

SEEKING TO SUBVERT: STEPHEN VOLK

Regular readers of *Black Static* will know Stephen Volk from his *Coffinmaker's Blues* column, which pulled down the shutters for the final time in #55 after a run of sixty issues (and for those of you who are trying to get their heads round those numbers, the first five columns appeared under the title *Electric Darkness* in the pages of *The Third Alternative*, the magazine which preceded *Black Static*). To the world at large though, Volk is known primarily for his scriptwriting on television shows such as *Afterlife* and the (in)famous *Ghostwatch*, films like *Gothic* and *The Awakening*, if he is known at all that is, most scriptwriters occupying a blind spot in the vision of cinemagoers obsessed with the work of directors and actors, but all too often taking for granted the efforts of those who put the words into their mouths.

Less familiar to that world at large, though hopefully not to readers of *Black Static*, is his work as a writer of prose, one of the premier exponents of the short form in the horror genre, which neatly brings us to a consideration of **THE PARTS WE PLAY** (PS Publishing jhc, 368pp, £20), Volk's third collection following on from *Monsters in the Heart* (2013) and *Dark Corners* (2006).

After an effusive introduction by American writer Nathan Ballingrud, in which he refers to Volk as one of three best short story writers in the genre, we get off to a flying start with the aptly titled 'Celebrity Frankenstein'. In Volk's skilled hands Mary Shelley's classic story is reinvented as a reality TV show, with the first person narrator assembled from assorted body parts and going on to have a celebrity career, with hit records, film deals, and copious photo opportunities, developing a lifestyle where success hinges on how many YouTube hits your last video had and who is following you on Twitter. Even the search for a bride is launched along reality TV show lines. But of course the joins will show, in an existence every bit as randomly stitched together as the bodily form of its protagonist, and soon the narrator's life is turning sour and then falling apart. With corrupt doctors prescribing the wrong drugs in the wrong amounts, accusations of murder and child endangerment, Volk effortlessly taps into the zeitgeist of our celebrity obsessed culture, seamlessly incorporating elements from the end games of O. J. Simpson, Elvis, Michael Jackson and others into his story. It is a fun piece, something that Kim Newman at his ebullient best might have produced, but at the same time a cutting satire on aspects of modern life that have become far too prominent in recent times, the vacuity of a milieu in which to be famous has become an end in itself, with no regard for any actual ability, and where everything has to be acted out in the glare of the media and for an insatiable public, as if to be unobserved is to not exist.

Again told in the first person, 'Bless' is both a horror story and heartrending in the way that it exposes the soul of the protagonist, a woman who is unable to cope with the grief of losing her young daughter, and so takes another child believing that it is her Kerys returned to her through some miracle of God. With the plight of the mother painstakingly laid out, it's a story that wrenches at the heartstrings and kindles our sympathy, even though we realise that she has done something terrible, and fear that worse is to follow. The woman is not a monster, or even mad by her own standards, but her view of the world, the perspective she has, means that her pain is transfigured into something terrible in a story with no easy answers, no condemnation to speak though we cannot doubt that the author disapproves of what his protagonist does. Volk's true achievement here is to give us a fully rounded character, one who is fatally flawed thanks to an overly literal approach to her faith but not a nasty person per se.

In the third story 'A Whisper to a Grey' Volk returns to a character he has used before, psychic investigator Venables. Set in the time around WWI it tells of his encounter with a gypsy horse whisperer and an arrogant blue blood who just won't take no for an

answer when the man refuses his offer of employment. With more than a hint of D. H. Lawrence in what follows, there is a sense of inevitability about the way in which the plot evolves, with first the gypsy framed for murder and then a supernatural vengeance wreaked on the lying baronet. It doesn't quite have the oomph of the preceding tales, being more properly regarded as a spectral tale in the Jamesian mould, but it more than adequately demonstrates the author's range, and with concerns for social justice woven into the text and criticism of the class system and attendant bigotry undercutting much of the action it is far from being a simple entertainment, for all that it works splendidly when approached on that level.

