

Interview for Loop - Enfield

- 1. You both grew up in Enfield and knew each other but didn't become friends until you were around 18. Tell me about the night you met at the Crown & Horseshoes pub and started talking.**

MS – I was born in New Cross and moved to Enfield when I was 4. I went to George Spicer Primary and Ambrose Fleming Grammar, leaving after A Levels. Len went to Ambrose too. I regularly visit Enfield now; my parents are both in the crematorium, and I like to show my wife and daughter my old 'haunts'. We used to hang out with a crowd of boys and girls and The Crown and Horseshoes at the end of Gentleman's was a favourite pub. One night it got late and we realised we were the last two of our crowd left. We had been talking together on and off all night, which was unusual for us. Then we realised we had lots more to say and so we went walking the streets. At around 3 in the morning we decided it was time to quit but we've been talking pretty much ever since.

LM: I was born and brought up in Enfield. We went to the same school but were never really in the same circles. Once we'd left school we got to know each other through mutual friends. Once we got to know each other it became apparent that we had similar literary interests; namely horror. From then on it was a progression – first reading the same kind of stuff, to deciding we wanted to write it. My first efforts were pretty poor, and a kind of friendly rivalry sprang up, each of us writing, trying to out do the other. I wouldn't say there was a specific night when we suddenly decided we wanted to become writers, but looking back now it seems almost inevitable that we did.

- 2. What inspired you to become authors? Had either of you thought about a career as a writer when you were younger?**

LM: It really was through reading, first horror, but more specifically, ghost stories. The thrill of reading authors like H P Lovecraft, M R James and Edgar Allan Poe, discovering these literary giants at an early age, was immense. That was where the seed was planted. I certainly never had any aspirations to become a writer. A footballer, yes; a rock star, yes. But I never saw myself sitting in front of a typewriter writing stories.

MS – I didn't enjoy secondary school but I did enjoy writing essays in English Lit. I did vaguely think I would be a teacher and write part time, without really knowing what was involved. Instead I joined a bank and am still there after 36 years. I had begun to read short stories as a teenager, most of which were supernatural, so when Len produced a short story, out of the blue, it felt natural to try to replicate what he'd done. I had 2 good English teachers, a Mr Deveson in primary and a Mr Mandelson at secondary both of whom inspired me. But it was Len's first story that got me started.

- 3. How did you get started?**

LM: I just picked up a pen and started to write my first story. It was as much of a surprise to me as it was to those close to me. It was even more of a surprise when I finished it and started writing another one.

MS – As above, with a short story in reply to Len. Then he did another, and so did I, and we carried on for the next couple of years. We sent an early ghost story to a paying magazine, London Mystery, and it was accepted and we got paid. We then sent a story to Hugh Lamb, one of the top anthologists of the time, and he accepted that one too.

4. Describe your books in 5 words:

MS – people centred fun supernatural thrillers

LM: Character-driven, page-turning, scary, human.

5. What is it about horror stories and the supernatural that you enjoy writing about?

LM: There is a certain freedom in creating a world that, whilst it is based in reality, had certain fantastical elements about it. It lets your characters go to places they might never go in a mainstream novel. We have written in the mainstream, also in the crime and thriller genres and each brings its own set of disciplines, but when writing about the supernatural you can really let the imagination take flight.

MS – I'm a natural cynic and although an eternal optimist I will always see the discarded tin can floating in the river, or the plastic bag and rubbish in the field of wheat. Not that I see the dark side of everything but my sense of realism is over heated so I guess to compensate I use my imagination to turn that into entertainment.

6. How did you both feel when your first novel, Shelter, came out last year?

LM: That the previous thirty years hadn't been wasted. Years of collecting rejection slips and writing stories and novels that didn't work for one reason or another, suddenly faded away. It was like a rebirth.

MS – Like the previous 30 years had all been worth the effort. It was a great thrill to be published in the mainstream press, a real step up from our independent press collections. We got more feedback from readers and reviewers from Shelter than all our others put together. It made us realise that novels were our way forwards. From writing it to it being published was over four years.

7. Is getting published the ultimate achievement for an author?

LM: Writing good fiction is the ultimate achievement. Getting it published is acceptance, and confirmation that you are on the right track. And it's also a thrill to know that other people are going to read your work.

MS – initially it is but then it becomes getting well thought of. Then it becomes wanting to be recognised as one of the best. Then it becomes wanting to do it full time. Always wanting the next step.

8. Demon Eyes is out in December. Tell me a bit about this. For example, where do you get the ideas for your stories?

LM: Demon Eyes started with a single sentence and with no idea where that sentence would take us. So often stories start like that; a sentence, sometimes even just a word. Our story The Bassinet was one of the types. There is no hard and fast rule, though I am a firm believer in the power of the sub-conscious. I think a lot of the creative process is done in this way. I can open my laptop without a clear thought in my head and half an hour later look down on the two or three pages that have seeming come from "nowhere".

