

Famous Monsters of Filmland

Famous Monsters: Mick and Len, welcome to Famous Monsters of Filmland, it is a real treat and pleasure for me to have you join us for an interview. I must say that Black Cathedral is awesome. The opening chapter where Robert Carter and Sian Davies investigate that small non-descript house was intense. First the ghostly cat and then those beetles, man my skin crawls just thinking about it.

Mick Sims: Thanks. Originally the novel was going to start with the Bennett character running up the hill on the island. Then when we second drafted we realized the story was better starting with Carter and Department 18.

Len Maynard: The scene at the house was the genesis of Department 18. When it was first written there were no plans to incorporate it into a novel, but it was just one of those happy accidents. When we wanted an investigation into what had happened on Kulsay, using Robert Carter as one of the investigative team seemed an obvious choice.

Famous Monsters: As you may have noticed, Famous Monsters of Filmland is now devoting a section to literary monsters to go along with their stable of movie monsters. Mick you mentioned in a comment on the Black Cathedral review that you have been reading Famous Monsters for years. Was Famous Monsters readily available when guys were growing up? And did it have any influence on your love of things that go bump in the night?

Mick Sims: Oh yes, Famous Monsters was on sale here in England. I grew up in London in the 50's and 60's and the horror films that FM was famous for were amongst my favorites. When I was big into collecting books and magazines I had quite a collection of early numbers but sadly all sold on now.

Len Maynard: I was lucky because there was a shop a few streets away that used to regularly stock Famous Monsters, as well as a number of other American magazines and comics. When I was a kid I used to buy the Harvey comics, with Casper the friendly ghost, Spooky and Wendy the witch. I had an interest in horror films since the age of about eight when I'd seen a still from Frankenstein in an old film book and the image of Karloff's monster had scared the hell out of me. So it was a delicious thrill to find Famous Monsters on the racks. It's how I used to spend my pocket money. So yes it was hugely influential.

Famous Monsters: Why horror? Was there some event in your childhoods that fed your love for monsters and scary things or maybe someone who influenced your love of the darker things?

Mick Sims: I had a fairly happy and ordinary childhood. I always enjoyed writing at school, essays and stories. I remember being in the back of my dad's car driving places and making stuff up, usually in my head, as we drove. I liked all kinds of books to read but on a holiday once I picked up an anthology 'edited' by Alfred Hitchcock and it was so different from what I'd seen before that I was hooked. Then gradually I discovered ghost stories and I was away. I was a very shy and uncertain child and lived most of the time in my head. Writing gave me a voice I guess.

Len Maynard: See the answer to the last question for that one. But there was one other monster that affected me and that was Charles Laughton's Quasimodo. I remember vividly watching that film up until the point where he first reveals himself

to Esmeralda. After that I was hiding behind the couch. That face! Even today I can't watch that film without feeling a sense of disquiet. Brilliant make up for its time.

Famous Monsters: When did you know you wanted to be writers and what or who influenced you the most in choosing this particular profession?

Mick Sims: For me it was early on but without any direction. Then Len wrote a story, and we chatted about it. I tried one, and we picked it apart. Then we began to rival each other and try to outdo the other. Eventually we began to write as one and the double act was formed. Lack of confidence in my own ability has always stopped me going at it harder than I have.

Len Maynard: I was reading a lot of inferior horror and decided I could do better myself. The arrogance of the twenty year old me astonishes me even now. Obviously I couldn't do better myself and it took me a number of years until I had written anything remotely publishable. But as well as the bad stuff I was reading I was also reading Bloch, Bradbury, Matheson and other top class writers, and while I don't think they particularly influenced my writing style, they certainly gave me something to aspire to.

Famous Monsters: You have known each for most of your lives and have been writing together for quite a while, how did this partnership get started and do you see any end in sight?

Mick Sims: No end only death. Joking. We met at school aged 11 but didn't become friends until we were about 19. Then the mutual writing began and we were hooked. Although we are very different people and have different views and opinions the writing has united us. We realized early on that the friendship was more important than the writing and that has continued.

Len Maynard: Mick mentioned earlier the early rivalry, and while that is long gone there is still a need to blow each other's socks off. When I write something Mick is my primary audience, as well as being my harshest critic – except for myself of course.

Famous Monsters: Do you ever write anything on your own?

Mick Sims: When we started we did it all of the time. Then we combined and there developed a joint style. All the books and stories are written individually and then the other has input. Black Cathedral was half written by one of us. Then the other took over and wrote the other half. You won't see a join because chapters got moved around, our style is now a joint one, and we are too good to let joins show!

Len Maynard: I've attempted stuff on my own from time to time, but it usually flounders. We have become so used to receiving creative input from the other that it would be difficult to write any other way.

Famous Monsters: Can you describe the process of how you work on a project together?

Mick Sims: Stories are written by one and the other usually edits, revises. Sometimes the one who starts can't finish so the end is written by the other. Novels are generally written by one of us. The other revises, as completely as needed. Then the first has a read through to maintain a single voice. Then we read through word

by word line by line sitting with each other so there are no continuity errors, or grammar errors, or repetition or any flaws.

