

Maynard and Sims

interviewed by David Price.

In the space of just three years, the names of LH Maynard and MPN Sims have almost become a byword for quality in the independent press. Their reputation began with a few well-received stories, then burgeoned with the appearance of Enigmatic Press, a project that hit the ground running in March of 1998 with the debut of Enigmatic Tales. Enigmatic Novella's, Enigmatic Variations and Enigmatic Electronic followed. This success story was, unfortunately, cut short when their financial backing was pulled. But this is by no means the end, nor is it the beginning. The Maynard/Sims story goes back many years. Let's hear that story in their own words.

1. DAVID: Your success as a writing partnership began in the early seventies, eventually leading to the release of the original **Shadows at Midnight** collection. Could you tell us a little about how the writing partnership actually started?

MAYNARD/SIMS: We met, at school, when we were eleven, but as we didn't immediately take to each other we were really only aware of one another for the first seven or so years. Around the age of 18 we were part of a larger group who frequented a pub in Enfield and one evening began a conversation, consisting of our favourite topic of the time, girlfriends and broken hearts. At closing time we went for a walk to prolong the conversation and finally went our separate ways home around 3.30.a.m.

The writing was something we were both compelled to do at this early stage. Len wrote a short, about 1000-word story, and showed Mick. Mick did the same and a pattern was built up. We would write horror stories at first, but as our reading expanded so our tastes began to expand as well and we tried ghost stories. Our first professional sale was a story called Curtain Call in 1974 to London Mystery Magazine for £7 – not a bad sale for the time. The story was included, revised, for the Sarob 1999 version of Shadows at Midnight.

That story is actually typical of the way our collaborative style developed. Len had the idea, began it, and Mick finished the story. We did that a lot in those early years. Most of the stories in the Kimber 1979 book were written like that.

We were both in our first marriages at that time, and used writing and the developing writing partnership, and friendship, as an escape from the world. By creating the different worlds of our stories we could live amongst the characters and in the locations for a while. The stories that eventually became the book Shadows At Midnight were all inspired not by M R James as some incorrectly believe, but by the overall mood and atmosphere engendered by the traditions of ghost story telling. The decanters of crusted port, the ongoing chess game, the roaring log fire, the whispering wind outside the window, the old boys' club where the stories are told amongst leather chairs, fine cigars, and wood-panelled walls. We lived in modern houses with modern lives at the time so a good deal of imagination was called for.

2. DAVID: Reading the 'History' section on your website, it is clear that the **Shadows at Midnight** tales we are reading now are very different to the ones that appeared

more than twenty years ago. Apart from restrictions of space, why did you feel that an already successful collection needed such an overhaul?

MAYNARD/SIMS: The stories in *Shadows* are the product of very different men, and therefore writers, than we were in the 1970's. We don't wear flared trousers any more for instance.

After *Shadows* was published we had a few other stories published in magazines and anthologies but we wanted to expand our writing horizons. Kimber asked us for another book and we presented them with one that we thought was better than *Shadows*. It contained some ghost stories, but it also had slipstream stories, borderline mainstream stories and some outright weird stories. Kimber wanted more of the *Shadows* style so they rejected it.

Whether through ego, or naivety, we decided we would plough our own furrow and turned our backs on supernatural short stories. We wrote a book of mainstream stories that Penguin quite liked, but not enough to publish. We then wrote around eleven or twelve novels, mostly horror but a few crime ones as well. None were accepted and most were consigned to the bin long ago.

Around the summer of 1997 we discovered, through such magazines as *Tales Of Grotesque and Arabesque* and *Terror Tales*, the small press field. We were lucky enough to have a few stories accepted and that gave us the confidence to re-write all our older stories. That included the *Shadows* stories, most of which, in our view, needed some revision to make them work better as stories. We were delighted when Robert Morgan of Sarob Press accepted the new book, which of course contained *Curtain Call* and a new story. When the book sold out quickly and was well received our confidence grew even more.

By then of course we were embarking on the Enigmatic experience, as well as writing the stories that became the second collection, *Echoes Of Darkness*. We haven't stopped writing supernatural stories since.

3. DAVID: Given the success of the Sarob collections, do you feel that you are any nearer to turning professional and actually making a living as authors?

