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STEPHEN JONES: HOME IS WHERE THE HORROR IS

With more than a hundred books under his belt, as writer and editor, renowned anthologist Stephen Jones is one of the movers and shakers of the UK horror scene, but for many people he's principally known for his editorship of *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror*, which is now in its twenty first year of separating wheat from chaff, the great from the merely good.

To mark the twentieth anniversary of the series Jones has edited **THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF THE BEST OF BEST NEW HORROR: TWO DECADES OF DARK FICTION** (Robinson paperback, 746pp, £9.99), selecting a favourite story from each year of publication. And the mammoth label is even more apposite than usual for this doorstep of a book, with not just stories on offer but a wealth of supporting material, including indexes to the series, reproduction covers and Jones' illuminating comments about the difficulties the series has contended with, insights into the publication backdrop and the horror genre itself. This is more than simply an anthology: it is also a history lesson.

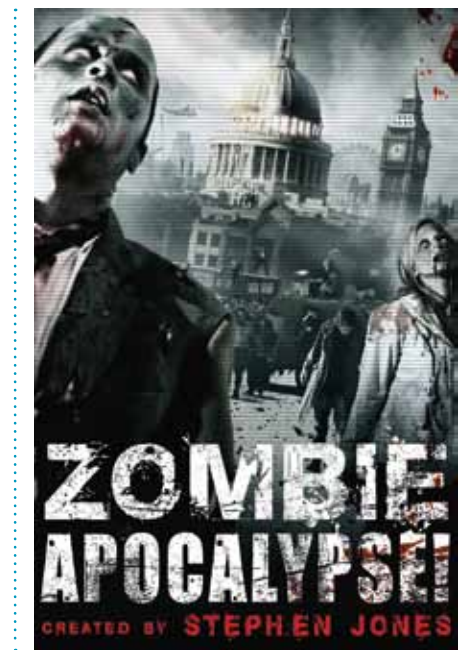
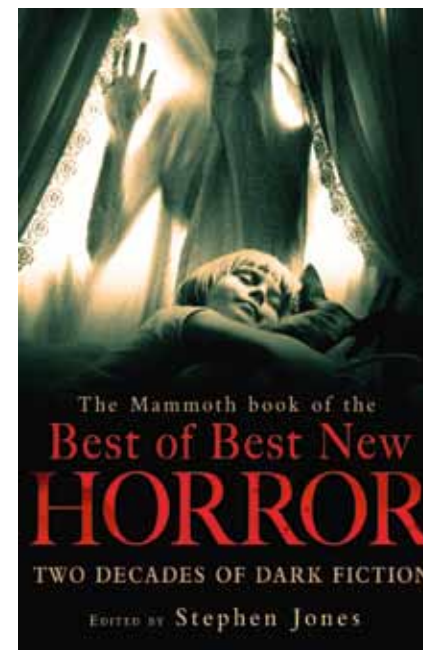
But the stories are the thing, and from the opening pages the reader knows that he is in good hands. Jones has a keen sense of what works in a story, developed over many years in the business, and while individual readers may disagree with certain of his choices (I personally didn't think so highly of the Stephen King story that represents 2008) you can be assured that the stories are all going to be of the finest quality.

Leading off is the ironically titled 'No Sharks in the Med' by Brian Lumley, in which a young couple on holiday in Greece run foul of a local who has a secret island to which he lures tourists. The foreign setting is perfectly evoked and there's a growing sense of unease as events unfold, with a 'happy' ending of sorts, though I was bit wary of the ease with which the couple go off with the local, given that he is such a creepy character. Michael Marshall Smith's first published story, 'The Man Who Drew Cats' is a tale of supernatural justice, in which the artist's ability to create extremely realistic work is put to 'good' use. It's written with sensitivity and a genuine feel for the material, the real thrust of the story being trapped in the carefully interwoven relationships and the dark hints of something much bigger going on in the background. We get more Brits abroad in 'The Same in Any Language' by Ramsey Campbell, which sees a young boy, the father and his female companion going off on a trip to a leper colony, with the story

told from the viewpoint of the child. This one was filled with small, subtle touches of detail and unsettling imagery, with a hint that the fate of the man is related to the antipathy of the child.

'Norman Wisdom and the Angel of Death' by Christopher Fowler is a chilling portrait of a serial killer obsessed with the comedian. Each word here is carefully chosen for maximum effect, the tale gradually revealing how truly disturbed this ostensibly harmless individual is and the terrible things that he may have done. An advantage of this volume's size is the capacity to publish work at novella length, and the first of these is 'Mefisto in Onyx', which has just the sort of prose pyrotechnics you'd expect from Harlan Ellison in his prime, the story of a young man who can reach into the minds of others and who uses that ability to find out if a serial killer is guilty of his crimes, only he has blundered into a trap. This is a superb story, with beautiful characterisation, crackling dialogue, vivid descriptions and a full appreciation of who these people are and what such powers would mean to the user, a story with twist and counter twist that keep the reader constantly off balance. At a similar length, Terry Lamsley's 'The Break' is a story in the vein of Aickman, as a boy and his grandparents visit a seaside town where strange things seem to be going on. The story builds superbly well, with new elements being introduced that move it ever further away from the comfort and normality of the English seaside, and the subtle intimations of a form of vampirism at the end.

The magnificent 'Mr Clubb and Mr Cuff' is one of the masterpieces of the anthology, a detailed and thoroughly absorbing account of how a man gets drawn into the macabre plans of two assassins for hire with an agenda of their own. Author Peter Straub doesn't set a foot wrong here, with each detail building on top of the previous one, the protagonist's whole life coming unravelled at the hands of the hired help, people who so casually inflict on him the things he had planned for others, and with subtle warning signs of what is to come embedded in the text. Tim Lebbon's novella 'White' is almost as good, the story set in a snowbound future England where the inhabitants of an isolated country house learn that there is something out there in the snow and it doesn't mean them well. Extremely cinematic, with a fully rounded cast of characters and a wealth of incident, this moody and eventful story is crying out for a Hollywood budget and is never less than gripping. 'Cleopatra Brimstone' is an



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account of metamorphosis, a young woman who has been raped transformed into a giant moth that feeds on men. Elizabeth Hand's prose, as ever, is a delight to read, but what makes the story special is the characterisation, the wealth of emotion conveyed so that we identify with the protagonist and feel for her, even though we know that what she is doing is wrong.

There's a Lovecraftian feel to 'The White Hands' by Mark Samuels, with the protagonist delving into the secrets of a writer and unearthing a ghastly secret. This is classic horror written as the masters might have done, with a shudder at the end, and far more hinted at than is actually revealed. Lisa Tuttle's 'My Death' is another wonderful example of the storyteller's art, its female narrator uncovering the past of a famous artist's model and how it connects to a barren island, and indeed to herself. Tuttle's measured prose gives the characters time to develop and grow, lures us into their world and compels us to stay there, presenting an intoxicating meld of past and present, art and history, with each detail carefully slotted into place and setting the stage for the reversals and revelations of the end. We're back in foreign climes for 'The Church on the Island' by Simon Kurt Unsworth, which has an air of the early Clive Barker about it, albeit without the violence. Charlotte swims out to visit the eponymous church only to find that it has been waiting for her.

There's a sinister quality to the matter of fact narrative here, the way in which so much is taken for granted by the priest in the church and how easily the world forgets all about Charlotte, an existential horror that places human concerns in thrall to some greater, inexplicable purpose.

These twelve stories and eight more that I haven't discussed for reasons of space, together form a substantial and important volume, a landmark anthology that all lovers of well written horror fiction will want to have on their shelves. If the genre needs a flagship to lead it through the treacherous waters of modern publishing, then you couldn't ask for a finer vessel than this.

THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF BEST NEW HORROR #21 (Robinson paperback, 512pp, £7.99) carries on where the previous volume left off, with the nineteen stories Jones considers to be the best of 2009's crop, and again quality is assured, though we will each have our own opinions as to what should have been included. Personally I much preferred Nicholas Royle's novella *The Enigma of Departure* to the story that represents him in this volume, and of the stories that I've seen from *The British Invasion* I thought Tony Richards' 'Birchiam Pier' superior to the Ramsey Campbell tale selected by Jones, but putting aside such quibbles these are all extremely good stories.

There's more to the *Mammoth Book* though than the stories, and before

considering the fiction a few words about the two sections that bookend this collection. At a hundred pages, Jones' introductory essay 'Horror in 2009' is a comprehensive overview of how the genre has fared during the year, and I do mean comprehensive. If you want to know what's available, then this is the place to look. But Jones doesn't simply list things, he expresses opinions and offers insight into the general publishing situation. You may not agree with him, but he's earned the right to be heard. I'm less gung ho for the eighty page 'Necrology' compiled by Jones and Kim Newman that closes the book. In principle, I think it's great that these people get remembered and their achievements noted, even down to the lowliest spear carrier, and there's often the shock of recognition, learning the fate of an actor or writer who once meant a lot to you personally. But all the same it doesn't make for an engaging read, is nothing more than a compendium of obituaries no matter how the authors try to present it, exhaustive but also exhausting. And some of the people mentioned seem of only marginal interest to horror fans. For example, why are we being told about the death of the manager of The Bay City Rollers? I know their music was bad, but to call it horror is stretching things.

Top and tailing the stories are two shorts by Canadian writer Michael Kelly.

'The Woods' is a subtle story in which

everything is suggestion, as a law officer questions an old man who lives alone in the forest about the disappearance of a child.

'Princess of the Night' is a Halloween flash fiction in which a hit and run driver gets his much deserved comeuppance at spectral hands. Engaging and exceptional examples of their type, these two act as appetiser and after dinner mint respectively for the feast of fiction that is served up between them.

'Throttle' by Joe Hill and Stephen King is a tribute to Richard Matheson, with *Duel* reinvented as the clash between a motorcycle gang and a lorry driver, and in microcosm between the gang leader and his wilful son. Not to dismiss Hill's contribution, but this is typical King, with plenty of twists and turns of fortune, excellent characterisation and the good old boy style of writing he has made his own. Simplistic perhaps, but a compelling story and with subtle undertones. If 'Throttle' was action packed, then Barbara Roden's 'Out and Back' relies on less obvious effects, with mood predominant. Eminently creepy, it tells of what happens to a man obsessed with visiting dilapidated pleasure parks and his long suffering significant other when they discover an overgrown park in a remote part of the country. There's very much a *Twilight Zone* feel to this, with atmosphere building steadily and the final fates of the two protagonists each chilling in their own way, with far more left unsaid than is actually revealed.

'Respects' by Ramsey Campbell takes as its starting point the leaving of flowers at a spot where a young man was killed while being chased by the police, and then elaborates on this through having an elderly woman accused of disrespect by the family of the deceased. It's an artful fusion of thoroughly modern concerns and situations with traditional supernatural tropes, with a uniquely unsettling and nightmarish end. Reggie Oliver develops an idea by M.R. James in 'The Game of Bear', the tale told by one man to another in a pastiche of the club story, and involving a child's game and a curious book, the two entwined in a terrible history. Oliver effortlessly draws the reader in, capturing perfectly the feel and aesthetic sensibility of the kind of material he is trying to emulate, making the story his own, with the strong suggestion of far more dreadful things hidden behind the curtain of the narrative than are shown on its stage. Nicholas Royle's 'The Reunion' is set in a hotel where time and space become distorted much to the bewilderment of the protagonist, as his reality slowly shifts. For the reader too there is a strong sense of dislocation, as the mundane events of the story and the world in which they are

set gradually alter, but with everything so understated you are just as confused as the character.