MS – Like Shelter, Demon Eyes is about a mythical race of creatures we have created but it is a much more focussed and edgy book. The theme is about power over people and the creatures are

more or less sexual vampires. Ideas come from the imagination but they have to be fed by things that have happened to us, although with a creative spin.

We have a free pdf that is available as a CDRom or email attachment that has over 35 stories, over 250,000 words of fiction and celebrates Demon Eyes coming out. Anyone can have a copy of Ghostly Voices and Demon Eyes from www.maynard-sims.com

This is the cover blurb from the publishers –

“ Emma had just started her new job as personal assistant to Alex Keltner, the charismatic and powerful head of Keltner Industries. So when he asked her to attend a party he was throwing that weekend at his secluded estate, she knew better than to refuse. It would be her first party amid the extremely wealthy and powerful elite.

It will be a party she will never forget - if she survives. At first it will be simply odd. Mysterious warnings. Strange, seductive guests. An atmosphere of seduction and sexuality. Video cameras in the rooms. But as the weekend progresses, Emma will slowly learn the true nature of the guests and her mysterious host and the real, grotesque purpose of the party.

\$7.99 US / \$9.99 CAN / £5.99 UK / \$14.95 AUS www.dorchesterpub.com “

9. Tell me about the differences in writing short stories and collections as opposed to novels? How do you write collectively when writing novels? What's the process?

MS – totally different. You can't write short stories, progress through novellas and then naturally write novels. Novels are so different from short fiction that we have had to learn how to write all over again.

With novels one wrote Shelter and the other re-structured and re-wrote. With Demon Eyes one wrote and the other merely tidied up. With the third novel, just delivered to the publishers, one of us had the initial idea, wrote about 15000 words and got stuck. The other one took over and wrote about 50,000 got stuck and then the other wrote the remaining 35,000 words and re-structured. Sort of full circle.

So they are all different. With the fourth I expect one to write it all and the other just have to tidy. Because the non-writing one on that will be writing a crime thriller we have drafted out.

LM: Writing short stories is a much stricter discipline. The fundamental is the same- you are telling a story, but whereas in a novel you can pick up threads and themes and run with them, with short stories you have to stay focussed and not waste a word. We have been writing together so long now that in novels, our writing styles are indistinguishable.

10. Your anthology, Strange Tales, won the World Fantasy Award 2004. What do you think made this collection so successful/popular?

MS / LM – It wasn't our anthology. We just had a story in there. We met the other authors at a celebration and clearly all were passionate about their work. The editors, who run Tartarus Press, did a great job. It was quite a daring collection of stories, well thought out and edited.

11. Which authors are your favourites? Who are your influences?

LM: I'd have to say Jack Higgins for his economy of words and the page-turning effect of them, Graham Masterton, because he always delivers a scary and highly readable book, James Patterson for his pacing, and the late Keith Roberts for his beautiful prose.

MS – Ed McBain, Mark Billingham, Peter Robinson, Robert Goddard, Henning Mankel in crime. Supernatural short stories, H R Wakefield, E F Benson. Influences were really the anthologies I used to read as a late teenager; Pan Horror, Fontana Ghost, and some wonderful old ghost story anthologies we used to pick up on Enfield market.

12. Any advice for budding authors out there?

MS – be very patient. You will only sell when you are good and that takes time. Not as long as we've taken admittedly but you need to be resilient when the rejections come in, and they will. Know the market you want to sell in. Know the subject you want to write about. If a genre stick to it and don't be diverted by books you read and want to write them. Have faith in what you write and stick at it. Write every day if you can. 500 words a day is better than none.

LM: Read, and then read some more. And it's not enough just to read a novel and enjoy it. Analyse what you are reading and try to work out if the author has achieved what they set out to achieve, and if not, why not? And if they have, try to figure out why you enjoyed it so much.

13. Hardest part of being a writer? Best part?

LM: The hardest part – getting over the fact that every time you start a new book it's like it's the first time you've ever written. The blank page is a daunting sight. -The best part – finishing a story or novel and knowing that you really couldn't have written it any better. Seeing your name in print for the first time is pretty good too.

MS – rejection is hard. The actual time and effort it takes to finish a novel. Those moments when nothing works and a scene or a chapter gets stuck. The elation when a scene works. When the problem you've been chewing over is suddenly solved and the next few chapters pop into your head. The acceptances, the kind reviews. Losing yourself in the actual process of writing.

14. In your opinion what makes a writer successful?

MS / LM – Passion in what they do. Belief in what they write about. It might be a horror or a crime novel but they have the belief to make it the best work they can possibly write. Have integrity and respect for what you write and make it the best you can. Talent, a love of language, an ability to tell a story and tell it well, and a huge amount of luck. There are a lot of writers out there with immense amounts of talent who have never broken through.

15. What scares you?

LM: The thought of losing my faculties: heights: drowning: being blown up on the tube on the way to work... the list goes on.

MS – The world. My daughter's future in it. Spiders. Not being loved. Having a day left and no one to spend it with and nothing interesting to do with it.