MAYNARD/SIMS: That would be marvellous, as the satisfaction of writing a story, or an essay, article, review, is immense. Some writers seem to have turning professional as their goal, in other words earning their living entirely from their writing. We have never had that as an overriding consideration. We have both been in our jobs for more than thirty years and clearly after that length of time income and expenditure commitments become stabilised. It would take a significant deal to enable us to substitute our current salaries for a life of full time writing. Not least of course because we would need to support two families, being a dual authorship.

We try now to sell our stories mainly to paying markets, but everything we write we still write from a love of the craft rather than the payment we might get. And naturally everything we do earn is shared half each; not a problem, just the way it is. We derive more pleasure from writing together than we do writing separately so that compensates. The question suggests that professional status is a goal to aim for. For us it would be nice, but isn't our main driver.

4. DAVID: If, by any chance, you are able to revive the Enigmatic publications, do you see yourselves branching out – in much the same way RazorBlade Press did –

into publishing novels and anthologies (Which, in a way, the last two issues of Enigmatic Tales were)?

MAYNARD/SIMS: The aim of Tales was always to be an anthology and the length and mix of the last two did achieve that. We sold reasonably well because the name was established, but possibly sales might still have happened had we packaged them differently.

RazorBlade has done well, and hopefully will continue to do so. Darren is a good bloke. We liked doing the Novellas and Variations and the natural evolution would have been into novels and full-length collections, as well as establishing Tales as a full anthology. There were some discussions in the pipeline. We were poised for hardbacks as well. Mind you when you read comments such as this from Rosemary Pardoe from her Ghosts And Scholars website it makes one wonder why we bothered.

“Everyone will be sorry to see the magazine (and related booklets) go, as editors Maynard and Sims have published some good fiction, but I'm not the only one with mixed feelings over the reasons for their going. I think a magazine or publishing project should be able to stand on its own or it shouldn't stand at all. I see no reason whatsoever why we have any right to expect to be subsidised, and no truly "independent" publication would want it anyway.”

If anyone truly wanted us to lower our standards, and produce less, they have missed the point completely. There does always seem to be a certain element in the small press who delight in verbally attacking others. That's not to suggest this lady in particular but it is a shame that more positive contributions can't always be achieved.

We certainly hope to revive Enigmatic Press some time in the future, although for the moment we are so busy with our writing we are beginning to wonder how we ever found the time for it.

5. DAVID: The recent publication, F20, which you co-edited with David J.Howe for the last FantasyCon, has been a great success, with most of the stories acknowledged in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror; so there is certainly scope for some form of revival in the future. But for now, lets talk again about your writing. Perhaps the most notable aspect of your tales is the completely normal settings, and the everyday characters you create. For instance, in the opening of **At the End of the Pier**, we have a fairly mundane opening; a man walking through a rundown seaside resort towards an even more rundown theatre. Nothing is really happening, and yet the oppressive atmosphere of the environment creates a sense of foreboding. You clearly feel that the setting is just as important as the characters and story. This is also true of some of the stories you have published. (Paul Finch's **The Devils Of Lakeland**, for instance) Do you feel that horror works better in a completely recognisable environment, rather than a fantastic one?

MAYNARD/SIMS: When house hunting the advice most commonly given is to look for location, location, location. With a supernatural story the advice we would give is atmosphere, atmosphere, atmosphere.

A good story, or plot, alone won't make an enjoyable read. It is important naturally, and you won't get away without one. Characters are of course vital, but without a sense of setting, of mood, then a story will feel flat. It might be technically very good, but it won't have that spark that brings it alive, that makes it linger in the memory after the reading.

That is of course not the same as setting a story in a recognisable environment. Atmosphere and setting are two different things.

We tend to set our stories in a foundation of normality as we find that creates an excellent juxtaposition of effects when the supernatural begins to intrude. If you are reading a story, and know it is a horror or ghost story, there is an automatic edge from the outset if you are reading about normal (whatever that means) people in everyday lives. You are waiting for the odd to occur, the gruesome or unusual to intervene.

Many of our supernatural occurrences are formed from the actions of our characters. No matter how innocent it may be they will by some means invite the supernatural to enter their lives. The formation of three-dimensional characters is vital because that allows the reader to believe in them and their actions, and just as importantly, to care what happens to them.

All this must of course be bound together by a good narrative drive, with plot and story enticing enough to keep the reader turning the page. We find the normal, fairly slow paced, narrative works best, as our stories are all reasonable lengths. If we started off in a weird setting, with a faster pace, the story for us would undoubtedly be shorter. That is not to say we don't write at shorter lengths, or that we always write of normal things.