Of course horror doesn't just happen on home territory. One of the highlights of the collection, 'Mami Wata' by Simon Kurt Unsworth is the tale of an inspector coming to find out why an African mine is performing below par and getting drawn into the clutches of a water demon and succubus of sorts. The sense of place in this story is richly portrayed, a culture ridden with superstition and yet also knowing more than we enlightened westerners allow in our philosophies, with the mix of local legend and timeless themes of horror fiction serving each other well, and Unsworth's grasp of his characters and their motives assured. 'Two Steps Along the Road' by Terry Dowling has an occult investigator visiting the Hotel Dis somewhere in boondocks Vietnam at the request of the owner, who believes that his daughter is really a ghost. Fraught with menace, the story is a cunningly constructed piece in which modern scepticism wars with age old belief, with the suggestion that things could go either way, and a strong visualisation of the foreign setting.

From Rosalie Parker we get another creepy little delight with 'In the Garden', in which the matter of fact narration about gardening leads into a revelation of the terrible atrocity committed by the barking mad female protagonist. It's the kind of story Saki did so well, but darker by several shades. 'The Nonesuch' by Brian Lumley has a man staying at a hotel where he doesn't appear to be particularly welcome and finding out what happened to the husband of the owner, the circumstances of his mysterious death. The story is largely an exercise in style, with Lumley's rambling narration and dazzling dialogue making up for a certain paucity of plot, and hints of some strange other world that impinges on our own.

These stories and eight others offer a snapshot of the horror genre as the first decade of the new millennium draws to a close, but before moving on I'd like to consider the story that I'd hope to see representing 2009 when Jones starts putting together a second *Best of the Best* in twenty years' time, 'After the Ape' by *Black Static* columnist Stephen Volk. This tale of what happened to Ann Darrow after the death of King Kong comes with echoes in its narrative of 9/11, another time when the Big Apple found itself under the cosh, and a foreshadowing of the horrors of fascism that lay in wait for the world of 1933, seen most obviously in the character of a lowly hotel employee of Germanic background who deplores the decadence and weakness

of America even as he fucks Ann Darrow and indulges in romantic and self-deluding fantasies of taking her away from it all. The story belongs to Darrow though, the woman who loved the great ape, but it neatly sidesteps the schmaltz and sentimentality of the Jackson reinvention, giving us the back story of a woman who has suffered at the hands of men, used and abused in her personal and professional life. Volk's prose captures perfectly the detachment of the character, the way in which she can no longer care about anything, having suffered too long and too much. The story is a tragedy that can end in only one way, and Volk doesn't flinch. Beauty killed the beast, but beauty too must die.

Of course Jones doesn't just pick and choose the best work from other people's books and magazines. He's also an innovative editor in his own right, which brings us to **ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE!** (Robinson paperback, 480pp, £7.99), though with this book editor is probably an understatement, as the cover attribution – 'Created by Stephen Jones' – will testify. This isn't so much a zombie themed anthology as a mosaic novel, with Jones riding ramrod on a team of writers, each allocated a particular task, the creation of a piece of the jigsaw he is assembling. What makes the book even more interesting is that a plethora of narrative devices are used – letters, emails, diary entries, blogs, song lyrics, official memoranda and reports – with the result that we get a sense of immediacy, of the action unfolding as it happens, a fluid situation. The nearest equivalent I can think of is the Omnibucket assemblage *Brainchild*, which used a variety of creators and techniques to portray a zombie plague and its aftermath, but remarkable as that volume was it lacked both the urgency and the cohesion of this book, the sense of many hands telling one story.

In the near future a right wing coalition government plans to stage a Festival of Britain as part and parcel of its patriot act, with excavations taking place at a church built by occultist Thomas Moreby, an apprentice of Nicholas Hawksmoor, a name that will ring a bell with many horror readers courtesy of Ackroyd's novel *Hawksmoor*. Moreby had rather unusual ideas on the preservation of life, and when the crypt of All Hallows is opened something inimical to human life is released.

The story is told through a welter of incidents and events. The lengthy email sent by a suicidal man to his deceased mother, detailing steps that were taken to stop the crypt being opened. Official correspondence of a scientist concerned that All Hallows

might have been built atop a plague pit. A report by the officer in charge of police guarding the site on certain strange events that befell his men. The diary entries of a young girl whose family are trying to protect her from what is going on outside, the lack of knowledge only exacerbating her fears. A doctor's findings from an autopsy on one of the victims of the virus. The minutes of a ministerial meeting to address the crisis. A blogger finds that a diet of zombie films isn't necessarily the best preparation for surviving when the real thing hits. A specialist in viruses writes in her journal about attempts to save the Prince of Wales. The Australian Intelligence Service takes drastic steps to defend its borders. A transcript of a radio broadcast reveals what happened in Mexico City. And so on and so forth. All of human life (and un-life) is here in a cleverly wrought tapestry.

If I have a reservation it's that the closing sections don't quite gel with what has gone before, introducing a note of humour into a work that until that point had been entirely grim and doing so rather late in the day for readers to adjust their expectations. It felt slightly off kilter to me, but really that's just a quibble.

The names of the writers involved are revealed at the end of the book, so it is possible to read through without knowing who contributed which section, and extra fun can be had trying to guess the 'guilty' parties. There is an element of fit for purpose in Jones' job allocations, with an ex-copper tackling the police procedural segment, a doctor handling the medical stuff etc. Along the way we get little touches of detail that add another dimension to the story for those in the know, such as a reference to Romero's *Diary of the Dead* in the camcorder efforts of some young Americans and a wannabe writer by the name of Will Holloway who may ring a bell with Bradbury fans. Serious concerns are addressed as well – the perils of patriotism in tandem with right wing politics, the shortcomings in modern policing, the surveillance society that has been one legacy of the war on terror, our modern obsessions with the cult of celebrity and reality TV.

These are all things that are there and waiting for the reader to pick up on them, but equally the book can be enjoyed on its own terms even if they all go over your head. They are just peripherals to a rip rolicking tale of the zombie apocalypse that is one of the most imaginative and innovative iterations of our current obsession with everybody's favourite brain munching monster, and kudos to Stephen Jones for making it happen.

STEPHEN JONES INTERVIEWED



Photograph by Peter Coleborn

I've seen you compare the role of the editor to that of a film director, and in the case of a project like *Zombie Apocalypse!* I can see that that analogy will hold true even more than usual. Can you tell us a little bit about the logistics of organising a 'mosaic novel' like this? Were there any surprises for you in how the project panned out?

To answer the last part of your question first – yes, there are always (or at least should be) surprises in how a project turns out, otherwise what is the point in doing it? I want to be surprised, otherwise I'd feel that I was stagnating as an editor!

But you're correct – *Zombie Apocalypse!* was very much like being a director again, which is why I think it turned out to be so cinematic. After being approached by the publisher with the initial idea, I came up with the overall concept, broke it down into separate story ideas (I even supplied titles for each of them, some of which the authors retained and some they did not), then assigned those stories to those writers who I thought were most suited to each section (either on a creative level, an experience level or a technical level). I must say that Michael Marshall Smith and Christopher Fowler – whose contributions kick off the book – did much to shape the all-important back story and mythology that fed into the other authors' work.

Once the stories had been assigned – and the authors had to work in specific styles: letters, memos, email, tweets, texts or whatever – then they were pretty free to come up with their own characters and

narratives within the guidelines that we had mutually agreed. The difficult part came once everything was in, and I then had to go through it all and 'smooth out' the bumps and integrate the dates, times, settings, characters, etc. That took forever. Thank goodness I was lucky enough to have a great desk editor and designer who worked as a team and made sure that I didn't screw up too much!

I've done 'mosaic' books before – *The Mammoth Book of Dracula*, the two *Innsmouth* anthologies, Jo Fletcher's *Horror at Halloween* (which, to continue with the movie analogy, I 'produced'), but *Zombie Apocalypse!* was definitely the most challenging (and also the most enjoyable!). God knows what readers will make of it though. I've described it as my 'Christopher Nolan book' – the timeline jumps back and forth, we see characters and situations from differing perspectives, and the narrative is presented in various and often highly graphic ways that may initially take some readers by surprise. Ultimately, however, I think it's quite a fun book. And for me, it was a welcome opportunity to attempt to do something different within the genre.

Zombies seem to be the monster of the moment in horror circles. Do you have any thoughts on their current popularity? Is it simply a sign of the times, or perhaps a reaction against the neutering of vampires by writers of paranormal romance?

As I've said before, these things go in cycles. Zombies – as with the other monster stereotypes – are simply an enduring and

iconic archetype that keeps popping up in horror at regular intervals. These things never really go away. Next it will be vampires again. Or werewolves. Or Frankenstein. These creations are so powerful, so resonant within our psyche, that they keep coming back for writers and film-makers to use in new and, hopefully, exciting ways.

Last year I not only had a new zombie anthology out – *The Dead That Walk* – but I also had a new hardcover edition of *The Mammoth Book of Zombies* – a book that I originally did back in 1993! It's just time for zombies to be popular again – no doubt fuelled by video games, movies and, of course, the occasional best-seller. Publishers are not a very imaginative lot – they love to follow a trend if they think they can make money out of it.

However, what I am wary about is jumping on bandwagons – such as these historical romance/zombie mash-ups that are perceived as being popular at the moment. Like most of those vampire paranormal romance titles you mentioned, they are totally disposable and, when that particular publishing fad has passed (and they always do), then the life of those books will also be over as well. And what's the point of that? Sure, everybody makes a quick buck and can maybe even claim to be a 'New York Times Bestselling Author' (you can do that with a *Star Trek* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* novelisation), but most of these books are basically worthless and once that particular trend has been replaced by something else, then they will quickly be forgotten.

I want to produce books that will last; that have a reason to exist beyond the vagaries of market forces and editorial whims. Sure, books need to be commercial, and there's nothing wrong with that if we want publishing to survive and flourish, but I can't see the point of doing something just because everybody else is doing the same thing at the moment. Chances are that by the time you get in on a trend it's probably on the wane anyway (as Hollywood so often discovers to its cost). So if I'm going to do a book – be it either editing an anthology, compiling someone's collection or writing a non-fiction study – then I have to be able to justify to myself (and of course the reader) why that book should exist in the first place. If I can't do that, then what's the point of even doing that book? God knows, there are enough pointless volumes out there already cluttering up the bookshelves.

I want my books to endure beyond their initial edition – I want them to go into multiple printings, I want them to be translated into foreign editions, I want them

to come back into print ten years after they were first published so that a whole new generation of readers can discover those stories, those authors. Otherwise, I really can't see any reason for those books to exist in the first place. I always try to give 110% to any project I am involved with.

The success of the *Twilight* books and rise of paranormal romance is probably the most significant event in recent years for the horror genre. I've seen some purists try to put distance between horror and paranormal romance, but you continue to list PR titles in 'the year in horror' section of each *Mammoth Book of Best New Horror*. What sort of impact do you think the popularity of paranormal romance has had on the horror genre? Is it a good thing or a bad thing?

In the long run, I don't think that the current boom in so-called 'paranormal romances' will have much impact on the horror genre.

