

## For Love Of Darkness

### An Interview with Mick Sims and Len Maynard

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Mick Sims and Len Maynard are a voice to be reckoned with in the horror field. Authors of superlative supernatural fiction, columnists, and critics, the long-time duo's accomplishments span like a bridge between the genre's past and future. Clearly devoted to macabre writing, Maynard and Sims often combine the essence of traditional supernatural fiction with contemporary characters and situations. *Shadows At Midnight*, their first collection, was published in 1979, and reprinted in 1999. A second collection, *Echos Of Darkness* was released by *Sarob Press* in May, 2000. Balancing full time jobs, a family life, and penning various short stories and commentaries, the two formed *Enigmatic Press* in 1998. A publishing imprint specializing in supernatural fiction that combined traditional subject matter with contemporary sensibility, *Enigmatic Press* gained a deserved reputation as an outlet for both new talent, and as a much needed preserver of macabre tradition. Publishing the highly praised anthology *Enigmatic Tales*, the partners soon expanded to include *Enigmatic Variations*, a series of single author collections and novellas, and *Enigmatic Electronic*, an online anthology. In August 2000, the childhood friends announced that *Enigmatic Press* was being suspended. Busy with forthcoming projects, both authors agreed to speak about the demise of their publishing imprint, the current state of supernatural horror, and the workings of the small press.

#### WS:

In August, you released an announcement that Enigmatic Press was being put on hiatus due, in part, to a lack of funding from the Eastern Arts Board. Why do you think that the board stopped supporting your venture? Might it reflect a negative attitude towards supernatural fiction and the small press?

#### S&M:

*It might, but it's not for us to say. They didn't deny that when we put the exact same point to them. We were grateful they supported us for the one year that they did. It enabled us to make excellent progress. The board do a lot of good and help a lot of diverse projects.*

*Unfortunately they didn't think Enigmatic Tales was worth supporting any longer. They obviously had their reasons, but you'd have to ask them whether it reflects on their attitude to the genre as a whole. We obviously spoke with them about their decision and their attitude was rather more bureaucratically based than artistically sensitive.*

**WS:**

Were there other personal or professional reasons for discontinuing operations? If so, could you share them with us?

**S&M:**

*The reason we suspended operations when we did was that without the EAB funding, we simply couldn't continue at the level we were, without financing a large percentage ourselves. Had the funding continued then we intended to expand and turn ET into a paying market. Broadly speaking Tales at 160/180 pages cost \$1300 to produce each quarter. Income from subscriptions and distributed sales was around \$900 so the Arts monies bridged the gap. Without it we couldn't afford to keep going.*

*The reality of running a small press is very different from how it is perceived. We had no idea at the outset just how much time it demands to do the thing properly. It amazed us how many submissions we got - a vast number each day. Of course, everything we received we read, and then responses were sent out. There was the publicity to deal with, distributors to find and keep informed, artists to commission; there's designing, typesetting and proofing. And then of course there was Enigmatic Electronic, Novellas and Variations, the production of which was another major consumer of our time. All of which meant we were getting less and less time to spend with our families and with our own writing projects.*

*But it wasn't our intention to suspend operations when we did. Our schedules were full until the end of 2001, and, while we were actively closed to submissions, we were in the process of planning new projects. The only reasons we closed to submissions in April was because we had so many publications scheduled, all of which has had to be cancelled.*

*We were spending 30 hours each a week on Enigmatic. Add that to our full time jobs which see us rise at 6am and not get home until after 6pm, plus family life, and our wish to write Maynard & Sims fiction and essays and you can appreciate that what was essentially a hobby to start with quickly became a full time business - but one we had to manage in our "spare" time!*

**W.S:**

What prompted you to begin publishing Enigmatic Tales? What were your major motivations? Were they the same reasons you began Enigmatic Variations and Enigmatic Electronic?

**S&M:**

*We started Enigmatic Press as a non-profit organization, feeling that we did not wish to benefit financially from the desire of writers to see themselves in print. It was our way of giving something back to the genre that we had been a part of for thirty years.*

*We both cut our teeth reading the anthologies around in the late sixties, early seventies - the Pan Horror series, the Fontana Ghost books. What we really wanted to do when we started was to present a regular series of books along those lines. Of course our first issue was rather more 'magazine' in style, but it took a while for the name to be known and for submissions to start flooding in. Once we knew we had the stories, the magazine quickly became a quarterly anthology.*

*Enigmatic Novellas and, later, Variations came about because we were getting a number of long stories in which would have taken up too much space in Tales, as well as multiple submissions of fine stories from single authors that deserved to be read as a whole. We wanted to give the readers, and the writers for that matter, the widest platform possible. The reason we published our story Moths as the first in the series, was to see if there was a market out there for the longer stories. We were encouraged by the response.*

*Enigmatic Electronic was something else again. The Internet has altered all our lives, whether we are aware of it or not. We felt EP had to have a presence out there. It also gave us an opportunity to publish stories that, while brilliant, were not quite right for ET, either in style or content. With the full publishing schedule we had we were able to feel we were offering something for everyone.*

*One of our major considerations was a desire to be a platform for new talent. We wanted to provide a forum for debut writers to be published and in that we think we succeeded pretty well. With the spread of stories we published we were able to let new writers cut their teeth in as good looking a forum as possible.*

*We really wanted to publish stories that we liked to read because we didn't think there were that many markets for this type of modern but traditionally based fiction*

**W.S.:**

You mention the apparent shortage of markets for "modern but traditionally based" supernatural fiction in the publishing community. Do

you feel this shortage of markets is due to a current lack of interest in supernatural content and writing styles, or might it instead be attributed to the failure of publishers to acknowledge or cater to the audiences who 'do' crave more formalized, atmospheric macabre fiction?

