

### **A trilogy of genre defying and captivating tales created by a master of his art.**

Stephen Volk's previous two novellas - 'Whitstable' and 'Leytonstone' were both enchanting, well-crafted and unique tales that evoked an England of bygone days with ease, with the male protagonists of both firmly entrenched in our minds because of their respective cinematic work. The genius of Volk's writing is that he takes us beyond the screen and into the very hearts and minds of these two legends, namely the aged Peter Cushing and the young Alfred Hitchcock.

In 'Whitstable' we enter into the grieving soul of the gentlemanly Cushing, recently bereaved and consumed with loss, sat on a bench by the sea in his adopted seaside town of Whitstable in Kent. Volk evokes the utter desolation swarming inside Cushing's heart and head with awe-inspiring dexterity and the reader is drawn into this darkly humorous tale of a man saved from the oblivion of grief by the intervention of a young boy. A boy who believes that Peter is in fact his best known screen character Doctor Van Helsing and recruits him to dispatch his evil stepfather whom he sees as being a real life vampire. It's a tale of emotional dilemma and is so poignantly written that one is almost in tears when reading it. The ending? Well, that's for you to discover!

'Leytonstone' is something entirely different. It's to Stephen Volk's credit that he avoided travelling down the same route as its predecessor, i.e. taking a much loved cinematic icon and placing him in a real life situation whereby he is cajoled into playing his best known character as a saviour for someone in distress. This time we focus on the troubled childhood of a seven year old Alfred Hitchcock living with his mother, two older siblings and his greengrocer father in the Essex town of Leytonstone. The father, in a misguided attempt to instil a degree of discipline into his son, arranges for him to be held against his will overnight in a cell in the local police station. An act, which far from having the desired effect triggers an inescapable, life long fear of authority in Alfred. Another event, this time perpetrated by Hitchcock himself, involves an obsession with a young, blonde-haired girl of his own age, culminating in an act (real or imaginary?) that in later life manifests itself in the way in which Hitchcock portrays women in a great many of his films. I'll leave you to follow all the clues that lead to the novella's climax. 'Leytonstone' again shows just how versatile a writer Volk is. His work cannot be classified or pigeon holed into a particular genre, his depictions of time and place and the complexities of the human character place him in a field of his own. His work, especially 'Leytonstone', is paradoxically subtle and sinister, intriguing, disturbing and compassionate at the same time without ever resorting to over used and predictable 'Horror' tropes that are sadly so prevalent these days.

So to 'Netherwood', the third instalment of this wondrous trilogy. When Stephen first leaked in a pre-emptive media post that it would be an imaginary second meeting of occultist Aleister Crowley and best-selling author Dennis Wheatley in a boarding house named 'Netherwood' in Hastings in the year 1947 I was immediately excited and intrigued by the concept. I'd been aware of the work, the legend, and the notoriety of Aleister Crowley since I was a young man in the early 1970s and at the same also excited by the writings of Dennis Wheatley. It's no 'Spoiler' to tell you that this story is about Wheatley being summoned by a near-death but still wickedly unrepentant Crowley to Sussex to assist him in destroying an evil being about to achieve full and unstoppable demonic power. What happens at the story's climax is a chilling, magical, revolting, incredible, esoteric, humorous and ultimately salutary piece of writing that left me breathless. Volk's characterization of the mismatched pair is like the interplay of a dark comedy duo and then, at the turn of a page, it's like watching the deadly ballet of a snake and a mongoose. But which is which? Read it and see!

There you have it. I cannot recommend this collection highly enough and it is as I said in the headline: A trilogy of genre-defying and captivating tales created by a master of his art.