

# MIDNIGHT STREET

## Quietly Horrifying : An Interview with L.H.Maynard & M.P.N.Sims

### Interviewed by Tony Mileman

#### Introduction

Described as [writing] 'stories positioned squarely along the Aickman-James axis' by Paul Di Filippo (Asimov's Science Fiction), 'eerie yet charming' by the British Fantasy Society and 'knowing what makes a horror story tick' (Shivers), British authors Len H Maynard (b. 1953) and Mick P. N. Sims (b.1952) have been writing 'classic old-school style themes told with a decidedly modern perspective' (Brian Keene, USA) since 1972. The authors first saw publication with their debut story, 'Curtain Call', which appeared in the 'London Mystery Magazine' (1974). Their second story 'Benjamin's Shadow' featured in Hugh Lamb's 'Taste of Fear' anthology (WH Allen, 1976), and a collection of ten ghost stories followed in 'Shadows at Midnight' (Kimber, 1979). From 1974 to 1984 the authors concentrated on writing stories in the style of the 'early traditional ghost story'. A 'barren period', from 'about 1984' to 1994, followed in which the authors wrote 'numerous stories~ and 'destroyed about eleven novels~ 'without sending much off for possible publication'~ From 1994 onwards, Maynard and Sims focused on submitting once more, had numerous stories published, had six collections published, three novellas, established 'Enigmatic Press' (1998-2000) and edited seven volumes and two annual volumes of the anthology, 'Darkness Rising'. In 2005, their short story, 'Flour White and Spindle Thin'~ appeared in 'The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror' volume 16 (edited by Stephen Jones, 2005). Their debut mass-market novel, 'Shelter', appeared from Leisure Books (Dorchester Publishing) USA in July 2006, with a second novel, 'Demon Eyes', currently being read. The authors live in Hertfordshire 'about 25 miles apart'.

#### 1) Writing background

*How did your friendship and writing partnership develop?*

MS: We met at secondary school in Enfield in 1963/64 but didn't really become friends until we left school. We began talking in a pub about an unsuccessful love affair with a girl of our acquaintance and carried on until the small hours. The writing began shortly afterwards when Len produced a very short story, which I then tried to beat, and a friendly rivalry began. That culminated in our pooling our resources' and Maynard & Sims partnership was born. The friendship has always been more important than the writing.

*Tell us about your development as writers and the journey that led to the debut story 'Curtain Call' appearing in 'The London Mystery Magazine'. What was this story about? How did your writing style, and learning process, evolve to that first publication?*

LM: The very early stuff was awful. Ideas without structure or indeed any quality at all. We read anything we could lay our hands on that was labeled 'horror' and were trying various types of styles to see what we liked. We were hostage to a myriad of styles and didn't really know what we wanted to write. It wasn't until we found the traditional ghost stories that we felt at home at that time. Hence *Curtain Call* is a ghost story as are the stories in *Shadows At Midnight*. *Curtain Call* is set in the English theatre, which is a setting we often use (Our new novella, *Double Act* is for example.) We had really left that style behind by the time *Shadows* was reprinted in 1999, and as *Echoes Of Darkness* and *Incantations* came out we had moved to a modern version of the ghost story, although many were supernatural without any trace of a ghost. The two retrospective collections *Selling Dark Miracles* and *The Secret Geography Of Nightmare* collected all the stories that had been published in the small press in the nineties. Many of which are horror rather than ghost. *Falling Into Heaven* is more diverse, with all the

stories being modern, and the ghost and horror element being very diverse. Our novellas are similar in content to the shorter work.

*What drew you both to horror fiction? What books and stories did you enjoy in your childhood and teens?*

MS: Movies and comics as well as the Pan series of horror books. Len's first book was one of the Pan series, and mine was an Alfred Hitchcock 'edited' anthology. There were so many horror books being published as we were taking an interest in reading and writing that we were drawn to them. Movies were coming out from Spain, Italy as well as US and UK, the videos were being banned, and it was all exciting. School turned Len away from reading but I enjoyed Shakespeare and all the rest.

