we use the highest quality pork meat that we can in our boudin and all our products—sausage and all our Cajun products, so I guess it would be the quality and we're—and the seasoning. You have to put the same amount of seasoning and the same quality of meat and you have to weigh everything every time. It's not just put together; everything is weighed—the seasoning, the rice is measured and the water, the salt and it's—it's hard to do it the same day—the same way everyday but you have to have somebody to keep track and make sure that it's done the same way—to have the same quality of taste day in and day out.

00:18:04

AE: I noticed that The Best Stop has their own prepackaged seasoning for sale. When did that come about?

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RC: Well I guess the seasoning prepackaged—that's been about 16 years—I guess about four years after we opened we started packaging it. Everybody was—excuse me—everybody enjoyed the—the seasoning the—the way we had it so we started packaging it—package—and it's doing

great. It's not like some seasoning that's highly salted; this is—is not too salty like some and it's not highly seasoned; it's just the right amount that you can—just people keep picking it up and—and one thing that has been good for us—the smoked boudin that we started about six years after we opened, we started smoking. We were the first store—Cajun specialty meat to smoke the boudin. We hang it in the smokehouse for about four hours and it's been a great, great seller for us. And also what they also do is they buy the cold boudin or the cold smoked boudin and they put it on the barbeque pit and they barbecue it which is very, very delicious and that's been going over great, too.

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AE: How often do you eat boudin?

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RC: Oh, about once a week I eat it—I eat a link and maybe four cracklings—moderation, you know. We have to taste and make sure it's right, you know. And it's something that you—us Cajuns we have to have. Like I say—moderation—a link a week and about four cracklings so I have to—I have a doctor's appointment Monday for my cholesterol [*Laughs*] and health but I'm in pretty good shape, yeah.

00:20:01

AE: Well and I got here today right during the lunch rush and you—for a moment there you ran out of hot boudin and they had people who were waiting for it but most everybody left with boudin and cracklings. Do you think those things go hand in hand?

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RC: Yes, if you have a link of boudin, you almost have to have a few cracklings and most of the time they get a diet drink with it but I don't know [*Laughs*] how much that helps. But and also with the cool weather a lot of people are leaving with sausage and andouille and stuff for gumbos. And what goes good, too, is for us Cajuns and a lot of people down South is a pound of boudin and a pound of crackling and a six-pack of Coors Light beer. [*Laughs*] We enjoy that.

00:20:54

AE: Okay. Do you have an opinion about there being regional differences within South Louisiana for styles of boudin?

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RC: Yes, they have many other specialty stores and they have their own product and people enjoy it all over South Louisiana and out of Louisiana, they enjoy all our products. We couldn't make enough to serve the world, so they all have good product. They—they try to all make it the same. And different regions—yes, around South Louisiana has a different flavor or taste buds might be different. But it—it—it's grown very rapidly, the Cajun culture and the food and the music and the cuisine. The restaurants that specialize in the Cajun food has grown very, very quick. Prejean's out in Carencro, [Louisiana,] Prejean's Restaurant is a very, very—that's one of the top restaurants in South Louisiana and we also have one in Scott—Fezzo's is a specializing in Cajun and they're very, very delicious. And you can tell the people—the place of business that has the real good Cajun foods—they're busy—they're busy seven days a week. This is not a lunch break; this is all day long that people come in, especially on weekends, you know.

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AE: Do you have thoughts on how far the—how far back the tradition of boudin goes in Cajun culture?

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RC: Oh, yes, ma'am. This is a long time before my—before I was born that grandfathers would—would make boudin and have a butchering and they wouldn't throw anything away except the squeal when they would kill hog. That was the only thing they couldn't can or—or cook or—but it's been—it started way back with a Cajun in Nova Scotia—the Cajuns would do boucheries in—in Nova Scotia and I'm not sure about France. We—we come—our forefathers came from France and then Nova Scotia and we were thrown out of Nova Scotia—exiled—forget what year, but they done us a big favor. They shipped us to Louisiana—all different parts of the country but we are blessed down here in Louisiana. And I have no idea exactly where the boudin actually started. I have a feeling it might have been in Nova Scotia. I don't know if it was in France or not; I'm not sure.