For a start, most of the people who write and read that stuff are not really horror fans in the first place (possibly beyond the occasional Stephen King or Dean Koontz title). They are *romance* fans and, as I was saying about zombies earlier, it just happens that vampire romances have been incredibly popular for the past few years. And yes, thanks to the *Twilight* books, werewolf romances are getting up there in popularity as well. There are even zombie romances (which seem just plain *weird* to me!).

But it won't last. These things never do. We've been there before, and we will most probably be there again sometime. Eventually this current fad will pass and be replaced by Western romances, or railway romances, or fallen angel romances (oh, wait – we already have those). Once the 'paranormal' boom is over, most of the authors, readers and their publishers will then follow the *romance* market, not the horror one. The majority of the books will disappear, never to be reprinted, and although a few authors may decide to remain (at least partially) in the horror field, most will move on to where the market takes them. This is exactly what happened with other 'booms'.

The whole point of the Introduction in each *Mammoth Book of Best New Horror* is to mark the trends in the genre in a particular year. You can't ignore the impact that paranormal romances have had on the horror field in recent years, and these need to be noted in the general overview, just as much as those abysmal *Twilight* books and films need to be covered. However, having said that, for the first time I had to significantly cut the listing for these types of

books this year – there were just too many series and titles to include, given that I have to work within a reasonable length.

Under representation of women in the horror genre has been a hot topic of late, as witness the controversy over the BFS interview book *In Conversation*. As an editor you've done your share in supporting the work of female writers with titles like *The Mammoth Book of Vampire Stories by Women*, but all the same, aside from paranormal romance, we're a long way from gender parity (e.g. only two females made the cut in the latest volume of *Best New Horror*). Why do you think so few women writers are drawn to horror fiction? Is it down to the genre's misogynistic reputation, as some commentators have theorised, or something more fundamental in the female psyche?

Or maybe, just maybe, there are not as many women out there writing as good horror fiction as men? Now there's a controversial answer for you!

Of course what happened with the BFS interview book was inexcusable – but put that down to the naïveté of the individual editor (and maybe the people who commissioned it), but don't tar the whole genre with the 'sexist' brush. I simply do not buy it.

Obviously there are – and always have been – many fine female writers of horror fiction, and I sincerely believe that I have done my part as an editor to support them over the years. But I don't assemble my anthologies along gender lines (unless that's part of the theme), just as I don't choose the stories based on ethnic, religious or political considerations either. If you were to ask me how many blacks, or Asians, or Hispanics, or Catholics, or Jews, or Muslims, or Fascists, or Communists I have in my books, I most probably couldn't tell you. Nor would I care.

That's not how I assemble my anthologies. I'm looking for the best *stories*, by the best *writers*, and unless you are a serial killer or a paedophile then the chances are that you stand a good chance of making the cut – just so long as I think you can write and I like your story. It's as simple as that.

Are there fewer women writing horror than men? I couldn't say, but most probably. Is there a greater percentage of men writing superior horror fiction? I couldn't say for certain but, my guess – based on my own experiences over the past twenty years or so – is again, probably. Therefore, as a result, most anthologies (and possibly the genre in general) reflect this simple fact.

I'm not going to introduce any kind of

'positive discrimination' into how I select the stories for my books – whether along gender lines or the other groups outlined above – unless the theme calls for it. All I'm interested in, and I believe the reader is too, is publishing the best fiction that I possibly can.

Of course there are a lot of women writing paranormal romances, but that's because the romance market has always been dominated by female writers. And that's probably because most of the readership for those kinds of books are women, and so the authors understand what their audience wants. But I don't see any outcries over the fact that few men write those kinds of books. It's just the nature of the market. Sometimes you just have to live with that and move on.

At the end of your introduction to *Best New Horror 21*, you talk about honesty in criticism and the inability of some creative people to deal with negative feedback in a mature way, something that I've recently become concerned about too. It seems there is an intolerance of dissenting voices, when those are often the very voices we need to hear. Assuming I'm not misstating your position, why do you think this is? Is it simply a by-blow of political spin and reality TV culture where everybody gets to be a star no matter how untalented, or something more sinister within our culture?

I think you're absolutely correct. These days many people think they *deserve* to be heard. That they *deserve* to be famous. Or successful. Or whatever it is they want out of life. The only problem is that much of the time they don't want to put the work in to make that happen. They just think that they can be a success by acting like one. This, unfortunately, is what the world is telling them these days.

Writing and editing is a hard and often lonely profession. It takes time, it takes research and, perhaps most of all, it takes a great amount of commitment. And despite the stories that appear in the newspapers every year about some unknown teenager earning a million pounds or whatever for their first horror novel (watch out for them – they turn up every spring), the harsh truth is that very few people make a lot of money out of writing. At best, you may just about make a comfortable living as a mid-list author. But if you have the ambition, the work ethic, the imagination and, perhaps most importantly of all, the *skill* to become a writer, then you have the opportunity to do something remarkable – to entertain, to share knowledge, and to influence the dreams and imagination of other people.

That's what the best writers do.

And they do it because they *have* to, because they want to, because they can't imagine themselves doing anything else. No matter how little they may earn doing it.

And what is it they say? If you can't do it, then become a critic. As somebody who has worked in movies and television, I know how difficult it is to get a project off the ground and make it work, and it angers me when I see a reviewer dismiss something out of hand without any obvious understanding of what went into creating it.

My argument in this year's *Best New Horror* 'editorial' is that just because you have a blog or another forum to express your personal views, it doesn't always mean that you *should*. Just because someone 'likes' or 'dislikes' a work doesn't make them a critic. It just makes them opinionated. And unless they can back those views up with knowledge or experience (as the best critics can), then I'm afraid their views are about as worthwhile as anybody else's. Which is what makes most of the 'reviews' on Amazon.com or IMDB completely worthless. Especially if, as with Amazon, they are posted anonymously.

I've always said that I would rather get a bad review from someone I respect than a rave review from someone whose judgement I don't. And I stick by that view.

In a 1997 interview with Paula Guran for *Dark Echoes* you stated 'I have the utmost respect for the small presses', but in a 2006 interview with Matt Cardin for *Cemetery Dance* you appear somewhat disillusioned – 'The small presses continue to churn out sub-standard books by supposedly "cult" authors'. What's your current feeling about the state of the small presses? How can they improve?

Times change. Back when I did that interview with Paula, there were a lot fewer small presses in the genre than there are now.

You can blame the mainstream publishers for that. Having created and then exploited the 'boom and bust' cycles, they quickly move on to something else once they have bled a popular genre dry. Then it's left to the small presses to pick up the pieces and keep the genre going until the next time the big publishing houses decide that it is 'commercial' again. This goes back to what I was saying about the revival of zombies earlier.

Unfortunately, the lack of mainstream outlets, coupled with a remarkable drop in the cost of creating and producing short-run books in the past decade has led to an explosion of independent presses. And this

is *not* a good thing.

There's a reason why the big publishers have submission guidelines, readers, editors, proofreaders, designers, publicity and marketing departments, etc. It's a way of, hopefully, ensuring that only the best work gets through the submission process and what eventually comes out the other end is not only to the highest possible standard, but also has a reasonable chance to be noticed in an already overcrowded marketplace.

This is not true with most small presses. Of course you have imprints like PS Publishing, Subterranean Press, Cemetery Dance Publications, Gauntlet Press, Bad Moon Books and several others, who publish their books to the highest standards – often better than the so-called 'mainstream'. And you also have more specialist imprints such as Tartarus and Ash-Tree, which do a marvellous job of producing the kind of books that most big publishers wouldn't even consider.

But you also have way too many imprints out there – especially in the print-on-demand area – that are cluttering up the market with inferior product that simply would not stand a chance in the commercial field. Now I, possibly better than anyone, understand that sometimes a book will fall between the cracks – I came from the small press originally, and continue to work enthusiastically within it today. There will always be those titles which, for some reason or another, get overlooked or are not suitable for the mass-market, and these may quite rightly end up being published by an independent imprint. But if those books and their authors are genuinely talented – and we've seen it with such writers as Kelly Link, Holly Phillips and Joe Hill, to name a few that immediately spring to mind – then they will quickly find their own place within the wider world of publishing.

I'm sorry to say it, but there's an awful lot of crap being published out there every year – because it is now so easy and cheap to do so – and just because you've self-published your novel or collection does not make you a 'writer', at least not in my eyes.

Once again, this goes back to your previous question and the matter of people craving instant fame and success. Just because you've written something and published it, does not automatically make it worthwhile. That said, it is still a wonderful experience for an editor when you discover a story or author from the small press and can give them a wider audience in a project like, say, *Best New Horror*.

In that interview with Matt Cardin you didn't seem very optimistic about the

future of books. Do you still feel the same way, or have you seen any signs (e.g. the popularity with the young of writers like Rowling and Meyer) that give you cause for hope?

Sadly, not. I think everything points to a world-wide decline in reading, and books will be the biggest casualty of that continuing trend. You only have to look at recent statistics – such as one in five children in the UK cannot write properly after two years of school – to realise that we already have a major problem looming. In London this year, 22% of pupils failed to reach the expected writing standard. You don't need to be a genius to understand that our schools are failing the next generation of readers and authors.

Suggestions by the current coalition government that libraries should be closed and moved to pubs or supermarkets are not helpful, either. We need to engage readers again – convince kids (and, I'm ashamed to say, adults) that reading can be entertaining, informative, imaginative, emotive and, most of all, fun.

Unfortunately, you have such garbage as 'reality' TV, 'social networking' sites, unnecessary mobile phone conversations, computer games, and all the other stuff out there that is designed to dampen the creative impulse. As Aldous Huxley predicted almost eighty years ago, these mindless, numbing diversions are the "soma" of our current Brave New World.

Of course, this ties into your earlier questions regarding instant fame and the worth of 'paranormal romances'. They are both part of a much wider social problem. I used to believe that if people read something – anything – then that was better than reading nothing at all. These days I'm not so sure that I still hold to that opinion. I'm not convinced that most people have the critical acumen to differentiate between, say, Stephenie Meyer and William Shakespeare (that is if they even know who Shakespeare was!).

I'm not convinced that eBooks are the answer, either. Publishers have got to find some new method to get their product out there, and I applaud any initiative they take to expand their readership. But personally, I don't want to read words on an electronic tablet – no matter how sharp the resolution is. I love books – the physical variety that smells of print, and has a tactile cover, that is filled with illustrations, and pages you can turn, fondle or slip a bookmark between. My bookshelves are filled with brightly-coloured spines and volumes that have a history to them. I love collecting books, and don't see anyone keeping a signed edition on

their Kindle or iPad anytime soon.

I realise that I might just be an old fart about this, but I'd rather we tried to convince people – especially new generations – to try picking up a book again, rather than attempting to come up with all these alternatives to traditional methods of reading. I'm not stupid – of course I can see a place for electronic readers alongside paper books, but it really does concern me that publishers and retailers are hailing these gadgets as the future of reading. This is another area where the small presses may once again prove to be the saviour of the genre.

In general terms, what is it about the British approach to horror that differentiates it from that of, say, the Americans? What have our guys and gals got that theirs haven't?

Most of my anthologies – especially the *Best New Horror* series – are usually split fairly equally between UK and American writers (although it obviously varies from year to year – as I said earlier, I don't work to any pre-subscribed 'quotas').

There are truly wonderful writers working in both countries (and, if you look in this year's *Best New Horror*, also in Canada, Australia and New Zealand as well). I just think that the American approach to horror can be very different to ours, which is what you would expect given that they come from a very different background.