Take a new story **Names And Faces** that can currently be read at www.horrorfind.com in the Fiction section. The character there is far from normal, and the settings, or some of them, are far from normal.

Or another new story **Beware The Beckoning Stranger** currently at www.feoamante.com/stories This one is more classically formed but the characters, and the supernatural intrusion, are far from standard fare.

When we get ideas for stories, which we tend to do continually – though not all end up as the finished product – the setting, and the sense of atmosphere are generally the things that form in the sub-conscious first.

Taking your first point, about F20, what sort of revival did you have in mind? With F20, as with Enigmatic Tales especially, we wanted to revive the golden era we grew up in when the bookshelves of the local bookshops were overflowing with anthologies and collections. We enjoy novels but the way short stories are ignored by major publishers is a crying shame.

6. DAVID: By revival, the odd one-off or yearly publication, such as the old Pan Books of Horror. As you say, with your own writing careers taking off, starting from scratch again would not be easy. But once you've published, the temptation to start again is always there. These days, one-off anthologies (Hideous Progeny, Nasty Snips & F20) are becoming more common than quarterly magazines, and this – outside of webzines – could be the future of the small press. But you have spoken of the writers you admire (In the At the World's End interview) including such modern writers as Dick Francis and Ed McBain. Could you tell us of some of the films you have enjoyed, past and present?

MAYNARD & SIMS: Back in the early 1970's we belonged to the Gothique Film Society, held once a month at the Holborn Library. It gave us a chance to see some of the old forgotten classics such as Rex Ingram's The Magician, and old Lon Chaney and Boris Karloff films. Wonderful stuff! But the influence of film was felt long before that. When we were growing up, the Sunday Afternoon Film was something of a tradition. It was usually some black and white antique starring Googie Withers or

David Kossoff, but sometimes there would be a gem, like the Laughton version of Hunchback (a very scary image for a six or seven year old).

It would be nice to think that Lugosi's Dracula and the Karloff Frankenstein had an important part to play in our development, but these were really too stylised to have any major impact.

The Legend of Hell House, The Omen and of course The Exorcist have all had a large effect, not only on us, but by their influence on the genre as a whole. They have probably helped shape the modern supernatural tale, as have the films of Mario Bava, Dario Argento (especially Suspiria for us).

One forgets just how much horror was around during the early seventies when we were finding our feet as writers. It was not unusual to travel up to London for the day and see two or maybe three horror film. Pete Walker was turning out a film a year (all awful, but at least he was trying), there was an abundance of material coming across from Spain – The Living Dead of the Manchester Morgue, The Bell from Hell, and all those awful Paul Naschy films. But as bad as some of those films were, they all contributed to the climate of horror that was around at the time and quite honestly we miss them.

We have a collection of about 500 horror films from the nasties to the classics; Italian, Spanish, you name it. The Hammer films were very prominent when we were growing up, but it is probably the more obscure and less polished films that influenced the most. To be honest we rarely watch them now but their influence remains.

They have a similar effect as our collection of 600 or so supernatural books that have a kind of mood control over the writing that cannot be defined.

7. DAVID: A lot of people have been trying their hands at collaboration. Frequently, their styles clash, but some (Crowther/Lovegrove, Lewis/Lockey) flow smoothly. What advice would you have for writers thinking of getting their heads together for the first time?

MAYNARD/SIMS: Ask themselves why they want to bother with such an added discipline when the business of writing is already so difficult.

There does seem to be a lot of people who collaborate at present and unless there is a genuine artistic reason it is something that is never going to be wholly satisfactory. There has to be some compromise with styles, unless the two writers have styles that are so similar that there will be no need for a blending of the mixture. Collaboration requires patience on the part of both writers as one will usually have the idea and the other will then lend their own variations and suggestions to the theme, and both will try to make a whole out of the sum of the parts.

We began so long ago that for us there is no other way. Yet our style of writing has evolved over the years, and certainly over the past three years. Our way of collaborating has also changed dramatically.

As we mentioned, aged around eighteen, nineteen, one of us wrote a story and showed it to the other. Not to be outdone - there was a lot of friendly rivalry in those early days - the process was reversed. And so it went on, until one of us started a story, but couldn't finish it, so the other one did. That became the trend. It was soon clear that the joint work was better than anything we could achieve individually, so we amalgamated. So the decision to write as a partnership was reached quite early on, and was an easy one to make. Sometimes we argued for hours about single words and

sentences, and again if we had a common aim the argument was more constructive and led to a better story being produced.