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AE: Well it would seem that a lot of it had to do with where you are and it being rice country that—that rice was an important thing being in Louisiana to—to produce the Boudin.

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RC: Yes, if you have boudin, you have to have rice and this is the rice country of the—of the world and we use a lot of—lot of rice—couple thousand pounds a week of rice. As a matter of fact she's [*the interviewer*] sitting on 50-pounds of rice right now—**[Laughs]**—her first time. But it goes all hand in hand; the pork we can't have enough grown here so we get it shipped from

the State of Iowa and up North where they have the hog farms, and we get it shipped down in boxes. It's all boxed meats because there is no way we could butcher all this—all this pork down here, all the hogs and—to keep up with our needs; so—.

00:24:52

AE: And how far does your—your family go back in this area? You were talking about your grandfather but what generation would you be Cajun?

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RC: Oh, they been here for a couple hundred years; they were deported from—from Canada and I think it was in I'm not sure of the year but it's been about 200 years that the Cajun was deported.

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AE: But the—the Cormier family goes back that far in Louisiana?

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RC: Yes, yes. It was—I just come back from Nova Scotia about—in May, a few months and they have a—five brothers that came down from—five Cormier brothers that came down from Nova Scotia; and they were mostly carpenters, shipbuilders, and we had a butcher in the family so I guess we took after the butcher. And I was a carpenter and a homebuilder for quite a few years. My dad was a—a builder too, so it goes back quite a few generations that I can go back to as far as Nova Scotia.

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AE: What was it like visiting Nova Scotia?

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RC: It was great to speak—to be able to speak French to someone in another country and our ways and our dialect and the Cajun—the—the culture was just—almost the same. We went to—we’re Catholics down here and they have a lot of Catholics in Nova Scotia. We went to Sunday Mass and it was all in French. We hit an area about 100 miles long that was all French—French college, French schools and French Masses and—and we got to speak French with a lot of people. It was—it’s—it’s beautiful country and we all look alike and speak alike and—and very nice people and they were—they enjoyed seeing the people from Louisiana because it’s not all that was deported—a lot went back after the deportation was over. A lot of people went back to—to Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia in French is La Nouvelle-Écosse, and we got to speak French with a lot of people there and it was—we really enjoyed it. It—we were proud—we’re very proud of our culture.

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AE: They understood your Cajun dialect of French there?

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RC: Yes, yes, yes; they sure did. As a matter of fact, we put—we use a lot of English words when we’re speaking Cajun French and do—they do the same thing over there so we understood each other very well and we spoke to quite a few priests that was down here for many years and—and went back to Nova Scotia and they all—we all speak the same, use the same language and dialect and I’m going to be going back because I really enjoyed our trip, yeah.

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AE: Is there anything that resembles boudin up there?

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RC: No, not really—I don't know what it's about—why it didn't go over, but I didn't find one place that made the boudin. They knew all about the boudin, but I'm not sure why. I guess we brought it all down here when we came. The ones that stayed couldn't make the boudin in Nova Scotia. *[Laughs]*

00:28:20

AE: Well can you talk about when you were growing up in the—the boucheries that your family would have and how all the—as I understand it—all the organ meats would be incorporated into the boudin and now it's primarily just the liver. Can you talk about the taste differences and also the—the boudin blanc and boudin noir?

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RC: Yeah, in—in my younger generation—my younger age my grandfather and my dad would make it and all of our families they would do the boucheries, especially the pork because that's what we use in boudin is mostly—just pork meat. And they would use pork meat to make the—make the boudin and—but they also used the heart and the kidneys and every—all the parts of the hog to—to cook it in different ways, not to use it just in the boudin. Like today we just use the Boston butt off of the hog and—and the pork liver. Nothing else is used but in—in the olden days we would salt the meat and also make our sausage and put—put it in—in hog lard in some crock jars and it would stay in the cabinets or in the shed for quite a few months during the

winter. But on—on a hog everything was used for—in some kind of a way or another and the pork belly was used for making cracklings and also used to make salt meat and—and bacon. You can make it—that's what the bacon comes from is the pork bellies, so yeah we did use everything off of the pork—the hog and—.