*Please tell us about the anthology, 'Shadows at Midnight' (1979).*

LM: Ten ghost stories mainly told from the atmosphere of chess playing, port drinking, and bachelor lifestyle men. That wasn't us at all but was our take on the traditional ghost story setting. Some critics said we were trying to imitate M R James but we weren't, as we don't wholly enjoy his stories. We were trying to emulate the writers who tried to imitate James. Some of the stories are short but most are about 5000 words, with a longer novella *Border End* finishing it off. The reprinted Sarob version included two additional stories, a revised *Curtain Call* and a new story. All the original ten stories were rewritten, some quite dramatically.

*You describe the period 1974-1984 as one in which you were both writing ghost stories, and 1984-1994 as a 'barren period' in which 'about eleven novels were destroyed~ yet you were not submitting. Could you tell us about this time in more detail, particularly the unpublished novels (what happened to them?), what you were writing and submitting, and how you kick-started your writing career in the 1990s to your comeback in the 2000s.*

MS: Laziness. No, more than that but generally a lack of focus. In 1974 we were young men without much life experience and so our stories took their voice from what we were reading as much as from anywhere because our lives were still being mapped out. Traditional ghost stories were an inspiration to us, from foggy walks home from the pub by the river, to visits to old churches. We sent Kimber a follow up collection to *Shadows* but there was a lot of experimental stuff in there and they quite naturally wanted more ghosts. We could have had more Kimber books but made the (wrong) decision to be different. We really had many things happen to us from 1984 onwards, with divorces, births, deaths, work pressures, and as we were also struggling to find a new path to follow having made as much of the traditional ghosts as we could, we tried numerous writing projects. There was a mainstream story collection that Penguin liked but we didn't follow up their initial enthusiasm. There were numerous stories

written at lengths of about 9000 words that didn't find a home. Horror was dying at this time and we knew of no small press. The novels included adaptations of some stories from *Shadows*, a mixed genre crime-horror novel, a psychic phenomena book, a US based police procedural, and two crime thrillers set in UK. Five of the drafts survive and will be written. In 1994 we discovered the UK small press. It was a time when our lives had settled a little, and we needed a new challenge. We re-wrote *Shadows*, re-wrote all those long stories we hadn't sent off, stripping them down to small press size of 3000 words or so, and when they were all done we started on the new stuff that became *Echoes*, and later *Incantations*.

LM: At this time we decided to start *Enigmatic Tales*, which spawned *Novellas*, *Variations and Électronic*, and suddenly had no time at all for anything else. When that ended we found ourselves editing *Darkness Rising*, though that was less time consuming. In 2004 the fourth stage of our career began when we realized, and were

advised, that we were spreading ourselves too thinly. Stories, novellas, editing, reviews, we were everywhere and doing everything. We had to concentrate and focus. We decided it should be on novels and that was the right decision. *Shelter being* accepted has proved that and with *Demoneyes* hopefully accepted, the third novel on the way, two more planned out as well as three mystery-suspense novels we are busy but on one thing.

## **2) Literary Influences**

*Which authors have been the most influential on your writing, or whose work you most admire, and why?*

MS: I would say Ed McBain's 87th Precinct novels. Short stories by H R Wakefield, and the so-called M R James followers such as Munby, Caldecott and RoIt. Currently I'm reading and enjoying Peter Robinson and Robert Goddard.

LM: I used to read a lot of post-apocalyptic stuff; Wyndham, John Christopher, and I love *The Furies* by Keith Roberts. These days I read very little fiction, as it tends to detract from my writing. But the writers I admire are Graham Masterton, who nearly always delivers and has great range, and Jack Higgins whose tempo and feel for a story really can't be bettered, but I mainly read a lot of non-fiction.