Undoubtedly the most explicit story in the book and not for the faint hearted, 'The Arse-Licker' is the first person narration of a man who got where he is by brown nosing. Here he goes too far and causes another executive to lose his job, with the result that he is the subject of some extreme and poetic revenge with echoes of *The Human Centipede* in what happens. A pointed and pitch black comedy along the lines of *Bad Taste*, this is very much a case of making the punishment fit the crime, and the punishment is described in terms that are almost akin to relish. However the curious thing for me is that the character somehow gains a kind of nobility by virtue of the ordeal that he undergoes. At the end of the story he seems surer of himself, more capable, with the act of anilingus transformed into his sexual peccadillo of choice, perhaps as a way to validate what has happened to him, an embracing of what has proved unavoidable, humiliation transmuted into something that empowers. I'm not sure if this was what the author intended, and I am certain that Volk disapproves of the underlying sycophancy, and yet right or wrong it was what I took away from the story.

Set in Hitler's Germany and written in the form of a dialogue between two old friends, one of them now a prominent Nazi and the other the head of 'The Peter Lorre Fan Club', our next story takes a close look at the arguments attendant on censorship and the way in which art can shape the individual (and national) psyche, the demands of patriotism and how to reconcile those with artistic integrity and truthfulness, an ends justifying the means pragmatism versus a more idealistic approach. While there is no doubt as to which side of the divide Volk stands, kudos to him for attempting to see the viewpoint of the Nazi, to make his arguments credible rather than presented as simply straw men, though ultimately the fascist argument is undermined by the inevitable descent into violence and brutality. It is a debate come drawing of battle lines that possibly has gained a hideous relevance for those of us who fear the course that may be set for the future in our post-Brexit, post-Trump world.

The artist narrator of the next story is attracted to 'Certain Faces', and the plot revolves round her rejection of a young woman as a possible model, and the guilt she feels for not mentioning this when the girl subsequently goes missing. It's a strange piece, one in which mood and the character's feelings are everything. Volk captures perfectly the artistic sensibility, the way in which Stella negotiates a path through the pitfalls of her life as a painter. At the heart of the story is a rather intense dialogue scene in which Stella talks to three potential models, and is repelled by their philistine attitudes, and perhaps it is this dislike that grounds her failure to act when the girl goes missing, a sense of detachment from events, an inability to see the young woman as an actual person, which in turn causes problems in her marriage and personal life. In a way it reminded me strongly of Raymond Carver's story 'So Much Water So Close to Home' in which fishermen ignore the corpse of a woman washed up near the site of their activities – there's a similar sense of failing to do the right thing for no good reason, or no reason that will be understood by normal, rational people, and Volk's achievement here is to craft such a gripping, engrossing story from material that is almost gossamer thin.

'With All My Love Always Always Forever xxx' is a flash fiction in which thieves steal what turns out to be a murderous device and suffer the consequences. It's a short, pithy

piece, entertaining in a rather grim manner, and I'd classify it as a "just desserts" style story, though I'm not quite sure that the characters deserved what happened to them, the punishment seeming way out of proportion to the crime, but perhaps that's just a sad reflection of these interesting times in which we live.

'Matilda of the Night' is the story of academic and folklorist Ivan Rees, who is presented with an opportunity to record a first-hand account of a visit by a spirit that presages death. So absorbed is he in this quest that Rees neglects his personal relationship with his boyfriend to the point of extinction, while his intrusive presence in a nursing home and hospital results in a horrific discovery, as there is more than a smattering of truth behind the story he thinks is only legend. I previously reviewed this story when it appeared in the *Terror Tales of Wales* anthology, and on that occasion I expressed some doubts about Rees' attitude to his work, his willingness to chase after this chimera with such zeal, but on a second reading those doubts have disappeared and everything that takes place on the human level felt perfectly plausible. Again there are elements of the Jamesian tale in this piece, a gradually mounting sense of unease, one where the spectral intrudes in the most elusive of ways until its presence becomes undeniable, though even here Volk is canny enough to allow a note of ambiguity. Ultimately the story belongs to Rees, and it is a story of redemption, showing how his career ambitions and the carelessness with which he conducts his personal life are eclipsed by a moment of sacrifice, an altruistic act.

Arthur Conan Doyle's Professor Challenger is the protagonist of 'The Shug Monkey', off in the English country to capture an elusive creature that may help to substantiate his Lost World stories. There's an old fashioned feel to this story, a variation on the legend of devil dog Black Shuck, and it is one of the weaker ones in the collection, but cleverly constructed and beautifully written with an end twist that more than rewards the effort of reading. Even at his least, Volk is still streets ahead of most other short story writers in the genre.

