

Coffinmaker's Blues

Collected Writings on Terror

Stephen Volk

PS Publishing 2019

Hb, 306pp, £25, ISBN 9781786363947

Mention the name Stephen Volk to an *FT* reader and the first thing they will think of is *Ghostwatch*. This is completely understandable. The programme had a huge cultural impact, and wraps up many forteen topics in one place, including hauntings, the blurred line between reality and fiction, the trust placed in public figures, moral panics and mass hysteria.

As you would expect, *Ghostwatch* is covered in *Coffinmaker's Blues*, a collection built around Volk's columns for TTA Press and *Black Static* magazine. Yet there is so much more to his career and his writing than that single occasion of terrifying the nation.

Stephen Volk is a writer. That might seem obvious, but it's worth emphasising, because one of the themes running through *Coffinmaker's Blues* is a precise exploration of where the writer is positioned in the worlds of TV and film.

He captures the frustrations and complexities of navigating this territory with script in hand, trying to keep a story together while different forces influence the final product. While he does not often name names, he is uncompromising in his criticism and knows where the bodies are buried (particularly of scripts cut or never reaching their final hurdle). There is honesty here. The chapter "In Purgatory: On Script Development" is particularly exposing and visceral (but not in a horror way), showing Volk's own wounds over the years from stories getting trapped in production companies and tied up with script development. The reason why Stephen Volk is so blunt is because he cares. He cares about quality writing, he cares about writers, and he cares about horror.

This final topic is the main focus of the book, and where you see that you're in the presence of someone who is passionate and knowledgeable about his subject. You might disagree with

his opinions (there are over 50 articles gathered here, so total consensus is unlikely) but you can never doubt his insight.

Themes covered include children in horror, Dennis Wheatley, the influence of Nigel Kneale, horror in mainstream films, and the relationship between religion and horror, among many others. Volk's approach to all of these is thoughtful and considered, for example talking about Guillermo del Toro's child's viewpoint in his films:

"In *Pan's Labyrinth*, for instance, there is no physical or cinematic boundary between fantasy and reality: the one is as dangerous and tangible as the other. At least in the mind of the girl. Which is what matters. Also, his *Hellboy* is like an overgrown toddler who doesn't really fit in an adult world (mentally or physically), often doesn't know his own strength, and often – deliberately or accidentally – pisses off the grown-ups."

Or about short story writers:

"Borges showed me the fantastical can be concise, anecdotal, even read like a footnote in a history book. While at the other end of the stylistic scale Angela Carter's unapologetically baroque language delivered a wry feminism via twisted, carnivalesque gags and loud, crashing symbolism."

While each article gathered here is fairly short in itself, it never feels as if he is skimming the surface, and as a whole

themes are picked up and carried through the book, making it feel coherent and complete. As an aside, it's also nice to see *Fortean Times* get a number of mentions throughout.

Coffinmaker's Blues is part of the Midnight Movie Monographs series edited by Neil Snowdon, and continues the quality of this series.

If you're interested in writing as a profession, particularly screenwriting, this book is for you. If you have a love for horror in all its many forms, this book is for you. If you're interested in the phenomena of *Ghostwatch*, this the book is for you. A well written personal exploration of horror, writing, and their place within the world.

Steve Toase

★★★★★