*What themes and subject matters are you interested in exploring in your horror fiction?*

MS: Definitely the innocent person, or people, being attacked by evil, in whatever guise, through no fault of their own. Sometimes there is a fault, such as a character flaw, that lets the evil have access, but generally it is an innocent act that sets loose the horrors. Some of our stories focus on the flawed character as the embodiment of evil, and often relationships feature as the catalyst.

## **3) On Writing**

*How do you go about collaborating on a short story? How do you work together, especially in the writing of the debut novel?*

LM: When we started one would start a story and the other finish it. Or one would complete a story and the other re-write. Then as our styles became more aligned through the years one would write it completely and the other merely edit. With the novels one of us will write the first-drafts, then it's passed across for the other to edit and revise. Then it's passed back for another draft in order to maintain the 'one voice', and then finally we read through each page sitting together to give as close an edit as we can manage. At all times we brainstorm ideas together.

*What do you think makes a good short story? How do you*

### *evaluate your own stories?*

MS: We published stories we liked, simple as that. It's indefinable why one story is enjoyed and another not, as often it has nothing to do with the quality of the writing. With our own work we've enjoyed criticism from many people over the years, from reviewers, editors and publishers, as well as other writers. We take it on board but ultimately you either believe in your own ability or you don't. We've reached the stage where we think we write well, though we are improving all the time (hopefully!).

*How have your stories changed over the years thematically and stylistically?*

LM: Initially the stories were traditional ghost stories but we haven't written one of those for more than fifteen years. Themes matured as the years progressed, with many of life's trials that we've experienced finding their way into the stories — marriage problems, children, work, the general debris of life. We still write with character as the main driver, allowing the supernatural element to insinuate itself through the plot and letting the structure build the suspense and mystery.

*A number of readers of this interview might be interested in 'writers tips'. For their benefit, I wonder if you could provide some writing advice; for example, how do you go about writing a novel or a short story?*

LM: How we do it may not help, as there are two of us so our way of working may be unique. Decide if you really want to write and it is not just a pleasant ambition because you like reading. Decide what you want to write. Short stories are not the route to novels. They're two very different animals, with different rules and disciplines.

MS: Decide what genre you want to write in. Find an idea, a theme, a story, the hub of what it is you want to say. Then you can explore how you want to tell the story, with which characters, what setting. Some writers have an ending first and work backwards when planning — crime stories fit this way nicely. But whatever you do be passionate about it because it takes a long time to write a novel and you need to be ready to write every day if you can, certainly as much as possible each week, and keep going week after week, with no guarantee that anyone will care about it when it's done.

#### **4) On Horror**

*What makes a really good horror/ghost story?*

MS: Suspension of disbelief, believable characters, atmosphere, tight plotting structure, and a realistic ending.

*Can you name your top 5 horror stories?*

LM/MS: No. Read so many. From early reading it would be the stories that influenced us thirty odd years ago. *Ringing The Changes, I 7th Hole At Duncaster, Mr. George*, many stories by Robert Bloch.

*How do you define horror fiction? Could you give us an example of what you consider to be good horror fiction?*

MS: A balance of gruesome and gentility. The characters have to be established so that we care about them. The horror has to be threatening from the outset, and the suspense of it sustained through the plotting structure. What makes a good book generally is the same question, as horror really has to have the same qualities as any good fiction.

*What was horror fiction like in the 1970s? How have you seen the genre evolve since your first publication? What is the state of current horror fiction here in the UK? The future of horror?*

LM: In UK much more was being published. Then too much got published, the market got saturated with some really awful stuff, the gore factor increased at the expense of story, and

the market died. When it began it was really exciting with novels, collections and anthologies coming out all the time. The first Stephen King novel, *The Exorcist* as novel and film. Now there is a small press but even they are bringing out fewer collections. The top few writers have mainstream deals but newer authors don't get published. In the US naturally it is a bigger market and horror has a louder voice. In the movies horror has remained constant and is currently very popular.

*What do you think of contemporary horror fiction?*

MS: There are some marvelous writers in both mainstream and small press. The mix is wide with the quiet horror seeming as popular as harder edged stories.