Like 'Bless', 'Wrong' is another story that tugs on our heart strings even as it presents us with a horrific situation. It's told from the viewpoint of a student at university lodging with an elderly couple, and relates what happens when the wife inexplicably absents herself. Based on a true story, it is the tale of a love and desperation that dare not speak its name, and while lesser writers might have played it for the shock value Volk writes with sensitivity and a genuine desire to understand how such a situation could come about. Like his protagonist he refrains from being judgemental, though of course he knows that social mores have been hideously violated. What happens is wrong, but also in a strange sense an act of love, and while abhorring his actions, the reader is hard pressed not to feel sorry for poor old Percy, with Volk's compassion for the character shining through.

Set in a clapped out seaside town during the off season, 'The Magician Kelso Dennett' is the story of a Derren Brown style performer who intends to stay buried on the town beach for forty days and nights. The story is told from the perspective of local boy Nick who is hired by the TV crew to help with security and related matters, and who ends up having an affair with the magician's wife while he is beneath the ground. Again it's a story that develops at a beautiful, relaxed pace, with everything that happens seeming entirely credible, giving us characters that we can believe in and as a side issue exploring the matter of celebrity, how there is the constant need to delight the public with ever more shocking tricks. And at the finale Volk pulls the rug out from under our feet with an end twist that is as unexpected as it is entirely obvious with the benefit of hindsight. It was a masterly entertainment, rich in atmosphere and with a beguiling sleight of hand on the part of both the eponymous magician and the writer himself.

Finally there's the 2015 British Fantasy Award winning novella 'Newspaper Heart', told from the viewpoint of Iris Gadney, the wife and mother in a dysfunctional family. To help her shy, retiring son come out of himself, she assists him in building a guy for Bonfire

Night, over the objections of the boy's father who thinks all his son needs is to toughen up a bit, not be molly coddled by his mother. But Kelvin becomes obsessed with the guy, treating it as real, an imaginary friend, and his actions disturb the other members of the family, eventually culminating in a terrible tragedy. This story really is a master class in how to write horror fiction, with a compelling plot, beautifully drawn characters, spectral grace notes, and a genuinely disturbing subtext. The figure of the guy dominates the narrative, a brooding and minatory presence that insinuates itself into the lives of these people and threatens their sanity. And while the father could so easily have been made into the villain of the piece, Volk shows him as fully rounded, a man capable of compassion and wanting the best for his child and his wife, even if at times he is not able to express this in any meaningful way. It was the perfect end to what is probably going to be the best collection of the year.

I'm not sure that I'd go along with Nathan Ballingrud in placing Volk in the top three of the genre, but certainly I'd rate him the best writer of short stories in the UK horror scene at the moment, with only a handful of people such as Nina Allan and Ray Cluley coming close. There's a simplicity to his storytelling that put me in mind of Stephen King, but without the tendency to bloat and attempts at folksy narration. Volk has the range, voice, and compassion of a true master of the short horror form, and he isn't afraid to experiment, so that we can never be sure what to expect from him, while at his best he always brings something extra to the table, real world concerns of a social and philosophical nature that add gravitas, make him a writer of substance as well as show. Volk holds up a mirror in which we all too often find ourselves looking at our own reflection and not entirely happy with what we see. He is the best that we have and *The Parts We Play* provides the ideal showcase for his exceptional talent.

And before we move on to the author interview, I should mention that the book is also available in a signed slip cased jacketed hardcover edition limited to 200 copies, with a bonus chapbook *Supporting Roles* featuring two additional stories. For those who like their horror with all the bells and whistles.

Q & A WITH STEPHEN VOLK

You're best known as a scriptwriter (*Ghostwatch*, *Afterlife*, etc.). What are the main differences in writing for the screen and for the page? How does your scriptwriting experience impact on your prose work? And, conversely, how does your prose experience affect your scriptwriting? What have you learnt from each discipline that is transferable to the other?

Unless it can be realised in picture and sound it can't be a screenplay: that is fundamental. Pace and timing is another stricture. You think in a differently-skewed way. Faces. Reactions. The edit. I would say writing for the page is more finding a voice, a tone – often in the first sentence – that you sort of run with. In a screenplay there's no voice, use of language itself isn't important in the same way, it's about structure, ideas, theme, moments. A whole short story can be about a moment. Not even a moment, a feeling. In a screenplay that would be not even half a page, so right away you need fifty of those. Most literary ghost stories would barely be the pre-title teaser of a TV hour. So that in itself is gigantically different, just on a craft level. Then, what to show, what not to show – which I've discussed in *Coffinmaker's Blues* in the past.