American authors have that 'can do' attitude that perhaps our more reserved British writers lack, but they often make up for it with more thoughtful approaches to how they deal with the material. I also think that, in general, British authors have a wider grasp of the world and how to use that knowledge, that understanding or experience, in their fiction. As anybody who has visited America regularly, as I do, can tell you, they can sometimes be somewhat isolationist in their outlook, and I just think that our European sensibility sometimes allows us to embrace a wider definition of what we think of as constituting 'horror' fiction.

I don't think that America could have given us Ramsey Campbell, or Joel Lane, or Alan Moore, or Nicholas Royle, or Robert Shearman, to name just a few examples, but by the same token, I don't think that the UK could have turned out Stephen King, Dennis Etchison, Charles L. Grant, Joe R. Lansdale or Karl Edward Wagner either. I'm just saying that we have different approaches to how we work within the genre, and that diversity can only be a positive and healthy thing in the long run.

Huge changes have taken place in publishing over the course of the twenty years covered by *The Best of the Best*. As regards horror, with the word being used once again to market books (e.g. Adam Nevill's *Apartment 16 and 15 Miles* by Rob Scott) are we on the cusp of a new uplift? Are there reasons to be cheerful? Ignoring the perils and pitfalls of publishing, in aesthetic terms alone is the horror genre in a better state of health now than it was when you began *Best New Horror*?

I wouldn't say that the genre is in a better state of health now than it was when we started *Best New Horror* – remember that back then we were coming off the horror boom of the 1980s – but it definitely seems to me that there is a resurgence in horror again.

You have to understand that I've seen these peaks and troughs happen a few times now, and it's very hard to get excited when you can pretty much predict what's going to happen. However, as with the problems affecting the world's economy, it's a very fragile recovery at the moment – as the recent troubles at Leisure Books ably illustrate – and it could still quickly fizzle out if publishers become over-confident or greedy, and start throwing money around at anything they perceive to be 'The Next Big Thing' in horror.

Still, it's reassuring to see a revival of interest again in the old *Pan Book of Horror Stories* and mainstream publishers supporting newer writers such as Adam Nevill and Tom Fletcher, so I'm optimistic that we could be looking at an upturn in the fortunes of the genre.

However, let's not forget those individuals and publishers like Ramsey Campbell, Ellen Datlow, and PS Publishing and Cemetery Dance, who have kept the flag firmly flying for horror during the lean years. These are the real heroes of the genre – the people who are always out there, toiling away in the trenches, whether the genre is currently perceived as 'popular' or not.

Whatever the outcome, I don't believe that horror will ever return to the kind of popularity it enjoyed three decades ago. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear to me now that that period of prosperity was an anomaly – the genre will always be considered a sub-culture of mainstream literature, but that does not mean that we need to allow it to become ghettoised.

Have Robinson given you any sort of commitment about the future of *Best New Horror*? Can we expect to see the series carry on for the next few years? What other projects do you have in the pipeline?

Because of the way their market works, Robinson only commission one volume of *Best New Horror* at a time. That is how it has always been – I never know if I'm doing another volume until I've delivered the previous one. The problem with that has been that, usually, they have not been giving me the contract for the next year's book until around November – which invariably left me with just five or six months to put the entire volume together: that includes reading all the submissions and compiling all the editorial material, let alone dealing with the contracts.

Thankfully, my new editor at Robinson, Duncan Proudfoot, has very quickly grasped some of these problems and started putting systems in place to make things run smoother in future. As a result, I am already well into work on next year's volume, which should make the whole process less stressful for everyone. It is a privilege to edit *Best New Horror* – I always remember that – and so anything that helps improve the anthology is welcomed by me.

As for other projects, there are always too many to remember! Ulysses Press, the American imprint I did *The Dead That Walk* for, has just published my angel anthology *Visitants: Stories of Fallen Angels & Heavenly Hosts*, and we are currently discussing a new supernatural anthology for 2011, with a twist on the theme that I don't think has been done before.

I have already delivered the second huge collection of H.P. Lovecraft stories to Gollancz, which is the companion volume to their best-selling *Necronomicon*, and I'm working on two more Basil Copper projects with PS Publishing, to complement the two-volume collection *Darkness, Mist & Shadow* that came out earlier this year.

Beyond that, Michael Marshall Smith and I – under our Smith & Jones aegis – continue to work on various script and design projects, and if you add all that into all the Introductions I'm asked to write, the other book projects I'm continuously developing, not to mention the occasional convention I'm involved with, and you can see that I lead a pretty busy life.

But you know, it really is a wonderful life! Back when I was starting out in the early 1970s, I could never imagine that I would ever have published more than 100 books, or worked on Hollywood movies, or been fortunate enough to win some major awards for what is the best job in the world for me. I never forget that, and so long as it continues, then I will always try to give something back to the genre that I am happy to call home.

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AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?



The title comes from the introduction to *STORIES* (Headline hardback, 432pp, £18.99), edited by Neil Gaiman and Al Sarrantonio, and for Gaiman it represents the crucial aspect of all good storytelling – if the reader is asking this question then the writer has done his job.

There's an air of expectation about *Stories*. In a market climate where short stories are reputedly anathema and horror fiction no longer saleable, the appearance of such a substantial anthology from a major UK publisher – a book in which genre favourites rub shoulders with 'literary' heavyweights and all of the fiction is grounded, if not in horror, then in the fantastical – can't help but seem portentous, and literary haruspices will no doubt pore over its innards in search of signs of things to come. Mere reviewers however may content themselves with saying if they like the book or not.

And there is much to like, or not, between the covers, twenty seven stories in all. Reasons of space dictate that, with this anthology and those that follow, I discuss only a fraction of what's on offer, and so I shall content myself with itemising the best and the worst, the most representative stories and those with a particular interest because of an authorial connection with *Black Static*: a sampling then, rather than anything more substantive. I shall however, for the benefit of the completists, post Tables of Contents for all the books reviewed in this issue on the Case Notes blog at ttapress.com during the month of October, along with other anthology focused material, so be sure to check it out.

Opening the proceedings is 'Blood' by Roddy Doyle, a tale with strong echoes of Romero's *Martin* as the protagonist develops a taste for blood which he indulges by biting the head off the neighbour's chicken. The appetite is strongly conveyed, both in its perversity and the feeling that it is somehow entirely natural, nothing to be ashamed of, simply another fetish, with the reaction of the character's wife at the end adding a chilling coda. There's a kind of vampirism too in 'Fossil-Figures' by Joyce Carol Oates, with one of twins feeding on the vitality of the other in the womb and after, the story following the unfolding lives of each, all leading up to the inevitable moment of collision. It's a fascinating tale,

with a real sense of something strange and macabre taking place, while at the same time offering nothing that can't be explained in mundane terms. For a third vampire tale (perhaps the literati haven't heard how passé vampires are), we get 'Juvenal Nyx' by Walter Mosley, with its eponymous hero turned into a bloodsucker and making a life for himself until love comes along to complicate matters. It's a dazzling display and one that never ceases to hold the attention, with plenty of incident as Nyx turns PI and has to track down a hell beast, and an emotional context that preserves his essential humanity by connecting him to the rest of us. Other famous monsters get a look in too, as with 'The Stars Are Falling' which reinvents *Sommersby* as the zombie story it was always yearning to be but never had the balls for until Joe R. Lansdale dragged it kicking and screaming out of the casket. There's tenderness here, an exquisite sense of loss and a feeling for the emotions of the characters, but then it all falls apart in savage violence, a comment on war itself.

Psychological horror also has a place. 'Weights and Measures' by Jodi Picoult looks at a couple coping with grief after the death of their daughter, the story firmly grounded in an understanding of their relationship and loss, describing in meticulous and compelling detail the unravelling of two lives. 'Catch and Release' by Lawrence Block is the clever account of a serial killer who is satisfied by the chase alone. Using fishing as a metaphor it is a chilling monologue that, for all the suggestion of passivity, eventually ends in terrible bloodshed, and is all the more shocking because of the dummy that has been sold to the reader. In 'Land of the Lost' by Stewart O'Nan a woman becomes obsessed with finding the body of a killer's victim, digging up isolated spots late at night. It's displacement activity for dealing with the emotional turmoil that has swept up her life, and there is a wonderful irony in the last line of the story, with its reverse declaration of sanity.

Urban fantasy plays a part. 'Wildfire in Manhattan' by Joanne Harris is a tale of the old gods living inside human bodies, and how an evil force is killing them off. Lighter in tone than many of the stories, this is a concept that Harris has fun with and milks for all its worth, with twists and turns of fortune, and a genuine feeling for the numinous amid the everyday. Michael Marshall Smith's 'Unbelief' is an audacious practical joke of a story, with a

hired assassin shadowing his target until the moment to strike, after which we get the reveal. Written entirely deadpan, it sucks the reader in before pulling the rug out from under our feet. The immortals of Jeffrey Ford's 'Polka Dots and Moonbeams' seem frozen in a moment that perpetually repeats, and their only wish is to find a way to death and bring this all to an end. The prose and dialogue here is scintillating, a perfect evocation of hedonistic lifestyles, with the reader fed clues until the underlying horror of the situation emerges and the game in which these characters are engaged stands fully revealed.

High fantasy abounds. Neil Gaiman's fable 'The Truth is a Cave in the Black Mountains' is a slowly unfolding tale of revenge delayed, with all the moment and impact of a Greek tragedy. Easygoing at first it soon becomes chilling, as things and people are revealed to be other than first presented, and the truth is more terrible than we could have envisaged. Michael Swanwick's Cabellesque fantasy 'Goblin Lake' explores the boundaries between fiction and reality, with an evocative account of a character who must choose whether to live in one or the other. There's a lovely picaresque feel to the story as it unfolds, but Swanwick brings it home with a metafictional twist that undercuts so much of what has gone before and poses the question of whether the very real potentials of the daily grind are preferable to imaginary happiness.

Disappointment is found in unexpected places. Peter Straub's 'Mallon the Guru' went right over my head; detailing a brief encounter between a disciple and the master he yearns for, it was all a little too enigmatic for its own good. The punning title 'Leif in the Wind' sets the tone for Gene Wolfe's story of astronauts who are infected by an alien life form or may simply have gone mad due to the length of their mission. Either way it's not a particularly gripping story, with ideas that have been dealt with before and more substantially. For Wolfe this was very much a routine tale. 'Let the Past Begin' by Jonathan Carroll is all over place, a jigsaw puzzle story whose pieces don't quite fit, ostensibly about the working out of a curse. Many of Carroll's traits are recognisable in the text, but the narrative just doesn't seem to be as focused as in his best fiction.

The book ends with a high three. 'Stories' by Michael Moorcock reads like a history of *New Worlds* and its times, with only the names changed to protect the not so innocent. It's a compelling and completely absorbing character study come

history lesson, one which doesn't really go anywhere in plot terms and yet has a feeling of containment about it, and of course reading Moorcock is always going to be fun, as the guy seems incapable of bad writing or dull storytelling. Longest story in the book, Elizabeth Hand's 'The Maiden Flight of McCauley's Bellerophon' is also one of the best, as three slackers come together to recreate a moment in aviation history for a friend dying of cancer. With some delicious characterisation and dialogue, it builds perfectly to the moment of revelation, where an outré event is sidelined in favour of more humanitarian needs. The story is shot through with mystery, but Hand prefers to place compassion and human feeling in the foreground. Last of all we have 'The Devil on the Staircase' by Joe Hill, innovatively written in the form of a staircase. A young man commits murder, but thanks to the help of the Devil's son he manages to escape the consequences of his actions and prosper. The story holds the attention all the way, with some excellent touches of colour and detail, and in the end it offers a denouement which holds terrible implications for all of mankind, not just the story's protagonist. It is the ideal note on which to end a substantial anthology and one that speaks to the robust good health of the short form in these challenging times.