## **5) Editing and Publishing**

*Tell us about 'Enigmatic Press' (1998-2000)? What did you set out to achieve? What was it like editing the first seven volumes of the 'Darkness Rising' anthology and the two annual volumes? The highs and lows? What advice would you give to someone wanting to edit their own publication or start their own small-press?*

MS: We were late to discover the small press in UK and what we really wanted to do was give a voice to the many writers out there that loved ghost stories. We tried to be as professional as possible on minimal funding, although the year we had Arts Council backing enabled us to raise the production levels. The huge number of submissions we got staggered us. That was demonstrated with the last *Darkness Rising* book, the 2005 annual anthology, where we received over 450 stories in two months for 20 acceptances. *Darkness Rising* production was too erratic to allow it to continue but the content was great. It was exciting to read and publish the first stories of writers who have now gone on to bigger things. The time demands were far too intensive though, along with the marketing, production, distribution, and costs. If anyone wants to start a small press don't think you can write as well, you won't have the time or energy for both. It was really good though to make contact with so many writers, editors and publishers. The friends we made then have certainly helped our profile and make the business so enjoyable.

## **6) Novels**

*Your mass-market novel, 'Shelter', appeared from Leisure in 2006. Tell us about the novel from conception to publication. How has the book gone down in the USA? Do American readers prefer US or British settings?*

LM: The basic idea for *Shelter* was inspired by our novella *Moths* that led us to create the Verani. Mick went to WHC in Chicago where he pitched the idea to Don D'Auria of Leisure Books. Don liked the book when he read it and had enough faith in it to hold it for an opening in his schedule, which was July 2006. It seems to have gone down well in the US. We have received loads of positive reader feedback, which is great. It was only out two weeks and a leading screenwriter made an offer for the movie rights. From British writers US readers seem to prefer British settings. It's about feeling the voice is right for the characters and situations. And to many Americans, English life is unknown and different.

*Your second novel, 'Demoneyes' is finished and being read, and a third novel is in progress. Could you tell us something about these novels? Are you going to concentrate fully on writing novels now? Are you both full-time writers now?*

MS: Certainly not full time writers yet, but we live in hope, after working for nearly forty years at other jobs. *Demoneyes*, is longer than *Shelter*, and is set in England. It concerns a supernatural species, and as with many of our stories, it deals with innocent people being threatened through no fault of their own by evil. *Black Cathedral* will be the longest yet, again set in the UK, and centers on revenge. We are concentrating on novels, supernatural and mystery-suspense, with an occasional short story if we are asked for one, and possibly some scripts.

7) *What else can we look forward to you in the future? What are you working on now?*

LM: The future is far busier than the past. First off is finishing the third novel, *Black Cathedral*, and then completion of the two novels we have in draft at 90,000 words each. That will take us to five supernatural novels and during that time there will be promo work as well, on *Demon-eyes* hopefully, as well as on *Shelter*. After publication there may be translation rights movie options and other rights to work on. We are working with an agent now so hope we will be kept busy.

MS: Were also working on three mystery-suspense novels that we have drafted at 50,000 words each. One may be the start of a US based police series, and the other two are hopefully the start of a UK based series. A new novella is due out Spring 2007 and several short stories are scheduled for publication.

LM: We have several stories under review, a couple of movie discussions, and we are attending FantasyCon this year and World Horror Convention in Toronto next year. Outside the writing, there are always forum requests, interviews, and other projects to keep us busy. And all of that is outside full time jobs and family life. It never gets dull!

Thanks. Tony, for the interesting interview.  
Len & Mick September 2006

#### Acknowledgements

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#### References

The official Maynard and Sims website: [www.mavnard-sims.com](http://www.mavnard-sims.com)

An up-to-date bibliography of Maynard and Sims can be found at their website:  
[www.mavnard-sims.com/contents/comolete\\_credits.htm](http://www.mavnard-sims.com/contents/comolete_credits.htm)