Len Maynard: Occasionally we'll brainstorm an idea, notes will be made and then one or other of us will go away and write it, bringing back for a final polish.

Famous Monsters: Ok, I can't wait any longer I really need to talk about Black Cathedral, which is awesome. I love ghost stories and your take on it is fantastic. There is nothing scarier to me than a haunted house. The first chapter really struck a nerve, especially when that first beetle came out of the wall and Carter had to pull it out of Davies. That was awesome. From what I have read, the book started out a little different from the final product.

Mick Sims: Yes. When the first of us started the book it was with Bennett on Kulsay running away. That scene is still there but later in the book. We thought it was dramatically better for the Carter scene to start the book and get him in right away.

Len Maynard: The beetles in the wall came from a dream. It was a particularly horrific one that left a lasting impression. It doesn't happen very often but when the subconscious spews out an image like that it would be foolish not to use it.

Famous Monsters: I read in a previous interview that Department 18 came about because of Black Cathedral. Now you also have a website dedicated to just them. What lies in the future for these talented people with these strange powers?

Mick Sims: The second Department 18 book is being written, hopefully with a Leisure date of 2010. The Department was just a device to have the second group of people visit Kulsay to investigate. The as the book developed the characters did as well. Leisure liked the idea of a series and many of the reviewers seem to as well.

Len Maynard: When we started writing about Department 18 it was very exciting to build up a cast of characters that could recur in the horror books. One criticism leveled at Department 18 was that because they are recurring characters the reader knows in advance that they will survive any supernatural onslaught thrown at them. But this is not the case. No one is indispensable. If the story moves in such a way that it is necessary for one or more of them to die, they will. No one is safe.

Famous Monsters: You seemed to have taken quite well to the internet. How do you see the internet, digital copies etc. affecting the publishing industry in general and you in particular?

Mick Sims: I don't believe it will ever replace books. We used to spend days when we were younger and collecting books, up in London visiting the old bookshops and buying dozens each time. Then we used to visit Hay On Wye and the bookshops there. We use the Internet all the time for research, and marketing with our websites.

Len Maynard: I love books; the feel and weight of them, the smell of them; just their physical presence. There's no doubt that the digital age will affect how we read things in the future. The way it is now, anyone with a story to tell can do so and publish it on the internet for others to read. While this is not such a bad thing, it does mean that quality will inevitably suffer, and it will make it more difficult for people to decide what and what not to read. At least with a book that has been published there is a certain benchmark of quality. It means someone has invested a

not insubstantial sum of money into a work so others may enjoy it. The danger now is that the publishing industry will end up suffering as much as the music industry. Like all forms of progress the digital age has to be embraced. It's not going to go away.

Famous Monsters: How do you think the publishing industry is doing during these uncertain times and with the proliferation of video games, reality shows and My Space, Facebook etc. What do you think they can do better?

Mick Sims: The modern generation seems to have a quicker response times to things and so a lower concentration level. Somehow books have to adapt to that and some kind of interactivity I guess will have to evolve.

Len Maynard: It all comes down to quality and good marketing. There is still a huge market for books. Publishers are still publishing works by new authors as well as the more established ones. But if the quality isn't there people will stop reading. There is no way a book can be compared with a video games, TV show and film. Film and TV and, to a certain extent, video games are fairly passive. You watch and the images are rolled out for you. A book is truly interactive entertainment. No two people read the same book and have an identical experience. We use our own imagination to conjure up the people and places depicted. This is why films made from books often disappoint, because the images we are seeing on the screen don't tally with the images we conjured up in our heads.

Famous Monsters: This is your third book with Don D'Auria and Leisure (Dorchester Publishing) the first two being Shelter and Demon Eyes. How are the folks at Leisure to work with?

Mick Sims: Fantastic. I met Don in Chicago at WHC, 2004 I think. I nervously pitched him the idea for Shelter and he asked to see the first 3 chapters. We wrote them and sent them across. After a long wait he asked for the rest and eventually accepted and published in summer 2006. He asked to see the next book which was Demon Eyes and that came out 2007. Len and I met up with him at WHC in Toronto and he kindly invited us on the Leisure table at the Stokers dinner. We hope to meet up with him again in Brighton for WHC 2010. Don and his team are wonderful to work with.

Len Maynard: No complaints from me. Don's a really nice guy, and what Leisure is doing for the horror genre is commendable.

Famous Monsters: What scares two horror writers?

Mick Sims: The future is fraught with dangers when you're the dad of a bold 15 year old daughter so I worry about her safety and future all the time. Getting old myself and losing my faculties as my dad died of a heart attack aged 59 and my mum had Alzheimer's. I also hate spiders.