Joe Hill also provides the last story in **ZOMBIE: AN ANTHOLOGY OF THE UNDEAD** (Piatkus paperback, 500pp, £9.99) edited by Christopher Golden, a house brick of an anthology with

nineteen stories which attempt to put a different spin on the subject of everybody's favourite brain munching monster, and generally succeed.

Dawning of the living dead. The short opening story by John Connolly puts a different slant on the tale of 'Lazarus', with the man Jesus brought back from the dead finding that nothing is quite how it should be and people won't accept him. It captures perfectly the plight of someone who is dying but not dead, a living source of decay. Stephen R. Bissette's 'Copper' is written from the viewpoint of a zombie, a war veteran leading a gang of ex-soldiers who survive off the things society no longer has any use for. I found the method of telling aggravating at first, but the story grew on me, with the repetition and short sentences used to portray the zombie's mental state

working well. One of the highlights of the collection, 'In the Dust' by Tim Lebbon has the few survivors of a zombieified community quarantined from the outside world. It is, like much of Lebbon's work, a singularly bleak tale, with a bad situation getting even worse, but beautifully written and showing a keen sensitivity in describing the emotional landscape of these trapped people.

Disappointments of the dead. I'm a big fan of Brian Keene, but 'The Wind Cries Mary' didn't work for me. An odd couple wonder if their relationship can survive, when she becomes a zombie and he becomes a ghost, but the story doesn't have much to offer beyond this polarity. The shortest story in the book, it's more idea than plot. 'My Dolly' by Derek Nikitas is another weak effort, with its hero saving one zombie girl at the cost of the lives of several living men, no real rhyme or reason to what goes on and the first half of the story seeming very much like padding.

Dead but still kicking. 'Delice' by Holly Newstein is a poignant tale of voodoo in old New Orleans, with a dead girl's body being taken over by a spirit to wreak vengeance on the girl's killers. Time and setting are perfectly realised, with gore in the story offering us the pleasures of seeing bad lots get their just desserts. Mike Carey's 'Second Wind' has a zombie financier taking steps to preserve his existence after death, only to find that one of the living has the ability to touch him. The subtext of the story seems to be that the protagonist has never really connected with other human beings until now, when being dead has made such a thing possible for him, but at the same time he still manages to reject what is offered in a poignant end twist.

Dignity in death. 'Family Business' by Jonathan Maberry is set in a future where zombies roam wild and the living exist in walled communities. The family business of the title is killing zombies and Benny wants to follow in the footsteps of his brother Tom, but first he must be educated into what the job really entails. The longest story in the book, this offers a striking alternative to the usual zombie horror MO, where shooting them up is the be all and end all, instead positing the idea of allowing the undead some dignity in their demise, following the logistics of the zombie plague. 'Closure, Limited' by Max Brooks is coming from a similar place to the Maberry, but from an entirely different direction, with zombies altered to resemble loved ones of those who then get to kill them. It's a good idea, and Brooks plays it close to his chest, so that you can't really be sure where the

story is going until the final twist.

Delights of the living dead. 'Among Us' by Aimee Bender is a social satire of sorts, several incidents intercut in such a way as to show that zombie and human behaviour are often identical. The point is made with wit and insight, and the story has grown on me since I read it, and I'm a lot more aware of Bender's novel lurking in the TBR pile. From James A. Moore we get the grim 'Kids and Their Toys', in which a group of boys take delight in tormenting a zombie, and one of their number learns that you either join the gang or become its victim. Like Ketchum's *The Girl Next Door* this story offers a disturbing master class in our capacity for cruelty and self-delusion. And then there's that final offering from Joe Hill, 'Twittering from the Circus of the Dead', with the story told in the form of twitter posts, something I thought of initially as a gimmick but which with hindsight works perfectly for the story Hill has to tell. A young girl on a cross country trip with her family twitters to her friends when they stop off at a circus where the performers pretend to be zombies and the audience become prey, only nobody is pretending. It's a striking blend of redneck horror and teen angst, with some delicious imagery and a tone just right for the material, and it provides the perfect end to a generally strong collection.



Of course where there are zombies, vampires won't be far behind, and we have two anthologies stuffed with stories about bloodsuckers. **EVOLVE: VAMPIRE STORIES OF THE NEW UNDEAD** (Edge

Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing paperback, 283pp, \$16.95) edited by Nancy Kilpatrick contains twenty four stories by Canadian writers that aim to put a new spin on the vampire archetype, to provide a 'twenty-first century vampire'. Despite that tease, I would say that there's nothing radically different on offer here, but the book does provide a lot of clever and intriguing variations on a theme.

'Chrysalis' by Ronald Hore is the story of a vampire coming of age, a young teenager who thinks her parents are down on her and who is bullied at school, but who then comes to the realisation that she has a great power. In a way the story celebrates the idea of the outsider, the alienated adolescent, whose fantasies of power and revenge are given tangible form. Jennifer Greylyn's

'Mother of Miscreants' puts a different slant on the whole 'interview' thing, with a vampire writing her confessions so that others of her kind will realise their true potential instead of being swayed by the images of vampires in popular culture. It's a clever piece, with the showdown between mother and one of her offspring put over well. 'Resonance' by Mary E. Choo takes a look at the vampire society, and how they punish their own if vampire secrecy is put at risk. The story is well written, with a heroine whose plight – wanting to help humans and keeping her family property – is one most of us will identify with, particularly given the whiff of corruption coming off the vampires at the top of the food chain. My only reservation is that the resolution all seems a bit pat, with the all-powerful overlords vanquished pretty much 'just like that'. Rebecca Bradley's 'The New Forty' depicts the fate of a vampire shunned by others of her kind because she was turned in old age, but who now finds that in the modern world age is not such a big issue. It deftly takes a human situation and shows how vampires might similarly be affected.

The least interesting stories are those that feel underdeveloped, of which there are something like half a dozen. For example, 'Red Blues' by Michael Skeet is a night in the life snapshot of a vampire jazz musician, but has little to offer beyond the observation that vampires are like musicians. Victoria Fisher's 'The Drinker' is similarly slight, a man who is given a taste by a vampire, but the story doesn't really go anywhere or have anything much to offer. Heather Clitheroe's 'Come to Me' is a tale of vampirism set in Japan, with a woman lured into the forest by a predator, but foreign setting aside there is little originality to the story. 'Alia's Angel' by Rhea Rose was all a bit too vague for me, set in an oblique world and with characters whose motivations I could never quite get a hold on.

This is a book however in which the good outnumber the indifferent by a considerable margin, with a satisfying amount of stories that put moral dilemmas at their centre. 'An Ember Amongst the Fallen' by Colleen Anderson is one of the highlights of the collection. The story is set in a world of vampires, where humans are cattle and their masters discuss if they are capable of intelligent thought and feeling, and the worst crime is for a vampire to have sex with one of the beasts. It's a clever reversal of traditional stereotypes, reminiscent in a way of *Planet of the Apes*, with a subtext about racism and the story brutal enough in places to horrify, both on the visceral

level and intellectually. In 'All You Can Eat, All the Time' by Claude Lalumière a woman falls under the spell of a vampire, one who seems to be protecting humans, but she is tricked when he takes over her body. It's a thoroughly engaging story, one where the writing fizzles and the character of Jenny comes alive on the page, so that we care about what happens to her, even while knowing that it's all destined to end in tears. 'When I'm Armouring My Belly' by Gemma Files features a young man who whores himself out to vampire clans, but eventually they always reject him, until finally he realises his true nature and becomes a predator. The story is, at bottom, about a submissive who makes the transition to master, and we manage to identify with Vic even as he is humiliated and suborned, the grittiness and need coming off the page in waves of raw emotion.

'How Magnificent is the Universal Donor' by Jerome Stueart has a future in which vampires have come out of the shadows and are helping humans with a deadly blood disease, only they need the pure blood of one man to aid them in their fight, and his partner attempts to rescue the guy before he can be drained. While there's some superficiality to the writing, this 'doctors wear scarlet' story addresses universal concerns, with the idea of sacrificing an individual for the greater good central. It invites readers to take sides, and curiously enough I chose the opposite side to the characters. In the last story, Tanya Huff's 'Quid Pro Quo', the vampire partner of a human detective is coerced by a billionaire who wants her to change him. It's a fast paced action adventure piece with likable characters and some engaging twists along the way to a gratifying finale, a light hearted but not lightweight end to a collection that adequately draws new blood from old skins.



With seventeen 'all new tales of vampiric horror', **THE BITTEN WORD** (Newcon Press paperback, 317pp, £9.99) edited by Ian Whates has a more traditional feel about it, and one might even

go so far as to identify a leaning towards the romanticised end of the vampire spectrum in some of these stories.

Leading off is Simon Clark with 'Vampithecus', a story with an Indiana Jones sensibility to it, at least initially as a zeppelin party of explorers unearth a cave in which bodies are mysteriously preserved,

and fall prey to the vampires they awaken (while entirely earthbound, the story also put me very much in mind of *Lifeforce*). The wide open spaces of the desert are brought to vivid life, and the attendant sense of wonder felt by the archaeologists, the story ending with a note of pathos as the main protagonist prepares to be reunited with his wife, but at a terrible cost to his humanity.

There's a similar old fashioned feel to Chaz Brenchley's 'Hothouse Flowers', as a gentleman of substance returns home after many years abroad to find his family residence rented out to a vampire who keeps his personal food supply of young boys close to hand. It's an engaging story, one that draws the reader in, with Brenchley not setting a foot wrong, the time and place and characters all just right, and several images that revolt thrown in for good measure. Freda Warrington has fun with the tropes of the subgenre in 'The Fall of the House of Blackwater', as an age old vampire returns to torment the current residents of his ancestral home, masquerading as a ghost, only to have the tables turned on him. It's vampire fiction as Oscar Wilde might have written it, knowingly amused at its own audacity and playing jokes on the reader.

At the fabulist end of the scale we have Sarah Singleton's beautifully written 'A Winter's Tale', which tells of a vampire girl who arrives on a block of ice and her relationship with an infatuated artist, the story shot through with a brooding feel of obsession and conveying a sense of decadence. In 'Where the Vampires Live' by Storm Constantine the main thrust of the story is in the relationship between two sisters, and how this is changed by the arrival in their house of a strange girl who turns out to be part of a vampire family. The artful writing, highly charged air of eroticism and subtle characterisation kept me turning the pages, albeit there were places where the story felt slightly forced. 'Taken at His Word' by Tanith Lee has failed writer and scholar Olvero unwittingly unleashing a vampire on the city where he lives. The story is beautifully paced and keeps its twists and turns out of sight of the reader until the appropriate moment of revelation, playing games with the idea of fiction made flesh.

Not everything worked for me. John Kain's 'English Spoken' had some lush imagery, but the tale of a Passenger in search of something that remains just out of reach never quite grabbed me and I came away from it with no feeling that the story amounted to something more than the sum of its parts. In 'Wuthering Bites' Brontë's tale

is vampirised by Jon Courtenay Grimwood, but he does it no favours. The writing is competent, as you'd expect from JCG, but otherwise the exercise seemed as pointless as most other 'mash-ups'.