I think my scriptwriting impacts on my prose in that I want the story to be as short as possible to be effective. Screenwriting is about being as concise as you can. Also I habitually structure, more so in my longer fiction, though I don't fastidiously outline as I would with a script. It's more notes and scribbles. I don't know what comes across as "screenwriterly" to

be honest. I just hope the characters are genuine, and there is more under the surface than meets the eye.

Conversely, the freedom I have with prose writing reminds me sometimes that I am in charge and I can do whatever I like. Nobody can stop me. That feeling of letting something bubble to the top and find its form, without a hundred people breathing down your neck or criticising the thought you haven't even had yet, can be liberating, even blissful. I suppose it puts me back in touch with writing.

Sometimes I write a short story precisely because it's impossible it could work in any other medium, but afterwards I can't help wondering how it might be a film. Not infrequently, a story begins in one discipline and I later rework it in another. I'm always open to that because nothing is ever wasted. Plus you discover things that way. 'Little H' started as a short film script, then I revisited it and fleshed it out into a spec screenplay, and later still it became the novella *Leytonstone*. Each version was an adventure. On the other hand, if I write a script and for whatever mundane reason it gets shelved, which happens often, I sometimes dust it off and give it a fresh look and sometimes the missing ingredient springs to mind, and you find what the story was always meant to be. Sometimes you prefer it. And sometimes only three people ever read the script and the story was read by . . . oh, at least ten!

You've recently adapted Phil Rickman's book *Midwinter of the Spirit* for the small screen, and I believe I'm correct in saying your first prose outing was a novelisation of your script for the Ken Russell film *Gothic*. Are there any novels that you would particularly like to be involved in adapting for the screen, and are there any films that you would like to write the novelisations for? And if so what is it that appeals to you about these works?

I'm not interested in novelising anybody else's scripts. I don't think I'd be very good at it and it doesn't appeal to me. I did *Gothic* because the company asked me if I wanted to do it or step down, and I said I'd do it because the shooting script had left out my original top and tail, so I put those things in the book.

Alternatively, writing an adaptation is much more alluring and interesting: the prospect of creating something in a different medium, providing I like the book – but you don't have to *love* the book. It's essential you think "I can do this, I'm the right person for the job" but also "I know how to solve the problems here". I avoid thinking of what novels I'd like to adapt, because chances are they are under option and being scripted as we speak, and then that's upsetting! (I leave it to fate that if I'm a good choice the producers will find me.) A couple of times I have been given novels that knocked me out – one was *The Glamour*, another was *The Chrysalids*, another was Marcel Theroux's *Strange Bodies*, another Adam Nevill's *Apartment 16*. I worked on the first two, thought I did good work, but they both came to nothing. The third, I couldn't see the concept in the way the producer wanted, so we amicably parted company. In all these cases the partners are important: how they see it, and ultimately whether they can get it made. However good a job you do, it is in the lap of the gods.

Adaptation appeals to me if I can genuinely see that I can bring something of my own sensibilities to the table. I don't say yes otherwise. It's going to be a gruelling task (it always is), so you want to be on firm ground going in, finding out if your approach is in sync with the producer and director. Essentially, I just love the business of trying to find dramatic or cinematic equivalents for things that seem unfilmable, they're interior monologue or un-dramatic or un-actable, or things that work in a novel but simply won't work on screen – something novelists, as a rule, have a hard time accepting! In *The Chrysalids* I invented a whole new third act because there wasn't one, just a disappointing *deus ex machina*. Deep

down you want to please the original creator, obviously, but your loyalty and duty has to be to the book, not to the writer of the book.

You've criticised the worlds of film and television for being risk adverse. Do you have the same reservations regarding mainstream publishing? Is the small/indie press the only arena for writing that pushes the envelope?