**S&M:**

*Definitely the latter. The argument seems to be that the market for traditionally based supernatural fiction is a small one, which is why it is best catered for by the small press. That ignores the fact that until a major publisher is brave enough to market such a book, to open up potential sales to the general reading public, the size of the market hasn't been tested. The reading habits of people are vastly different from say ten years ago, yet the majors seem to be basing their opinion of sale ability of certain genres on old experiences. There doesn't seem to be a lack of interest in supernatural content; just look at the recent spate of movies that succeeded. There is always an interest in ghosts and the supernatural amongst the whole spectrum of society. The trick for a publisher is to tap into that with the right marketing to promote worthy books. Too many publishers allowed violence and sex to dominate their titles in the last rush of publishing, so that horror as a genre was able to perpetuate the myth of it being less than important as a literary outlet and a rather juvenile pastime to read and write such material.*

**W.S. :**

Several contemporary critics and authors wave their shiny red flags and predict the demise of supernatural horror fiction (which people have been doing for decades). Would you say that supernatural and occult themes still have the ability to speak to something deep within us as a species, or has the world of computer modem and science diminished our ability to be frightened of (and enjoy) shadows and nuances of the unknown?

**S&M:**

*No to the last part of the question, and yes to the first half. More so than ever the quest for answers, for the 'why are we here?' type discussions, are involving more and more people. As we enter this new century there are still so many things about our everyday life, our very existence, that we do not know. Scientists come up with DNA answers for all kinds of issues daily it seems, and yet the basic human condition continues as a puzzle to us all.*

*Perhaps because so many key genes are being isolated, and so many human attributes are being reduced to samples under a microscope, there is an even*

*deeper need to shield ourselves with beliefs and hopes that go far deeper into our sub-conscious. The feeling one might get standing in a field, at night, under a starry sky, with only an owl disturbing the silence, cannot be explained with test tubes, and the desire to read and enjoy supernatural fiction does possess the ability to probe into the deeper part of us. The modern technology has enhanced rather than diminished the experience. With computers certainly the writing part is so much easier, and with the reading as well. It is now possible to enjoy not only films but books online.*

**W.S:**

Enigmatic Tales appeared to harbor a special fondness for including traditional supernatural stories and the works of more obscure, forgotten authors alongside fresh talents. How important is preserving and promoting a sense of tradition in this genre, or for that matter, Literature in general?

**S&M:**

*We think it is very important. We entered into a debate once with an eminent author who argued that stories from, say, a century ago should be judged by modern day standards and only if they are as technically sound and as relevant today as current fiction could they be considered valid. We don't agree with that. We think one should allow the author of a long ago written story to be forgiven if their writing is a little more stylized than current taste, and if their themes are now familiar to us. Neither issue was the case when the story was written. We think it vital that influences are acknowledged and the writers who pioneered what we are able to read and write today are preserved. The traditions of the genre are something we hold very dear to our hearts. Our column on *At The Worlds End* [www.markchadbourn.com](http://www.markchadbourn.com) is called *History and Traditions* and that is not by accident. Speaking with lots of writers, editors and publishers as we do they all, in the main, have a love of what is loosely termed 'horror' and all have stories to tell about the first book they read and so on.*

**W.S:**

Earlier, you mentioned that you had several projects in the works before suspending operations. Do you plan on pursuing any of these in the near future? Do you have any plans to resurrect Enigmatic Tales magazine?

**S&M:**

*We spent most of the day at the recent British Fantasy Society's Fantasycon being asked about our plans following Enigmatic Tales being suspended. Four different people and organizations that want us either to do joint ventures or to produce work for them have approached us now. We aren't going to rush into anything because the Enigmatic experience was such a special one for us that we don't want to do anything less than that.*

*We have plans in the formative stage for a couple of Enigmatic Press books next year, possibly hardback, and one may possibly be a version of Enigmatic Tales. We had managed to get Enigmatic Tales to the brink of where we wanted it, and ironically the size of the final issue in September 2000 will be almost there.*

*Perhaps we produced too many titles, with Novellas and Variations as well, not to mention Electronic, but we received so much good material we wanted to use it all. We certainly should have increased the price of Enigmatic Tales but then you run the risk of alienating subscribers and other buyers. All the stories and novellas we had scheduled, up to and including September 2001, have been returned, but as and when we begin publishing again we are confident we will have a wonderful reception from writers, who were always so kind and talented with the material they sent to us.*

*We have so much of our own writing to do, and to follow up on, that the time we used on Enigmatic is already being filled. We have a short novel, a collection, and several stories currently out for consideration. We have our two essay columns as well as book reviews. We are underway with a second short supernatural novel and two short crime novels, as well as a number of stories.*

*We are also revising our website, so as you can see, time is at a premium.*

I wish to thank the authors for their time and insights.

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