'Those Damned Kids' is the one thoroughly modern story in the anthology, and is typical of Gary McMahon's oeuvre, delivering up a bleak and repellent depiction of urban blight, with communities dying on their feet, and the hoodie clad teens who personify this decay, only to then turn the tables on reader and renegades alike. There's a grittiness to the language, an underlying awareness of social substrata and the very real horrors that give us all sleepless nights, the whole mulched up in a welter of blood and tears, and with an ending where only the monsters can offer hope. And 'Coldrush' by Kari Sperring is the most futuristic piece, set in a reality where a spacefaring insect civilisation falls prey to a vampiric black hole, though you can't entirely dismiss the idea that all the SF stuff is a ruse and actually Sperring is writing about insects in their own terms. It's the most original piece in the book, though to my mind doesn't quite fit with the company it's keeping.

Donna Scott takes the vampire back to its Victorian roots with 'Lord of the Lyceum', a story in which Bram Stoker has a role to play and a vampire tackles Jack the Ripper. Filled with tiny touches of detail that help to bring the age to life, with some fascinating characters and charged interplay, this was one of my favourites. Saucy Jack also features in 'Fool's Gold' by Sam Stone, a well written tale that provides one of the most original takes on vampires and the Ripper that I can recall seeing. Finally in 'Vanities' by Gail Z. Martin two vampire thieves are part of an organisation that protects the world from far greater evil. The story is a Machiavellian treat, with two parts rip roaring adventure to one part horror, and brings down the curtain on this production with considerable panache.



THE SIXTH BLACK BOOK OF HORROR (Mortbury Press paperback, 198pp, £7) edited by Charles Black is unashamedly retro, the latest in an anthology series that aims to recapture the feel of the old horror

tomes of yesteryear. It comes with fifteen stories from a selection of familiar (and not so) denizens of the UK small press scene.

Opening the score is the ever reliable

John Llewellyn Probert with 'Six of the Best', in which the producer of a *Most Haunted* type TV show with a gory twist takes extraordinary steps to ensure the audience get what they want. It's a clever piece, well written and with Probert resisting the impulse to deliver a revenge from beyond the grave style ending. The longest story in the book and one of my favourites, R.B. Russell's 'An Unconventional Exorcism' is a delightful black comedy in which Aunt Imelda is nursed by a niece who claims to be in contact with the dead, only after her death she comes back to haunt the young woman. There are some great characters here, a witty writing style and a great twist at the end in the way in which the old lady is exorcised. 'The Doom' by Paul Finch sees a new age vicar inadvertently convincing a frustrated rapist that it is okay to be himself, with dire consequences. There are echoes of Dahl at his most vicious in this cleverly constructed story, with a nasty sting in the tail and a subtext about the advantages of old style fire and brimstone preaching over the more touchy feely approach.

Gary Fry's 'Keeping It in the Family' is an obliquely slanted tale of a writer who is taken by a monster while staying with his family at Whitby, but then returns. The story has an assured build-up and a genuinely unsettling atmosphere, reinforced by subtle suggestions of some terrible transformation that may be taking place. In 'Spanish Suite' by Craig Herbertson a trainee confectionary salesman on a European tour falls foul of a revenant. With a strong sense of place and an amiable writing style this was a thoroughly engaging piece, and my only reservation is that the nasty ending felt more like an afterthought than the destination to which the plot was driving. Reggie Oliver's 'Mr Pigsny' is one of the highlights of the collection, as an academic with gangsters as in-laws finds out that there is something decidedly off about the man who was the deceased gang lord's 'spiritual' adviser. The story is beautifully executed, with a real feel for the scenario and the characters, and a chain of wholly inexplicable events that accrete to provide a genuinely unsettling frisson or two for the reader. Set in 1950s Derbyshire, Stephen Bacon's 'Room Above the Shop' is another winner, a disturbing tale of mannequins and guilt coming home to roost. The atmosphere is built with assurance and the characters live and breathe, while both period and setting have the ring of authenticity about them.

Several of the stories are weak, marred by predictable elements or a lack of anywhere interesting to go, while a couple leave

a sour taste in the mouth. Simon Kurt Unsworth's 'Traffic Stream' is pretty much Pacman played for real, with ravenous lorries chasing cars along an endless road. It's decently written and an idea with some slight potential, but the author's decision to use the names of other writers for his characters is a distraction that prompts misgivings about Unsworth's motives and judgement. 'Keeping Your Mouth Shut' by Mark Samuels is a story of two halves, neither of which has much relation to the other. In the first protagonist William Powell decides that he wants to be a writer, though it's only a pretext for a rant about the shoddy practises of self-publicists that appears to have more to do with off page events than the narrative in which it appears. With that out of the way Powell goes off in search of the film starlet who shaped his sexuality, only to find that she is dead, setting us up for a snippet of revenge from beyond the grave, though exactly what is being avenged is unclear. The story has little to commend it, is just a series of incidents strung together willy nilly, though it does provide a laugh for the anatomically challenged with the closing image of 'a shrivelled member confirmed to be that of the severed penis'.



WHERE THE HEART IS (Gray Friar Press paperback, 221pp, £8.99) edited by Gary Fry contains nineteen stories, each set in the place where the author lives, and each accompanied by an afterword in

which he or she explains the connection. It's an intriguing idea, but I didn't feel that it really worked: for most of the stories it seemed to me that the location could easily have been changed with nothing lost. There was seldom any sense that the setting was intrinsic to the narrative, which is not to say that these are bad stories or this is a poor collection. It's just not quite what it says on the tin.

The best story comes early on in the book, Stephen Volk's Bristol based (but could be anywhere really) 'Easter', which is a quintessentially British tale, as council workmen turn up to re-enact the crucifixion in front of a suburban dwelling, and the man of the house takes the 'victim' cups of tea and chats with him about this and that. The whole thing seems wonderfully surreal, Pythonesque even, with some delightful dialogue and a deadpan delivery, while the problems of the protagonist's marriage offer

an emotive counterpoint to what is going on outside.

'The Cuckoos of Bliss' is typical Rhys Hughes, with an unemployed man taking on the job of safety officer in Heaven and rubber stamping the invasion of Swansea by a host of giant babies. It's a story that brings to mind the work of Lem, the plot completely ludicrous, with Hughes testing to destruction the laws of physics and logic, injecting shots of whimsy neat and an anything goes sense of invention. In 'Summerhouse' by Mike O'Driscoll a man returns to the Gower Peninsula of his youth and has a vision of the woman that he dated back then, confronting things about himself that until now he has been able to ignore. It's a subtle ghost tale, rich in atmosphere and with a subtext about the things we hide from and how they will always come back to haunt us. A Birmingham crime baron looks set to get away with murder when witnesses start to die in Joel Lane's 'The Last Witness', but the man himself is also a witness. This was a strange story, gripping and filled with compelling imagery, and yet at the end I came away from it with the suspicion that things had all been a bit random.

Mark West's 'The City in the Rain' is a new rendition of an earlier story and has a cancerous Leicester absorbing people into the brickwork of buildings to restore their health. The idea is an excellent one and West captures well both the emotions of his character, in mourning for his dead wife, and the horror of what is happening to the victims of the city, with some garish imagery. Stephen Bacon's emotive 'Last Summer' has a man remembering the days of the miners' strike, when he was a child and his father stood on the picket line, while a serial killer preyed on innocent children. He goes to check on what he has suspected all along, that one of the victims was actually killed by his best friend. There's a terrible sense of poignancy and lost innocence, with Bacon managing the two strands perfectly, and bringing alive the tensions and high feelings of that lost time. 'Winter's End' by Simon Bestwick is another highlight, with a young man's relationship with the ideal girlfriend interrupted by the demons from her past. My only quibble with the story is that the protagonist's policeman buddy seems a bit of a plot convenience, but other than that Bestwick sucks the reader in with skill, his characters never less than believable and the emotions between them entirely credible.

Paul Finch's 'The Daftie' is set in Wigan and has a young boy on a cross country run getting off the beaten track and falling foul of a mental home escapee. Initially the

story struck me as rather drab and clichéd, albeit competently written, but then Finch served up a final twist which reinvented all that had gone before, showing things in a different light entirely. 'Scale Hall' by Simon Kurt Unsworth is set in Lancashire and another highlight, as the search for a missing child leads a man to the discovery of a gap between dimensions. It bears a passing resemblance to the Lane story on one point, but Unsworth has more of a plot and a sure grasp of his strong, central character. The imagery is unsettling, while the plight of a whole community as seen through the eyes of one man is well done, and the twist at the story's end is pulled off with aplomb. A salesman breaks down on the North York Moors in Gary Fry's 'The Welcoming' only to be taken in by a family who appear to have their own agenda. It's a jolly outing, with some nice turns of phrase, but nothing that won't be familiar to horror fans from countless similar outings.

'We Are the Doorway' by Gary McMahon features a Sunderland man for whom guilt over past failure has taken the form of a door on his chest, and he finds absolution by joining up with a group of people similarly afflicted to form a 'house' gestalt. I liked the feel of arch weirdness that hung over the story, even though I had a good idea where it was going to, but wish that McMahon had given us a bit more about the back story to his protagonist's condition. Finally 'Stamping Ground' by Carole Johnstone has a man followed by Glaswegian tramps, their presence infecting his whole life, causing him to lose his job and social standing, then at the end becoming one of their number and inflicting the same fate on another. Johnstone writes well, winning our interest and holding it all the way as she puts her characters through the paces demanded by the plot, the idea at the heart of the story having novelty and the way in which it is played out never less than convincing, with the story's understated denouement a particular pleasure. It was good note on which to end a solid anthology, one with more hits than misses.



From the same publisher we get **NEVER AGAIN** (Gray Friar Press paperback, 292pp, £10) edited by Allyson Bird and Joel Lane, a book described as 'an attempt to voice the collective revulsion of writers in the weird fiction genre against political attitudes that

stifle compassion and deny our collective human inheritance', with contributors donating their work and all profits going to anti-fascist and racist organisations, such as the Sophie Lancaster Foundation (google Sophie Lancaster if you want an example of real life horror and heroism).

Reviewing charity anthologies is an endeavour fraught with peril for the reviewer as nobody wants to be the bad guy who rains on everyone's parade, but fortunately the twenty three stories in this volume – eleven of them reprints – are of a generally high standard, exceptional in one or two cases, so that particular poison chalice gets taken from me.

First up is 'Feet of Clay' by Nina Allan, in which a Jewish family relive nightmares of the past against a modern background of growing racial tension, and with the possibility of a golem in the mix. As ever, Allan writes with a keen pen, showing insight into the lives of her characters and the plight in which they find themselves, overlapping past and present to the strengthening of both, with only the ending striking a weak note, one in which the author doesn't quite seem to know how to finish. 'Volk' by R.J. Krijnen-Kemp has a surreal, Kafkaesque feel to it, with a couple given outsider status and feeling strangely menaced by the shadowy official who lives upstairs, the constant threat of having life and liberty snatched away, intercut with the shocking demise of their cats. The story is rich with imagery and echoes of Lynch's *Eraserhead*, the whole shot through with an unsettling quality that seems omnipresent and yet gains power to unsettle from its very vagueness. Lisa Tuttle's 'In the Arcade' depicts a future in which coloured people survive only in exhibitions for the edification and entertainment of the white masters, the story told through the eyes of mystified Eula Mae, who doesn't understand what has happened to her or why, with an undercurrent of savagery to the tale, seen in the offensive language and the sheer mindlessness and brutality of what appears to have befallen a significant proportion of the human race.