I don't think there's a distinction – it's the modern age. Creative enterprises cost money to get stuff out there, and people, not unrealistically, want a return on their investment. They also want to make a shitload of money if they can. It's not enough just to make a profit, they always want more. It's like the announcements about a supermarket's profits going down this year – you go, “Hang on, we are still talking millions of pounds of *profits!* How is this a bad news story?” It's just unfettered greed, and you know from my 60 columns between these pages, it gets my goat, because the people that make the intellectual property, the “content” – you and me – are at the bottom of the tree while others eat the bananas.

The indie press can be wonderful because it is people who do it for love, but it can feel a bit like sitting on a lily pad in a very small, introspective pool. However, if I'm pushing on doors in the mainstream and the door is not only locked but double-bolted, I'll go where I'm wanted and appreciated, and when it's people who know their genre and love it as I do, I'm extremely happy.

I think it's individual authors who push the boundaries and the small presses, luckily, where they find their feet. *Black Static* is obviously one example. You interviewed the brilliant V H Leslie recently. I can't wait to see what writers like Ray Cluley and Priya Sharma will do next. But sadly it tends to be literary authors outside the genre who seem to get most recognition when they delve into writing a genre novel, and that can be galling, but it also can be a wakeup call and a breath of fresh air. If it's good writing it should be a kick up the arse to all of us. And not to badmouth them, but the small presses do produce a lot of disheartening tripe, too.

In an online interview you said “I like genre because it has rules and therefore you can break them”. What in your opinion are the rules of genre? Why is it important to break them?

By the rules of genre I mean the clichés – the holiday that turns weird, the perfect middle class couple about to get their come-uppance, the strange child, the blessing that's also a curse, the person from the past with evil intent. We all know the formulae – which can be perfectly fine as a start point. *The Gift* feels like a standard story to begin with, but turns into something plausible and very different and more interesting along the way, while *Unfriended* was a clever, skilful new way to tell a ghost story. I loved them both.

Writers should always question what has gone before. A shambling zombie. Make it run! A loathsome vampire? Make it handsome! A horrid murderer? Make him charming. If the charming murderer is a cliché, make him boring! If that's a cliché make him funny. And so on... You've got to play that game to spice things up – to the extent sometimes I like to write a story that is not even horror at all, even though it is born of horror sensibilities. Sometimes I think: “What's the *least* I have to do to make this horror?” Which forces you to dig a bit deeper. Maybe. Anyway my wife says I shouldn't call myself a horror writer. It's a flag of convenience, I don't mind, and I remain unapologetic that it's the genre that made me. There's no getting away from that. However much I want to bend it out of shape.

I think what I meant by the quote is, learn your genre, know it inside out, then seek to subvert it. Do the unexpected. It's what is expected of you. That's what stops the genre from stagnating.

In his introduction to *Parts* Nathan Ballingrud describes you as “one of the finest writers of horror fiction working today. Top three, easily.” What three writers within the genre are your three favourites? What about their work appeals to you, and what have you learned from them?

I could easily list three fiction writers I love, but I hate any kind of “Best” list. I find all sorts of voices fascinating and inspiring: too many to mention just three. So, perversely, I will give you three screenwriters I wish I could be as good as, whose skill is gobsmacking and exemplary. Firstly, John Logan, whose *Penny Dreadful* has been an absolute delight from start to finish, and contains, to my mind, one of the best renditions of the Frankenstein story ever filmed. I would kill to have that kind of canvas and that kind of budget to play out my dreams. Secondly, Allan Cubitt, who, in *The Fall* gave us stunning access to the mind of a serial killer and the woman hunting him, without ever compromising his vision (in the face of opposition from critics, and even his audience). I love that he stuck to his guns and knew what he was doing. The final episode was perfection as it brought together the strands of all three seasons. He wasn’t afraid to write long scenes that the actors made sing. What an achievement. Lastly, Charlie Brooker. A brilliant writer whose wit and rage permeates everything he writes. I bow to no one in my admiration of *Black Mirror* – and thank him, and it, for bringing adult SF back onto the radar. At last, TV drama that is actually *about* something. And stories you will never forget.

Of the twelve stories in *Parts*, one is a dialogue, four are written in the third person and seven in the first. Elsewhere you’ve spoken of the need to find the right approach to a story, the right voice. Can you talk us through this process a bit? What sort of factors come into play when determining “voice”? Is it primarily an intuitive process or are there more objective criteria?