Len Maynard: Most of the above. But on a more basic level I can be spooked by a darkened room and an inexplicable noise. But the thing I think that scares me most is the fact that society is becoming desensitized. We are fed images of war and violence on a daily basis by the media, and it has got to the stage where we almost accept it as the norm. Where we see a horrific headline in a newspaper or on the evening news and we just shrug our shoulders. That really frightens me.

Famous Monsters: Who do you like to read? (Not necessarily horror, I personally love reading about the American Revolution and the Salem Witch trials.)

Mick Sims: I read mostly crime, thrillers. I loved Ed McBain and the 87th Precinct. I read James Patterson, Mark Billingham, Peter Robinson, Henning Mankel, Harlan Coben, Robert Goddard, and lots of others.

Len Maynard: Jack Higgins is a perennial favorite. Graham Masterton is always good value for money and I like his other fiction as well as his horror. The problem is that I find it hard to read fiction when I'm writing, so I tend to go more for biographies and reference books. And I'm a magazine junkie – but then I blame Famous Monsters for starting that addiction.

Famous Monsters: Who were/are your biggest influences in writing?

Mick Sims: **Len.** Two English teachers, Mr Deverson when I was 11 and teacher in my sixth form. I always enjoy traditional English ghost stories so they inspire me even now.

Len Maynard: Difficult to say. I'd have to cite Jack Higgins because I leaned a lot from him about pacing a novel. Like Mick I used to be hugely influenced by the early ghost story writers; people like H Russell Wakefield and A.N.L. Munby. But I'm a bit of a sponge. I tend to be influenced by a lot of what I read.

Famous Monsters: What are your three favorite horror books?

Mick Sims: Hell House, Ghost Stories H R Wakefield, and my copy of the 1931 Complete M R James with a signed letter from the author that I bought in 1972 in my lunch hour from work with a lift from Carol Morley who had a car.

Len Maynard: Richard Matheson's Hell House, definitely. I've read it five or six times now. Fevre Dream by George R R Martin. A brilliant take on the vampire tale. The Magic Cottage by James Herbert. It's one of his more understated book, but for some reason it's always worked for me. He's a very underrated as a writer.

Famous Monsters: What are your three favorite horror movies?

Mick Sims: Suspiria, Bad Timing, Black Sunday.

Len Maynard: The Exorcist still chills, The Grudge (US version) worked really well for me, and I think Rosemary's Baby is a classic.

Famous Monsters: What do you guys do when you aren't scaring people (with your writing of course)?

Mick Sims: **I revolve around my daughter and wife who have social lives I interact with. I enjoy reading and gardening. I like Soft Machine music and crime and comedy on the TV.**

Len Maynard: Reading, playing guitar, listening to music, watching films and whole seasons of TV programs back to back. I a sucker for box sets.

Famous Monsters: I think of your three published novels Black Cathedral would make a great movie, in the right hands of course. Do you see any of your books getting the film treatment and how do you feel about your books or books in general being made into movies?

Mick Sims: I would love it. We had a screenwriter interested in Shelter but the deal fell through. At present we are talking with some production companies in USA

about Demon Eyes and Black Cathedral as well as some of our novellas. I would love to get a movie deal and try my hand at the screenplay.

Len Maynard: When I first started writing I had an ambition to win an Oscar, which was a bit dumb because I wasn't writing screenplays. But the dream lives on. I'd love to see a film made from something we'd written. For me the biggest thrill would be seeing my name up there on the screen.

Famous Monsters: After I read Black Cathedral, I went back and read Shelter and Demon Eyes which I thought were both really good. I can definitely see a difference between the three. Do you think your writing and storytelling is improving with each effort?

Mick Sims: I think so. Black Cathedral is definitely the most ambitious and I think the writing is best in there. Demon Eyes is good too but there are parts I would revise now. Shelter is very different to the book we first wrote. I am happy with it now but the process of writing novels after so long with short stories was not an easy one.

Len Maynard: It's been a long haul and as Mick said the transition from writing short stories to writing novels has not been that easy. But it's a progression. I love the space a novel affords you to explore the characters you've created. There's always the need to keep improving and keep evolving, otherwise there would be no point doing it. Writing is hard work and without the desire to top what you have done previously it would be dangerously easy to give it up and take on a less demanding pursuit.

Famous Monsters: What lies in the future for Maynard and Sims? Are there any current projects you can tell us about.

Mick Sims: The second Department 18 book, about 50,000 words in. A crime thriller series where I have 3 books drafted out at about 50,000 each, set in USA with an anti hero. We also have a long horror novella drafted out at about 90,000 words.

Len Maynard: An adventure thriller is the current project. After that is a case of picking one of the many ideas floating around in my head and going with that.

Famous Monsters: Thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview, I for one look forward to reading more of your work, especially Department 18.

Mick Sims: Thank you Peter. I am so happy you enjoy the novels so much and the opportunity to feature in FM is wonderful.

Len Maynard: It's been great. For me I've come full circle. When I was devouring copies of Famous Monsters of Filmland in the late '60's, I never dreamed that one day I would be appearing in it. So thank you for the opportunity. As Mick says, it's wonderful.