00:30:20

AE: Do you—do you miss all the flavor of that traditional style of boudin, or can you compare it to what you have here now?

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RC: I would say the boudin of today would probably be better because we use better quality meat in it and we used to make the—the red boudin also, not here—we never did here but at The Best Stop but the Board of Health and—were just—we used to do it in the—in our younger days but with the Board of Health now days they just kind of stopped us from using the blood. You had to boil it, cook it for a while, and then you mixed it in like a gravy in your meat, and that's what made your red boudin. And it was delicious but like I said we couldn't make it anymore with the—with the Board of Health.

00:31:14

AE: Do you also—can you speak to the tradition that I've been hearing about hot meat, where you cook the meat just after the pig is slaughtered and some slaughterhouses would do that?

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RC: We would—when we would slaughter the pork we would cook right away—we'd make backbone stew for that day for people that was working and fried pork chops and they would do

the boudin and they would also do the hog-head cheese; that's another good product that we have here, the best of it that we make thousands of pounds every week—is the hog-head cheese and back then we—they didn't have any freezers or they had some fridge—ice-box so they would cook almost everything and they would also send packages back with each family. Every family would go back with a big package. Today with the coolers and the—the butcher shops and—and they can hang it for a few days; you can freeze it and you can—you can buy this—all the pork meat fresh daily so if you want to cook up some good pork-back bone or anything you want to do with the pork, salt meat, you can buy it daily and cook it.

00:32:37

AE: Well now coming up just in a couple weeks you have your 20th anniversary. What do you hope the future of The Best Stop will be?

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RC: Well I just hope our kids can keep—because we only can live just for so long, and I think our kids—we don't have any intention of ever selling it. We could get a big fortune for it but we—it's—it's not about the money. It's about the quality and having something that people want, having something that you prepare that people want; it makes us feel real proud. And I think our kids are going to keep it going and they'll—they'll—they have taken over already. My—my daughter and his son and I—I think they will just keep on doing what they—we started, Mr. Menard and I and we're very proud of what we have accomplished through the help of God. It's not just our—our hands and our ideas; it was through God's help and his grace that we've accomplished what we have done today.

00:33:38

AE: Was—what would you like to tell people about The Best Stop and about your boudin? What would you like to say to people who have never been here before?

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RC: Well come and—and get a taste of it and you will see that the quality of—of our product has been proven for 20 years, and once you get a taste of it you just keep coming back for more. And it's just through the years people just keep coming back and they keep spreading the word and just keep going on and on and on. And I think just as long as we can produce this product and our kids can produce it, people just keep coming. And we'll have other specialty meats that's going to open because it's—of so much business, you know. You have competition, which we don't mind because it makes you work harder; it makes you want to put out a better product when you have competition and it—it's good. It's good and we have plenty—plenty business for—for other specialty meats because it's—it's grown in the past 20 years amazingly—how it has grown.

00:34:56

AE: So is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to add or a final thought?

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RC: No, I'm getting short-winded now. [*Laughs*] But I've enjoyed speaking about it. And we've been interviewed many, many, many times—people from France and Canada and Germany and they'll come in with their cameras and—and we just get interviewed and show them how we do the cracklings and the boudin. We've—we've even given the recipe to people that come from elsewhere and, you know, they go home and they try it and some succeed and

some don't but it's just—we just like to spread the Cajun culture because it—it's helping everyone and we're just proud of our Cajun culture and our—our French-speaking people because really when you can speak two languages you're two people—two different people you know and excuse my accent but I really enjoy my—my Cajun culture; so—.

00:36:01

AE: Well, as I said, I feel really fortunate to have caught you here today, so I really appreciate you sitting down with me. Thank you very much.

00:36:07

RC: Thank you because I'm semi-retired so I just come on Tuesdays and Fridays and you lucked out today. *[Laughs]* But I enjoyed it; thank you so much.

[End Robert Cormier]