

ENIGMATIC ENTERTAINMENT

Maynard Sims

www.maynard-sims.com

THE SOUND OF HIS PAST

(In search of the lost anorak)

The young man's eyes scanned the books laid out on the stalls of the street market. He had already collected a pile of them, now wedged firmly under his arm – some books he had been after for ages, new titles by new authors he thought might be worth a look. When he saw the slim grey cloth-bound volume his heart skipped a beat. *The Sound of his Horn*, "Sarban", Peter Davies, the faded lettering on the spine proclaimed. He had read the book as a Sphere paperback with a gaudy, uninviting cover. He never thought he would ever find the hardback version.

He reached out and closed his hand over the spine. He pulled it from the pile and opened it. Inscribed on the endpaper was "To Frank, Regards, JWW". As he read it a man's hand reached out and made a grab for the book.

'Hey,' the young man said. 'I saw it first.'

'I think not,' the man said.

The young man looked up at the man's face. As he stared into the man's eyes he was hit with a jolt of recognition. He felt a tingling in his fingertips and his head started to swim. The man's face drifted out of focus and the young man felt himself falling, tumbling over and over in space, books spinning about his head, pages flapping, dust-wrappers fluttering, creating a kaleidoscope of swirling colour.

He was brought back to reality as the book was snatched from his grasp. Gradually he re-focussed his eyes and looked about him. The rank of market stalls had gone to be replaced by a few rows of battered books, placed on the pavement in no particular order. The old man who ran the book market had gone. The person who was now overseeing the remnants of what had once been a London institution sat in the open back of a blue Ford Transit, smoking a cigarette. His face was familiar and the young man realised with a shock that it was the stallholder's son now running the much-diminished show.

'You look like you've seen a ghost,' said the man who had snatched the "Sarban" book from him.

'I don't understand,' the young man said, then for the first time noticed the cars that were passing by. The unfamiliar makes, the futuristic designs. His jaw dropped open.

'Welcome to the year 2014,' the man said with a smile.

'Rubbish,' the young man said. 'It's 1976. July the first, 1976.' But then he looked about him again and knew he was wrong.

'I think you could use a drink.'

The young man looked flustered and confused. 'I have to pay for these first,' he said, indicating the books wedged firmly under his arm.

'You can't afford them,' the man said.

'Rubbish. I've got a pound in my pocket,' the young man said indignantly.

The man smiled indulgently and called to the stallholder. 'How much for these, George?'

'How many has he got?'

The man counted the books quickly. 'Twelve.'

'Twelve quid then.'

The young man took the crumpled one-pound note from his pocket and stared at it forlornly.

'It's okay. Have these on me. Then we'll go to the pub.'

The young man nodded dumbly.

Almost everything about the pub was alien to the young man. From the huge flat TV screen hanging in the corner to the name of the beers on display.

‘What will you have?’ the man asked him.

‘Pint of Red Barrel,’ the young man said distractedly, gazing at the sights inside the pub with awe-struck eyes. He was watching a girl sitting in the corner. She had a stud in the side of her nose and a tattoo on her shoulder. She noticed his attention and stared back at him incuriously. He averted his eyes, focussing instead on the flashing lights of a strange looking machine in the corner. It was only after he had studied it for a while that he realised it was a type of one-armed bandit. He shook his head in disbelief.

The man was speaking to him. ‘...I said they don’t do Red Barrel anymore. Will any bitter do?’

‘Yeah, fine,’ he said, barely able to comprehend that Watney’s Red Barrel was now a thing of the past.

Once the beers were bought they settled themselves at a table in the corner.

‘Right,’ the older man said. ‘Let’s have a look at your horde,’ and picked up a slim book with dark brown cover. ‘*The Rats*, James Herbert,’ he said neutrally.

‘Yeah, well, it’s *horror* isn’t it? I know he’s a new writer and he’s come in for a lot of stick, but I really fancied reading this one. It’s the same with this guy.’ The young man pulled a book from the pile and held it out. ‘A friend of mine said he’s going to be huge one day. Can’t see it myself, but I read one of his called *Salem’s Lot* and enjoyed it, so I thought I’d give this one a try.’

‘I don’t think you’ll be disappointed, though you may be in some his later books. As for Herbert, he’s now the best selling horror writer in the country... actually one of the best selling writers full stop. *The Rats* is a modern classic, and people study its sociological subtext for their university courses. And by the way, he’s sadly passed away now, far too young.’

The young man looked stunned.

‘Don’t look so surprised. Stephen King is now incredibly famous. They make films of his work. They started with that one there, *Carrie*. And you would do well to hang onto those two books. At their peak on the second-hand market you could sell them and buy yourself a week’s holiday in the Bahamas.’ He took a long pull on his beer. ‘Now this one,’ he said, pointing to a book supporting the weight of the others. ‘This one will always be a classic,’ He pulled the book from the bottom of the pile and ran his hands lovingly over the faded red cloth. ‘Have you read William Hope Hodgson before?’

‘I read *The House on the Borderland*. Those are short stories, aren’t they?’

‘*Men of The Deep Waters*. Yes, indeed they are. And you must treasure this book. It’s very scarce and the stories in there are wonderful; very much of a time sadly long forgotten. Tell me, do you know what book radar is?’

‘Book radar?’