The joy of our arrangement - now celebrating thirty years of production - is that we both give full rein to our own individualistic artistic creativity but harnessed within a joint structure. When we began all those years ago, the stories were very different in style, with Len sometimes producing a basic horror idea and Mick an arty style piece, neither of which was wholly successful. We offered up our work to the other for criticism but then argued when that criticism was raised. Hours could be spent in fruitless silence and grudging conversation before, very often, a compromise was reached. It was a good decision to write under our joint names. It soon led to a Maynard & Sims style as we were writing with one purpose.

We always give one of the two of us the responsibility of overall control over a story. That means that even if Len begins a story and Mick finishes it, that Len then has the final say over the editing and revising so that the one common voice prevails. This prevents any conflict of voice and with the joint style now very much developed there are never any awkward changes of pace in the stories.

There are no agitations at all now. At the beginning there were teething problems, but no more so than there would have been had we continued to write separately. The joys are innumerable. The writing is an integral part of our friendship, though secondary to it. It enhances our relationship, and allows each of us to reach far higher plains in creativity than if we wrote in isolation.

Nowadays we are much more confident than when we started. Generally now one of us writes a story, shows the other one who edits and revises very little, and then gives it back to the writer. The story is then placed into our current collection listing, sent off for sale, and filed.

It used to be that Len wrote long pieces and Mick short ones. Len was good at page turning action and Mick stylish flourishes. Len was good at character, but wrote slow scenes, Mick was good at description and atmosphere but his scenes were quick ones. As we have developed and matured, our styles have leaned towards each other so that they are now joined at the hip and there are no discernible joins at all.

The partnership has been going for so long now, and gives us so much pleasure, that even though we are both quite capable of writing individually - and effectively that is what we do now - it makes every sense to remain as what has been described as "that two headed beast known as Maynard & Sims."

8. DAVID: And finally, as we have discussed the future, what about life after Enigmatic?

MAYNARD/SIMS: We are far more excited about the future than the past. Our best is yet to come.

We have been so busy since the last Enigmatic Tales rolled out in the post that we can't quite work out how we found time for it. Yet there is still talk of it reviving. We have had several discussions with people who wanted to continue it but either they couldn't commit the time - the workload is phenomenal - or our involvement would have been too demanding. However we are currently in talks with someone in the USA about an option to keep it going in a slightly different format. But more news of that when we've ironed out a few more details.

Our own writing has been very productive this year. With *Shadows At Midnight* selling out quickly we hoped *Echoes Of Darkness* would do well, but were

surprised and delighted at just how well it did do. It sold out within three months and was generally well received.

We have just about enough new material, mostly written this year, for two story collections – one based around a long novella of 33000 words *The Business Of Barbarians*, the other based around a short novel of 41000 words *The Seminar* – and one of the collections is currently being read by a publisher. Once we hear about that one we can begin to think about placing the second.

Moths is coming out from Cosmos Books of USA as a double book with Sarah Singleton's *In The Mirror* next year. Also accepted and just out is a story *The Nice House* in "Bell Book and Beyond", the HWA anthology edited by PD Cacek for the Design Image Group in USA. Another story, *A Victorian Pot Dresser* is coming up in the *Children Of Cthulhu* anthology from Del Rey, again in USA, as is *Killing Anonymity*, a crime story which features in *Red Work* an anthology edited by Gerard Houarner. There is a children's story, *Why God Rested*, in a book series in USA, a story *Pilgrimage To Oblivion* in *Foxfire* magazine USA, and a collaboration – the only one we have ever done with a third party – *The Shadow Man* in John Ford's *Evil Entwines* book.

Currently we have two stories that can be read online. *Beware The Beckoning Stranger* at Feo Amante site USA in the fiction section at www.feoamante.com/stories and *Names And Faces* in the fiction section at the USA site www.horrorfind.com We would urge people to read these as the latter story especially is unlike any Maynard & Sims you will be familiar with.

We always have 10/15 stories out and under consideration at any time as we find that stimulating – unless they get rejected! We are always writing new stories, as and when anthologies get announced. We try for the paying markets now and presently we are working on two stories an USA editor has commissioned, and a third another USA editor has asked for.

There is also a USA anthology we might be co-editing, and we have the second *F20* hopefully to fit in for next year.

Next year we plan to devote entirely to a novel we are currently outlining. Then there are always enjoyable projects that come along when we least expect them – like this wonderful interview. Thanks Dave, it's been a pleasure – two pints please!

THE END