

Electric Darkness/Stephen Volk – BS#8

“WALKING MILWAUKEE”

This summer I was on a panel at a new SF/Horror conference in South Wales called *Space Time Machine Monster* when the inevitable question came from the audience: “Where do you get your ideas?” Andrew Cartmel, writer and ex-*Doctor Who* script editor, chipped in acerbically that Stephen King always answers that two ways: he either says “Milwaukee” or “From Satan”. But, facetiousness and obfuscation aside, what is the straight answer?

To me, in all honesty, it’s this: you don’t get ideas, ideas get you. Most writers would agree, I think.

Ideas are like heat-seeking missiles. They catch you unawares. When you’re on a roll writing against a deadline in the wee hours; when you’re on caffeine overload or in moments of relaxation; or even *sleeping*, they can get you.

Case in point. One night when I was writing series one of my TV show *Afterlife* I had a vivid dream. I saw Alison (my spirit medium character) carried out of a house by a huge black guy wearing a mask and placed down in the middle of a road under a railway bridge—dead. I woke up thinking, this has got to be the end of series one. I was absolutely convinced of it. But wait a minute. Where was she? Why was she there? Who was the man? Why the mask? Why the train passing? I worked back from that one scene, building up elements throughout the series to take me to the climax. I trusted my instinct because the idea, albeit irrationally, felt *right*.

The other thing, misunderstood by non-writers, is that ideas are work. The spark doesn’t come and everything else lines up behind it like obedient little soldiers. You have hundreds, thousands of ideas if you are a creative person. Then you have to sort the wheat from the chaff. That’s your job.

Film in particular, David Mamet says (in his wonderful book about writing, film, and ideas *Bambi vs Godzilla*) is a *corporation* of Good Ideas. *Jaws* was the product of a great title, the image of a fin, the tune, the underwater camera, the Indianapolis scene, “We’re gonna need a bigger boat” and a million other decisions, acts of chance, mysteries—call them what you will.

In my experience even the “spark” is often not one but *two* ideas that ignite off each other. For instance my story “Indicator” (which appeared in *Crimewave* and subsequently Best British Mysteries) came from thinking of Robert Maxwell’s sons and playing that off a childhood memory involving my father and a car accident, the two “ideas” enabling me to explore how a liar comes to be born.

But what plugs you into a story idea, essentially, is the compulsion to go on a journey. Something beckons. Come this way. And you have to find where it leads. The strange thing is, that journey often is more important than the story or movie you end up with.

Weirdly, I never want to see films I’ve written. By then I’ve moved on. The river has flowed by. I’m a different person. I remember seeing footage of Scott Walker recording his latest album and he said to the technician: “Do you mind if crank up the volume this time, because it’s probably the last time I’ll listen to it.” I know the feeling.

Which idea to give priority to? That’s difficult. I’ve learned to trust that if an idea attracts others like iron filings to a magnet, it’s probably worth pursuing. Others, often great pitches or one-liners, often wither on the vine.

Then there’s the irrational excitement about *new* ideas. One I’m working on now worries me to hell, because it isn’t like anything I’ve written before. It’s a dark crime fantasy: A Coen brothers version of *Taxi Driver* by way of *In Bruges*. Is it commercial? Is it any good? Can I even *write* it? Who knows? But when an idea grabs you it’s the Old Man of the Sea on Sinbad’s back. Now I’m on page 75 and scared and exhilarated in equal measure. But that’s fine.

Because that’s another thing about ideas. The wonderful *privacy* of them. They’re like a black box “flight recorder” you’re carrying round. Nobody knows the contents but you.

Given only a dilettante or a hack chooses his writing projects based on money or fashion, what makes an idea appeal in the first place?

Henry Moore said of his work: “It’s what I’m interested in. I don’t know why and I don’t *want* to know why.” He added that a Jungian analyst had written a book about him, but he was reluctant to read it in case it stopped him sculpting altogether. Some writers have confessed to me a similar fear of self-knowledge, but it’s surely unfounded. There is no final answer to who we are, so why should there be a final answer to what we write?

Which brings me back to “Indicator”.

My father died last year. It made me think how he figured in my work. If at all.

I’d never consciously written about him directly. Then for one of Chris Golden’s anthologies I wrote “Monster Boy”—about, amongst other things, a boy’s relationship with his grandfather via old copies of “Famous Monsters” magazine and *King Kong*. My dad never shared my enthusiasm for monster mags. So maybe it was a massive piece of wishful thinking that we had some common ground. Which we didn’t, as far as books were concerned. The only books he owned were about Margaret Thatcher or famous cricketers.

I felt like a charlatan writing about him and my feelings about his death through invented characters. In reality I never talked to him in that hospital room, not that he could hear me at that stage (I cheat myself into believing). I didn’t acknowledge that I knew he was dying and neither did he. Instead I said in a pathetic *story* the things I couldn’t say then. How despicable is that? But in many ways storytelling is a coward’s art form. We hide in it, those of us who shy away from the rigours and chaos of real life.

I thought too about *The Nature of Enchantment*, a screenplay I wrote a long time ago about an old psychoanalyst emotionally distant from his professional artist daughter.

In that (as-yet-unproduced) script a violent act—the burning of a children’s book—is the catalyst for the narrative. Only years later did I realise it was inspired by one of my dad’s tempers during which, because my brother hadn’t been revising for exams, he burned his collection of football cards. I must have been horrified. Strangely, my brother doesn’t remember the incident at all! So why the hell should I? To the extent I write about it and don’t even *realise* it?

In the final episode of *Afterlife* (series two) I had the sceptic character, Robert Bridge, in a coma hovering between life and death. Watching the episode for the first time, I suddenly realised the person dying before their time was my cousin Geoff—a man cruelly destroyed by alcoholism at age of thirty-five. It was *me* begging to do a deal with Death. It was me, like Alison, who was too late.

“All your stories are about trauma” a therapist friend told me at a dinner party earlier a few months ago. She asked me if I realised. I

said I did now. But sometimes you don't know what your stories are about till long after they take form. (Or, maybe, never.)

I was very taken recently by the epigraph by "Rumi" in Siri Hustvedt's new novel *The Sorrows of an American*: "Don't turn away. Keep looking at the bandaged place. That's where the light enters you." Later Hustvedt puts the following lines in the mouth of one of her characters: "Kirkegaard never recorded what his father's secret was. We may never know about our own father. I've had all kinds of fantasies about it, making up stories in my mind... I've even thought of murder... Pappa would never have stayed silent about a crime, would he?"

So it goes. My woman ghosthunter wrestles with denial. My twin brothers explore ESP in Soviet Russia. My cocky reporter finds himself at the core of the Jack the Ripper story. My paranormal investigator searches for his lost daughter.

Maybe the real question is not *where* do you get your ideas, but *why*?