'Sense' by Tony Richards shows a society in which people who feel disenfranchised turn to fascist politics, only to realise that everyone who does not conform is in danger and the solutions offered are false. In embryo it's an illustration of Martin Niemöller's famous observation that culminates with 'and then they came for me', with Richards exploring the theme with a deft touch, showing at first the appeal of fascism and then the slow shift until its ugly side is revealed. 'In On the

Tide' looks at racism through the eyes of a young man, forced to ignore a boy of different colour to appease the prejudices of his mates, slotting into the tale an incident of wartime segregation and death that echoes down into the present day. Author Alison J. Littlewood tackles her themes with conviction, the characters never less than real, especially the protagonist with his hatred of the prevailing mindset but inability to go against the crowd. The bullying is as shocking as it is senseless, soliciting our sympathy for the victim while at the same time suggesting how his tormentors came to such a pass, the banality and hopelessness of lives that can only be validated through the infliction of pain on a weaker party.

'Survivor's Guilt' by Rosanne Rabinowitz, which originally appeared in *Black Static*, provides a potted history of fascism in the early days of the twentieth century through the eyes of a female immortal (the vampire word is never used, but there's a strong suggestion). Beautifully written, it draws the reader in, juxtaposing the personal situation and concerns of the narrator with those of society at large, celebrating the link between love and liberty, how the two reinforce each other. Simon Kurt Unsworth's 'A Place for Feeding' takes a very ordinary situation, that of a woman wanting to breast feed her baby in a café, and then distorts it terribly, with the café's clientele turning against the young mother. The story captures perfectly the social intolerance and insistence on conformity that seems typical of fascism, with a backlash and anger out of all proportion to the supposed offence given and the victim humiliated and abused while all the time being told how it's for her own good, and that she is being unreasonable in seeking to exercise the simple right to feed her own child.

Towering over everything else in the book is 'Night They Missed the Horror Show' by Joe R. Lansdale, one of the classics of the genre, a savage and brutal case study of racism, as two rednecks fall foul of people even worse than they are. The whiff of the KKK runs through this story, and even though thirty years old it retains the power to shock, so that the reader almost wishes to look away as a terrible situation steadily gets worse, and we are deprived of any sense of closure, just the nullity of senseless death.

Steve Duffy's story details the home life of 'The Torturer', the routines and small exercises of power that sustain him, the dreams that torment, all just an appendix to the job he performs with such apparent zeal, the story chilling in its implications

and matter of fact depiction of inhumanity. Gary McMahon's 'Methods of Confinement' gives us the situation of a woman visiting her brother in prison, and showing how she also can become a prisoner of the situation. While engaging, this story was a little too oblique for my liking, the horror for once too understated. In a lighter vein, Robert Shearman's 'Damned If You Don't' is the story of Martin, who ends up in Hell sharing a cell with Hitler's dog, and then when the dead are returned to Earth learns exactly how Adolf got the way he was. It's a delightful tale, full of touches of sly invention and a wry humour, all of which underline the serious points the story has to make.

'Machine' by Carole Johnstone has a theme park in which scenes from the Second World War are recreated by actors, only one night everything comes horribly real for the owner. So far, so weird, but the subtext here seems to be that fascism is latent in all of us, a machine that is driven by our hurt and fear, needing only the right stimulus to surface once more. Stephen Volk's 'After the Ape' is simply brilliant, but I already said that in my review of Stephen Jones' *Mammoth*. Along with the Lansdale, it's the highlight of this anthology. 'The Death of Dreams' by Thana Niveau takes on the tabloid press, with a future in which dreams can be captured and the details made public. A celebrity's life is torn apart by tabloid revelations about what is going on in her subconscious, but the implications go much further, with society itself endangered. The story spotlights the tabloid sensibility, the need for sensationalism that puts headlines above everything else, with privacy thrown out of the window, and all done in the public interest, with our consent and connivance.

'The Depths' by Ramsey Campbell has a writer finding that he must get horrid fantasies out of his mind and down onto paper, else they will find an expression in the real world. As ever with Campbell, the hints of something awry come thick and fast, consensus reality slowly upset by intrusions of the outré, and the possible subtext that perhaps we have a personal responsibility for the things we create. Last story in the book, Simon Bestwick's 'Malachi' is set in a totalitarian future Britain, with a mixed race family wishing to escape to another country, but only able to do so through the intervention of a Holocaust survivor. It's an engaging story, but all the same runs along on familiar and expected tracks, with the plight of the characters touching the reader, but no real surprises or anything insightful to offer.



NULL IMMORTALIS: NONYMOUS TEN (Megazanthus Press paperback, 330pp, £11) edited by Des Lewis is to be the final volume in this anthology series, which has made a virtue

differently. In previous volumes stories were published independently of the authors' bylines, but not this time around. Editor Des Lewis still has some moves though. Each story includes a character called Tullis (the winner of a competition run in the last volume) and is inspired by the phrase 'null immortalis'. My impression is that Lewis puts a premium on lateral thinking and high concept over plot, which can be something of a mixed blessing. There are stories among the twenty six in this book that are the rival of nearly anything found in the other anthologies here, but also a number that are slight, little more than brief word pictures, and some that don't invite the question 'And then what happened?' so much as 'What just happened?'

Case in point, 'Turn Again' by William Meikle, in which Tullis is an enigmatic stranger who comforts a grieving woman with talk of how nothing is ever lost and Zen. It's engagingly written and at only four pages doesn't outstay its welcome, and as an appetiser for what follows works well enough, but all the same I can't muster up much enthusiasm beyond a shrug.

Let's talk about some of the ones I can get enthusiastic about, and three stories stand out in particular. 'Lucien's Menagerie' by David M. Fitzpatrick, a tale that has echoes of *House on Haunted Hill* in the plight of a woman bequeathed her family mansion by her wealthy ex, but only if she spends a night there, and dotted about the house are stuffed animals that are intended to drive her over the edge into madness. It's a marvellous piece, full of incident and rich in detail, with tongue in cheek dialogue and a megalomaniac character who must surely have been inspired by Vincent Price at his most insidious, and easily my favourite of what's on offer. Reggie Oliver's 'You Have Nothing to Fear' provides a look into the lives of the upper classes, detailing the abusive relationship between an aristocratic photographer and his model, and then how the tables are turned on the man. A delight to read from first word to last, the story is a subtle supernatural piece in which a frisson of fear runs through the narrative, but with events always so off kilter that the reader can feel free to ignore it completely. Stephen

Bacon is a writer who is growing in stature (I'd say we were overdue a collection of his stories) and 'The Toymaker of Bremen' doesn't disappoint. A young boy finds himself abandoned by his parents and falls into the care of an elderly man with a large family of children, but as the plot unfolds the boy comes to realise that something far more sinister is going on. Bacon hits entirely the right note here, with the boy's feelings of estrangement and his happiness at how he is treated put over well, but never so well as to obscure the fact that something is very awry, all priming us for the final plot twist with its unsettling revelation.

Writing itself is central in some of the stories, as with 'Apotheosis' by D.P. Watt in which Tullis is the most successful writer in the world, though his nature seems to be more that of hive mind or collective than an actual individual. Another writer is drawn into the Tullis web as part of his own shot at immortality by proxy, the story cleverly playing with the themes of the book and the competition. Joel Lane's 'The Drowned Market' is perhaps a metaphor for the end of publishing as we know it, with hints of murder/suicide along the way as an author and his manuscript undergo changes until they disappear altogether, and the final image of the blank page eclipsing reality itself. It seems churlish not to mention the story by S.D. Tullis given his lynch pin status, but 'The Return' was not one of my favourites. After having gone missing for nearly two years, a young girl returns home but will not speak. The story holds the attention, with a minutely detailed description of events unfolding and responses to them, but the metamorphosis of the final section, with hints of something rotten in the family fold, doesn't quite work, seems to be offering strangeness for its own sake rather than as a means to reveal the truth of this situation.

Some of the shorter pieces work, usually those with a humorous side. Rachel Kendall's 'Holesale' takes a play on words and fashions it into a slight but eminently enjoyable tale about a man who sells black holes for use as storage space, and how those holes might be put to use. 'Fire' by Roy Gray gives us the meditations of a condemned man in the moments before he is killed by firing squad, a neat and clever piece with a sting in the tail. Bob Lock knows how to pander to the vanity of editors, with not only Tullis but Lewis himself as a character in 'Haven't You Ever Wondered?' and the whole Nonymous project reified as a matter of multiversal importance in a witty and cheekily audacious story that delights with its playfulness.

'Love is the Drug' by Andrew Hook steps into a world where emotions are sold by drug dealers, and a man is given love but it destroys the feeling he already has for his wife and children. The story is cleverly told, with Tullis being interrogated by people who ostensibly want to help him, but underlying that is a subtext about our emotional states and how fragile they are, often the result of conditioning and socialisation rather than the profound feelings we believe them to be. 'The Scream' by Tim Casson is an enigmatic story of kebabs and property booms and busts, of strange illnesses and fractured relationships. Propping up the narrative is a metaphor in which the spread of fast food outlets becomes emblematic of the commodification of people and society, and the poison seeping into our lives. Tullis in Gary Fry's 'Strings Attached' is an entrepreneur planning to open a fast food outlet at a sedate seaside resort and against the will of the residents, but the abandoned ticket office chosen for his premises might not be the best of locations. Fry is adept at creating a sense of urban unease while never revealing too much, with corrupt council officials, hostile locals and a ghostly spectre all helping in the measured unravelling of his central character. With powerful writing and a narrative device that put me in mind of Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables*, Steve Rasnic Tem's 'The Green Dog' chronicled the relationship between dog and man in the latter's dying days, with identities seeming to merge, the naturalness of one contrasting with the artificiality of the other, their shared concerns.

The last story in the anthology is also the longest, Tim Nickels' novella 'Supermarine' which reads somewhat like *Catch-22* if it had been written by Michael Moorcock and he'd used the family Cornelius for his dramatis personae. Mostly it was a fun read, with some tasty prose, larger than life characters and oblique invention, but at the end I didn't have the feeling that the various episodes formed something greater than the sum of their parts, enjoyable as they were in isolation. At the end of the story is the legend NONYMOUS 2001–2010. It will be missed.



As I said in reference to Stephen Jones above, when it comes to 'year best' volumes reviewers are often little more than rubber stamps. What I won't rubber stamp are the typos in the 'Summation 2009'

section of **THE BEST HORROR OF THE YEAR VOLUME 2** (Night Shade Books paperback, 308pp, \$15.95) edited by Ellen Datlow. With close to forty errors in thirty pages, there's something seriously awry here. Names are misspelled (Jane Austen is Austin, Stephenie Meyer is Myers, John Langan is Lanagan, Steve Redwood is Redmond etc), commas are misplaced and words appear to be missing, and we get such howlers as 'low budge movies' and 'lessons the impact'. I've read plenty of summations and introductions by Ellen Datlow over the years and can't recall ever seeing enough typos for it to be an issue before, and fortunately the malaise hasn't spread to the rest of the book, but Night Shade obviously need to take a hard look at whatever proofreading procedures they have in place.