‘It’s a term used by a book dealer friend of mine. It’s the ability to know when there is a desirable book about. One can sense it. I go to auctions a lot, and I can look at a tea chest of books, and I can tell more often than not when it contains a book I want. It’s not infallible of course, but it works more times than it doesn’t.’

The young man was nodding. ‘I remember last year I was out for the day with my aunt and uncle and we were driving through Norfolk. We were passing through a small village, Yoxford, I think it was, and I noticed a small bookshop. It looked very run down, almost derelict, but I made them stop the car so I could have a look inside. I had a gut feeling that there was something I would want. Charles Birkin’s *Devil’s Spawn*, what a find! Phillip Allan, 1936, and in such good condition. I only paid ten pence for it.’

‘There you are, you see. Book Radar.’

‘I put it down to luck.’

The older man smiled. ‘Do you buy books through dealers?’

‘Used to, sometimes. Fantasy Centre in London, G. Ken Chapman in Kent.’

‘Vernon Lay in Whetstone?’

‘Yes, the young man said excitedly. I’ve only just discovered him. He’s got some great stuff.’

‘Dead now, of course, as is Ken Chapman, but in their time they were really useful source. The Fantasy Centre is gone. It’s all Internet now. Cold Tonnage – that’s a good one. Abe Books – search it, you’ll love it. What’s this?’ He took another book from the pile. ‘*The Doll That Ate Its Mother?*’

‘Ramsey Campbell. It’s his first novel. I read *Demons By Daylight* and loved it. Thought I’d give the novel a try. Bit of a find really. Only came out this year.’

‘Of course he’s now regarded as our finest dark fiction story writer. But then I’m not really surprised; Ramsey has ploughed his own unique furrow. His novels aren’t as popular as some lesser writers, but his short stories always hit the mark.’ The older man drained the last of his beer from the glass. ‘Come on; drink up. We can continue this back at my place. I’ll be interested to see what you make of my library.’

The young man smiled and drained his glass.

‘My God!’ the young man said as he walked into the dimly lit room at the back of a 1930’s semi. ‘I’ve died and gone to heaven.’

The room was lined with books, from floor to ceiling. ‘Those EF Benson’s they’re all first editions. And you’ve got *The Smoking Leg* by John Metcalfe. I’ve been after that myself for the last few years.’ He crouched down to scan the books on the bottom shelf. Now some of these names I recognise. Bradbury, Bloch, Joseph Payne Brennan, Henry S. Whitehead, and of course Derleth and Lovecraft. They’re all the Arkham House originals, aren’t they?’

‘They are indeed.’

‘But what about these?’ The young man was almost beside himself with excitement and looking now at a series of books, decorated with fine dust wrappers and bearing titles that had been on his “wants” list for years. ‘Munby, Burrage, Benson, Wakefield. Who on earth are Ash Tree Press?’

‘Another speciality publisher, like Arkham House in a way. They performed an invaluable service to book collectors and serious students of supernatural literature, by bringing these titles back into print.’

Something else had attracted the young man’s attention. It was something that made his heart race faster in his chest. With shaking hands he took the book from the shelf, turning it over and over in his hands, looking at the dust wrapper; a representation of a water mill drawn by an artist called Ionicus. He flipped open the book and looked at the contents. ‘But we’ve only just written...’

The older man took the book from him gently, closed it and set it back on the shelf. ‘You weren’t meant to see that.’

‘What was the title again? *Shadows At...*’

‘Enough. Look at some of the other books in the collection. There’s Hodgson, James, Vivian Meik... now there’s a name from the past. Jasper John, Amyas Northcote, RH Malden, LTC Rolt.’

‘You haven’t got *Carrie...* or *The Rats*,’ the young man said critically.

‘No you’re right, I haven’t. I used to have periodic moments of madness, when I would cull the collection. *Carrie* ended up at Enfield Town Market. Got fifty pence for it, I seem to recall. *The Rats*? Well that’s a long story, and involves a girl I used to love and a holiday she desperately wanted to go on. I’ll say no more.’

‘And do you have “Sarban”?’

‘Oh yes, I have “Sarban”. *Ringstones*, *The Doll Maker*, and of course *The Sound Of His Horn*.’

‘I’ve just written to him, actually,’ the young man said. ‘His real name is John W. Wall. I wrote care of his bank to ask him whether he would mind me writing an article about him for the British Fantasy Society.’

‘He was a very private man. He’d give you short shrift I’m afraid. Look, there they are.’

The young man reached up to the top shelf and pulled a slim grey cloth-bound book from the shelf, opened it and read the inscription on the end paper “To Frank...”, ‘But that’s impossible...’ Then his vision clouded and he was falling, back through time, back through a thousand collected books, a thousand dusty memories.

‘Do you want those books, son, only I’m about to close up.’

The young man blinked and looked around at George, the elderly grey haired proprietor of Farrington Road book market, then he looked down at the book in his hands: the first edition of “Sarban’s” *The Sound of His Horn*. He flipped it open and on the endpaper was inscribed “To Frank, Regards, JWW.”

‘How many you got? Twelve. That’s sixty pee.’”

In another place and another time a portly middle-aged man pulled a book from one of the many shelves in his library. He turned the book over and over in his hands, studying the ionicus illustration of the water mill in the minutest detail. It was a good many years since he had done that. With a rueful smile he slipped it back on the shelf and pondered lost innocence.