I think it’s instinctive, isn’t it? Like when I’m finding the name for a character, I can circle it for days until it is right. Some story ideas just sit there until the way in presents itself to you – basically, the way to write it. It might need to have that Joyce Carol Oates sense of neurosis, or Rob Shearman’s dry wit. You don’t necessarily go for imitation, of course. Often it can be down to point of view. Several times I’ve stalled on a story until I’ve found the person who is going to tell it – and it may not be the protagonist. I had the idea for ‘Wrong’ for a while but until I had the notion of the innocent narrator I didn’t have the story. In ‘Bless’ the narrator is mentally unstable, but it wasn’t until her observations of banal normality appeared that I found her voice, because it was a counterpoint to the chilling side of the narrative. The only “objective” part is asking, in a problem-solving sense, “What is the most effective way of telling this one?” then hoping it becomes apparent.

On occasion your work is not for the faint hearted or easily shocked/offended, as with certain scenes in ‘The Arse-Licker’ or the desecration of Vogel’s body at the conclusion of ‘The Peter Lorre Fan Club’. What do you feel is gained by the use of such explicit material, descriptions that will challenge the reader? And what are your feelings about censorship at a societal level? Are there things that you would be unhappy for people to view or read?

Well you answered it yourself – challenge the reader. It seemed to me essential to the integrity of ‘The Peter Lorre Fan Club’ that I not shy away from the obscenity of acts committed during wartime. It would have been horribly cowardly for me to avoid doing so – self-censorship, in fact, which is the worst and most pernicious censorship of all. “I’m not even writing that because somebody won’t like it or somebody won’t buy it or somebody won’t like me.” That kind of thinking, in my opinion, is tantamount to going along with the status quo and, effectively, turning a blind eye to what is going on in the world. If you are not

writing about what makes you angry, what is the purpose of you being a writer? To entertain the masses and keep them happy and doped up with complacency? No thank you! I want to shake people up, morally, emotionally, and in any other way possible.

I don't think anything should be *verboten*, depending on context. I'd draw the line at hard core material being available in a kindergarten. Also, personally I don't get a kick out of writing gratuitous, exploitative stuff (such as so-called "torture porn") as an end in itself. It's simply not my taste or inclination. Neither of the instances you point out are violence for the sake of titillation or to be "cool" – quite the reverse. The point in 'Peter Lorre' was the extent to which people can relinquish humanity. That is the tragedy and horror embedded in that story. In 'The Arse-Licker' the purpose of the OTT description was to point out the utter absurdity of gross-out horror. As a general rule, I always say that you can usually feel in a story where the author's heart is. Whose side they are on, what they want you to feel. Whether there is a cruel streak there or empathy. Though, if the reader doesn't realise that 'The Arse-Licker' is a comedy, that's got to be my fault, not theirs. We writers deserve to be judged on the decisions we make.

Censorship is something I feel very strongly about. I don't know how any writer can fail to be concerned about others across the world who are imprisoned and even executed for saying things that certain regimes disagree with. Historically, the right wing always wants to clamp down on horror because by its very nature it depicts things best left unsaid. Horror's job is, sometimes, to be unrespectable and contentious. So we should be very careful not to be complacent. We should never think "it can't happen here" or "I'm safe, my writing will never be picked on" – because it might.

In several of your works you've used real people – Peter Cushing, Alfred Hitchcock, Suzy Lamplugh. Why does this approach appeal to you? What are the advantages and pitfalls of doing so? Have you ever had any feedback from people who have actually known those you've written about?

I was told by a few people who had met Peter Cushing that my rendering of him was uncannily right, which was unbelievably gratifying, as you can imagine. In general I think it comes from an impulse on my part to understand what the hell is this business I'm involved in – the business of making people afraid for a living. And whereas Stephen King is comfortable with fictional writers as his surrogates, I tend to prefer to pluck people from the past who did the job I try to do, directly or indirectly – Cushing, Hitchcock, Poe. I feel through writing these characters I can reflect on what horror does, and why. In the case of *Whitstable* it was about the tremendous positive force I felt horror fiction to be, and Hammer films in particular in forming my imagination. It became about love in all its manifestations, as well as a love of genre. *Leytonstone* was more an origin story for the archetypal Master of Terror – what made Hitchcock somebody who wanted to terrify his audiences. The third in the trilogy, which I am presently writing, is about another figure familiar to genre readers and will embellish on the same themes, about the creation of horror and the juxtaposition between real horror in the world and the fictional kind. The three novellas will be published under one cover in the fullness of time by PS, under the title *The Dark Masters Trilogy*.