There are seventeen stories in the anthology, and while I might quibble about some of the choices Datlow is experienced enough and has sufficient critical acumen to not inflict any stories on us that don't earn their place. For purposes of this review I shall ignore those stories I've written about before (the Duffy, Langan, Barron etc) and comment on some of the ones that are new to me.

The opening story, Steve Eller's 'The End of Everything', is a grim account of a man's life in a world overrun by zombies, and his own feelings of isolation given that he needs to kill others and they are nearly all dead. It's a keenly felt piece, one in which the subtle shades of emotion dominate. 'Mrs Midnight' by Reggie Oliver is a traditionally slanted piece in the Jamesian vein, with a celebrity who gets involved in the campaign to save a dilapidated theatre learning rather more than is good for him about a vaudevillian of yesteryear. The story is beautifully paced, the character's obsession taking root and signified by numerous tiny touches of detail before the inevitable denouement. The influence of *Ringu* is obvious in 'Each Thing I Show You is a Piece of My Death' by Gemma Files and Stephen J. Barringer, with film makers discovering what appears to be a suicide or murder tape and the transferral of a mystery figure to all video, even television programmes. Written in a variety of forms, including interviews, memorandum, correspondence etc, this is an intriguing story with a wealth of detail and invention, and at its heart the fear of what our modern communication media may be doing to us, both their ability to shock and also to insulate and deaden our emotions. Technically the most ambitious of the stories, with the exception of John Langan's marvellous 'Technicolor' (which I considered when reviewing the anthology

Poe) I'd rate this the absolute best of what's on offer here.

'The Nimble Men' by Glen Hirshberg concerns a strange incident at an isolated airport, with the crew of a plane perplexed by incidents on the field. The beauty and strength of the story lies in the fact that nothing is stated: we simply get an existential sense of dread and the growing feeling of unease, even though nothing actually happens to threaten the characters, at least not until they step out of the plane. But even then group hallucination brought on by dread anticipation is an option. 'Wendigo' by Micaela Morrisette is an obliquely written piece, the story's heroine getting drawn into the world of a secret group of cannibals, or worse, and consuming her own flesh. There are elements of the story that feel fairy tale like crossed with a heady sense of decadence, as if Angela Carter had written the script to Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*, and underlying it all awareness that the narrator, in love and in flight from her everyday life, may not be as reliable as we could wish.

'The Porches of My Ears' by Norman Prentiss is a keenly felt tale of loss, with the man whose wife is dead from cancer looking back to happier times and trying to pin down the moment when it all went wrong, and finding that moment in a chance encounter at the cinema. The strength of the story lies in the way in which ordinary events are reified, so that what may be no more than simple rudeness is given a horrific, premonitory quality. 'Lonegan's Luck' by Stephen Graham Jones concerns a snake oil salesman who moves from town to town poisoning the inhabitants, only this time he gets the tables turned on him. Heavy on dialogue, it's a fast paced story with plenty of twists and turns and a gratifying final twist of the tale as the man's mule comes into its own, with my only complaint that there wasn't enough explanation for the title character's actions.

A maritime tale with a touch of Hodgson about it, Carole Johnstone's 'Dead Loss' has a Scottish trawler and its crew running foul of sea creatures. So much here seems to be rooted in the psyche of the fishermen, with conflicts between them, that the idea of monsters from the id presents itself, and though at the end Johnstone eschews that possibility in favour of something more concrete at a stretch it's possible to read this story as both creature feature and psychological horror. Like 'Wendigo', 'The Lammas Worm' by Nina Allan put me in mind of the work of Angela Carter, and also of the film *Freaks* as the members of a travelling circus encounter and take in a

strange young woman who acts as crowbar to lever apart the close knit group, turning them against each other. There's a subtle undercurrent of menace here, the sense of far more going on off the page than we read on it, with some excellent imagery to accompany the story and evocative descriptive writing.

These stories and the eight I haven't commented on provide a snapshot of the horror genre and its current state of health, which on the evidence presented seems to very robust indeed.



DARKNESS: TWO DECADES OF MODERN HORROR

(Tachyon paperback, 470pp, \$15.95) edited by Ellen Datlow, is a volume that has a similar agenda but different timescale to the Jones *Best of the*

Best reviewed above. *Darkness* opens with a foreword by Stefan Dziemianowicz charting changes in horror fiction during the period 1984 to 2005, and that's followed by twenty five of the best stories published during that period (none of which overlap with the Jones volume, so there's a case for acquiring both), providing an overview of the genre, its major players and the themes that have preoccupied them.

'Jacqueline Ess: Her Will and Testament' is a fine example of how marvellous Clive Barker was in his prime, an account of a woman with the power to transform living flesh and how she uses that talent, both for sex and murder. The writing is powerful and provocative, with Barker eschewing moral judgements and easy targets in favour of delving deep into personal obsessions, as his various characters seek out their sordid destinies. One of the longer pieces, 'The Pear-Shaped Man' by George R.R. Martin is the superbly disturbing story of a young woman moving into a new flat and the man in the basement who she finds so intimidating that his presence invades her reality. This is a story of the type where only the victim knows the truth of what is happening with everyone else dismissing their fears as irrational, and Martin handles this familiar device with skill and aplomb, weaving small notes of unease into his narrative and making ordinary events seem sinister simply through their juxtaposition.

Another highlight, 'The Juniper Tree' by Peter Straub is a tale of childhood abuse remembered in adulthood, the train of events sucking the reader in and the moment of 'seduction' truly squirm

inducing. And yet there is also the sense that the victim feels somehow complicit in what is happening to him, that he acts in such a way as to bring it about. Straub solicits the reader's sympathy but at the same time he raises questions about the nature of the abuse taking place and how it fits into the larger picture of the protagonist's life. Pat Cadigan's 'The Power and the Passion' combines two tropes of the horror genre, with a ruthless serial killer who gets to indulge himself by murdering vampires at the government's behest. It's an intriguing idea, here given a novel twist, and reading the story the squirrely nastiness of the character comes over well, the sense that this is really an animal we are reading about, a predator who allows others to live only because he has no choice about it. There's a similar feel to 'The Phone Woman' by Joe R. Lansdale, in which a writer is drawn to the plight of a neighbourhood character who keeps attempting suicide, finally helping her to completion and realising that there is something terrible in his own nature. The story grabs the attention right from the start, the reader identifying with the protagonist, who is pissed off at first by this disturbance to his routine, but then finds that something about it attracts him, so that in the end we are asked questions about our own culpability, if we too have this dark side in our natures.

Any overview of horror fiction since the eighties has to take on board the colossus that is Stephen King, but I'm not convinced that 'Chatterly Teeth' serves the maestro well. The idea is a simple one – a driver is saved from a psycho hitchhiker by the chatterly teeth he purchased at an isolated store – but the story is too long for its own good. All of King's traits are in evidence, with an eminently readable narrative couched in that 'just us folks' tone he does so well, memorable characters and plenty of incident, but also the leaning to literary elephantiasis, the feeling that we're getting the economy size version of a story that really would have worked much better at less length. 'A Little Night Music' by Lucius Shepard has a music critic detailing his reaction to a zombie band, but this is only distraction activity from his broken marriage and the wife who wants a separation. Beautifully written the story succeeds in cataloguing emotional detachment, the failure to connect, that of both the zombies and the protagonist. 'Calcutta, Lord of Nerves' is one of Poppy Z. Brite's very best stories, a grim tale of zombies running rampant in the Indian city, where the poor and the sick are so populous

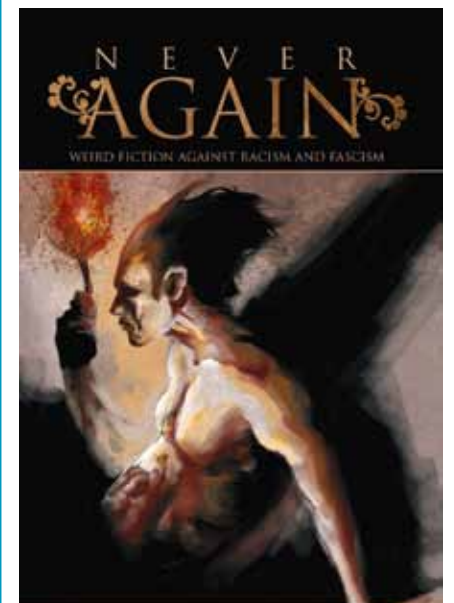
the zombies are really nothing much to worry about, and presiding over it all is the scarlet goddess Kali. The vivid descriptions here, the ripe sense of place, are almost overpowering at times, while the subtext about the thin line between living and dead seems even more apposite nowadays.

Elizabeth Hand's 'The Erl-King' is a deal with the devil tale, deftly weaving together strands of fairy tales, Warhol's Factory years, rock music and the lust for fame, all in a tale where two young girls are beguiled by the fallen rock star who lives next door. There's a lush feel to this, an entirely natural story that has so much that is beautiful and strange within its narrative, a miscellany of objects that delight as much as the story itself. Dennis Etchison's 'The Dog Park' looks at the brutalising effects of the Hollywood system, with dogs becoming fashion accessories in the climb to the top of the pile, and a man who has lost his dog thrown into a suicidal funk. Obliquely written, the story suggests so much more than is conveyed, with subtle shifts of emphasis and nuances that hint at a subtext of emotional vacuity, of gladiatorial contests for the amusement of the hierarchy even. 'Heat' by Steve Rasnic Tem didn't work for me. A rather wordy account of a woman fascinated by fire and ultimately immolating herself it never came alive until the closing scene.

Ramsey Campbell's 'No Strings' has a man bewitched by a street musician who lures him into a building where tramps hide and in which he will become a sacrifice, but as with the Tem the story seemed rather slight, an assemblage of effects rather than anything more substantial. In other company it might have stood out, but not here. 'Stitch' by Terry Dowling sees a young woman confront her childhood fear of a sampler in her grandparents' bathroom, which is tied up with an incident of abuse, only at the end she has her own agenda, rooted in horror. The story builds well and even though it seems predictable with hindsight the ending is shocking in its abruptness. Finally we have 'My Father's Mask' by Joe Hill, in which a trip away to an isolated holiday home becomes fraught with menace, and the sense of secrets revealing themselves as events from different times overlap. There's dazzling imagery, a keen sense of youthful angst, and the story has a strong end, with echoes of Oedipus in the resolution. It's a good note on which to end this volume, and now all we need to ask is...

And then what happened?

▶ Pete's Case Notes Blog: ttapress.com/blackstatic/casenotesblog



EDITED BY ALLYSSON BIRD AND JOEL LANE

NEVER AGAIN is an attempt to voice the collective revulsion of writers in the weird fiction genre against political attitudes that stifle compassion and deny our collective human inheritance. The imagination is crucial to an understanding both of human diversity and of common ground. Weird fiction is often stigmatised as a reactionary and ignorant genre – we know better. The anthology is published now by GRAY FRIAR PRESS, and edited by Allyson Bird and Joel Lane.

It is a mixture of original stories and reprints from Ramsey Campbell, Lisa Tuttle and Joe R. Lansdale amongst others. NEVER AGAIN is a non-profit initiative aimed at promoting awareness of these issues among readers and writers of weird fiction. The editors, authors/artist and publisher will receive no fees for this work. Any profits made from sales will be donated to Amnesty International, The Sophie Lancaster Foundation, and P.E.N. (International organisation to promote literature and human rights, encouraging translation and campaigning against political censorship).

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