

## ENIGMATIC ENTERTAINMENT

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### A DIP INTO MEMORY'S BUCKET OF WHELKS

So history is all in the past? Traditions are venerable crustaceans sheltering within their shells for fear of modern world scoffing? Nonsense! We live and read history daily, in our books, on the Internet and newspapers and in our ordinary lives. We create traditions each time we find a new writer we like and who becomes elevated to those who are admired by more than a couple of readers.

Any time we read a Wakefield or a Benson we are picking the flesh from the shell of history. Each time an Ash Tree or an independent publishes a “forgotten” writer of the genre they are helping build the traditions that sustain the genre.

People who scorn the past generations of writers and dismiss their work as dated and irrelevant are missing the point completely. There is no finer literary tapestry than that woven by the crafts-people of years gone by. The stories they unfolded give the foundations to the master builders of today who can plunder ever-richer seams of ideas because of the solid footings left for them.

As a youngster growing up in the exciting 60's and 70's there was a huge shell of books scuttling crab-like around in the myriad of pools that were the bookshops and markets of the day. The Pan series of horror books were a staple diet for the budding reader. It was the Hitchcock “edited” books that first caught some people's eye, with their purple and black covers promising thunderstorms of terror. They were of course frowned on by parents brought up with something slightly more genteel – but then parental disapproval only added to the pre-punk attitude of rebellion that was prevalent in those heady days of spin before spin and hype before hype.

The slower paced stories that were represented by the Fontana ghost series and the books by James, and others, that were added to the ever-growing collection on top of the wardrobe were almost reverentially approached as though they were somehow more literary than their more lurid cousins. They seemed part of history whereas the stories of blunt cutting and thrusting and the Birkins were now and happening.

That is until the novels began to appear. The Exorcist, Carrie, Hell House, Burnt Offerings, Mephisto waltz, Rosemary's Baby – all added to the burgeoning atmosphere of a rich vein of fictional supernatural talent and range of ideas that could not fail to inspire eager young writers. Yes, a woman was physically sick at a screening of The Exorcist we saw in London. We know someone who had four versions of the pirate video, as well as the handsome official issue. We do still have the album, long playing vinyl, of the Mephisto Waltz by Liszt. We can remember the evening, the seats, and the circumstances in which we saw the Hell House film.

So keen were we to add to the size of our collection that we began to blur the edges of what we termed supernatural. We found fantasy creeping in, the odd borderline SF, and some thrillers that had a particularly enticing blurb. Then we purged the books, the magazines – Weird Tales, Famous Monsters, and so many more – and concentrated on the ones we felt added to the type of stories we wanted to write. Then of course, as we had no real appreciation at that time of the history or traditions of the genre we were trying to write in, we found we were blurring the edges of what we were writing. After a while we found we quite liked that, and like many writers today we found we were creating our own very small slice of history and creating our own blend of traditions. We did it by using our appreciation of the classical standards of technical skill with a modern freedom that gives free rein to expression when needed.

And then there were the anthologies that grew like urchins on the bookshelves, swaying and enticing as each new publication filtered through. Haining, Singer, Dalby, Derleth, and of course Hugh Lamb. Mixtures of new writers and reprinted classics, themed and open anthologies; a true melting pot of history and today, of tradition and innovation.

Today the market is as alive and as dead as you want to believe. There isn't the proliferation of anthologies that there once were from the major publishers, but in their place are the marvellously inventive creations from the independent press; a case of artists making their own market to fill the vacuum. There are novels published with confident regularity from majors and small presses alike, not to mention the self-publishing tidal wave. There are the reprinted classics of yesteryear from the marvellous specialist presses that bring unobtainable books to our table like never before. Some professional looking outfits are bringing out even single author collections, those beasts considered untameable by some big publishers.

The outlets have changed though. Now one can be on the mailing lists of one or two excellent specialists; receive the catalogues of four or five first class booksellers; scan the Internet for websites, or Amazon, even order via credit card online – whatever next. There are still a few quality bookshops. There are still the market stalls that occasionally allow a treasure to pop up as sure as if it had been thrown up by a tidal wave from a restless sea.

Then, twenty, thirty years ago it seems, there were a myriad of sources. A day's trip to London would yield dusty bookshops along Charing Cross Road, Dark They Were, Hatchards, Foyles, all worth a visit. Lunch in the churchyard along Regent Street, then on to the markets at Berwick Street, Leather Lane, before venturing back to the cinema bookshop near Tottenham Court Road. Carrier bags full to the brim with hardbacks, paperbacks and magazines. The Saturday market in Enfield Town Market Square was a shipwrecked oasis in a desert with its damp boxes of books picked over by wide-eyed beachcombers all looking for the next rarity.

Now the bookshelves are an eclectic mix of history and tradition. The old books rub spines with the new, the classical writers with the modern. *Uncanny Stories* by May Sinclair next to the Terry Lamsley; Arkham House's Lovecraft books leaning against *A Century Of Ghost Stories*; R L Stine tangoing with Marjorie Bowen; Ligotti arm in arm with *Dracula*. *Samhain* swims with *Akham House*.

Let history live, and traditions breathe. There is room at the top table for both of them. Room also, if we squeeze our chairs together, for all manner of modern ideals and theories to expound and add, layer upon rich layer, yet more ripples of richness to the supernatural fiction genre.