The instance of my using the disappearance of Suzy Lamplugh was rather different. I was writing a ghost story and the premise that occurred to me was, what if the estate agent showing a prospective buyer round the house was the ghost? Then I remembered that Suzy Lamplugh had been an estate agent and it gave me pause. Could I use her? I hadn't seen a real person used in a ghost story before. I quickly researched the case and calibrated whether it would be (to my mind) offensive or exploitative, and decided that, no, I was using the character in as sensitive a way as possible, conveying the true sense of loss, not just using her

as a “gag”. Again, where was the author’s heart in this story? I hope it was in the right place, but only the individual reader can say.

Your wife is an artist, and I believe I read somewhere that you went to art college at one point, and the story ‘Certain Faces’ is told from the perspective of an artist. How do you feel art impacts upon your writing? And would you be up for working on a graphic novel with an illustrator? Does that form of storytelling interest you?

Yes, a graphic novel would interest me. I grew up on comics, which I loved, extending into my love of film, and when I worked in advertising I storyboarded all the commercials I wrote, but it’s all really about visual ideas. In writing screenplays you are always trying to distil ideas into a potent image or series of images and I love that. Sometimes I draw images of a scene before I write them. A telling image can give you the idea for a whole scene or how a character or setting looks. Often specific paintings can be inspiration, like Fuseli’s ‘The Nightmare’ in *Gothic*. I often save images of paintings and photographs, and postcards from museums or galleries, and stick them in my ideas file. The thing is, artists have been trading in this knowledge of the power of images, of colour, of composition, of subject matter, for centuries, so why not use it? They knew what they were on about, and I’d say the history of art is probably as useful to a screenwriter as the history of literature. Dance, physical theatre, even abstract painting can give you ideas – you can’t be inspired only by prose, in fact it’s severely limiting if you are.

In an online interview you stated that horror “is often seen as a base and sadistic thing by society”. Why do you feel the genre has such an image problem? Is it simply that a genre whose main raison d’être is to scare people is always going to be problematic for a large number of consumers, or is there something more complex going on?

It starts with the word doesn’t it? *Horror!* “Why would you want to write such things? Why would you want to upset people? That’s an awful thing to want to do!” That is the default position of a lot of people from which we have to argue otherwise, and that’s not going to go away – partly because *some* aspects of horror *do* aim to upset people, and that is part of what horror is very good at! And however we might argue that there are superb, intelligent and subtle things within horror “that you might love”, even if they *do* see it and love it, they will say “Well, yes, I like *that*, but that isn’t horror!” And so on. We will never win.

So, as a consequence of the very word itself being a turn-off to many, we now get fragmentation into sub genres: supernatural thriller or ghost story or psychodrama or gothic or paranormal romance or urban fantasy, and so on.

On a deeper level, you are right, the question is: how do you persuade the mass market that something repulsive might be enjoyable? (Especially if, to them, it might not be?) But the real knot in the wood comes from the will of marketing people to label something that will provide a sure fit hit. It’s all down to terminology, and it shouldn’t affect what scripts or books we write, but we *will* discuss it ad infinitum. My only hope, actually, is that horror TV shows and new modes of access to material will “normalise” horror and the H-word slides, crawls, oozes back into fashion. Who knows? The tectonic plates are shifting all over the place. Anything could happen.

What can we expect to see from you in the near future? What work do you have in the pipeline?

My new novella from PS publishing is out in January. It’s called *The Little Gift* and it’s rather different from my usual fare – whatever my “usual” fare is! I’m very proud of it and the team at PS did such a great job with *The Parts We Play*. I’m anticipating it will look similarly gorgeous. Next up, film wise? Hopefully *Extrasensory*, a script I’ve been developing with

Lesley Manning, who directed *Ghostwatch*: we've waited a good old while for the money to be in place and now she is casting, which is extremely exciting. Other than that I'm working on new screenplays – one with my mate Tim Lebbon (we're loving the collaborating process: it involves lots of cake!) – and TV ideas, waiting for the musical chairs of commissioners to settle down and hopefully get a decision or two. Fingers crossed. And of course short stories. There'll be more of those. You try and stop me.