

The Ghost Road

An interview with Len Maynard and Mick Sims

By Sandy Auden

Life is not a single narrative thread. Between birth and death, we do not tread an individual path, but a complex network of soaring freeways, unmarked footpaths, twisted lanes and sudden blind alleys.

Like all of us, Maynard and Sims have travelled many roads to arrive at their current location. But in their case, they have travelled almost all of them together. Out of that partnership, many supernatural and weird tales have flowed and a multitude of anthologies have been edited and published. They have a close working relationship and a deep, loyal friendship – in fact, they are so inseparable that the words of one, are also the words of the other, as you will see in what follows below.

Here, they've paused for a moment, to look over their shoulders and examine the route they have taken. A simple reminder of the richness of their lives so far, and the potential of the road as yet untravellered.

A Merging of Paths

'We first met in 1964,' say Len and Mick with one voice, 'It was two years before England's glorious triumph in the World Cup, and eleven years after we were both born. Mick is a month older than Len, which lends him that natural authority, while Len retains his youthful good looks. We both went to Ambrose Fleming Technical Grammar School in Ponders End, Enfield after passing the old Eleven Plus exam and, actually, we were aware of each other at school without being close friends at all.'

'It wasn't until 1971, when we were eighteen, that the real friendship began. Mick was just leaving school to begin a lifetime with Lloyds Bank (now a senior manager) and Len was already a year or so into an apprenticeship as a lapidary (now office manager). The friendship was created, as much of our lives have been blessed, by a woman – a rainy evening, a lonely drink in the Crown and Horseshoes pub in Enfield, and the shared reflections on the vagaries of love's labours lost.'

'A short time after this pub meeting, Len wrote a short horror story, Mick read it, and we discussed the merits and faults of it. We argued, we resisted criticism, we revised – it was the start of a natural pattern of collaboration. Then Mick wrote a short atmospheric story, and the same process continued with each writing a story in turn.'

'Our first sale was a professional one: in 1974 we sold *Curtain Call* to London Mystery Magazine for £7. We were also accepted and published that year in *Taste Of Fear*, edited by the great Hugh Lamb, who liked the story *Benjamin's Shadow*. That gave us the confidence to write more ghost stories, and the result was the first collection *Shadows At Midnight* in 1979, published by William Kimber & Co.'

'The memory of acceptance of that book is still as fresh today as it was then. It was Christmas Eve and someone had to read the letter out to me over the 'phone. I then rang Len and we were both pleased to say the least!'

'We have always written together since then, but the process has certainly evolved since the early days. Back then, we would write a story and the other heavily revised it. One might start a story and the other finish it. One might write a whole story and the other might add thousands of words or remove thousands of words.'

'Nowadays we tend to need only slight revisions on the original story, grammar, and typo's that kind of thing. Using the Prime collection *Incantations* as an example, most of the stories in there had one voice in that there was one prime author (pun intended) for each story but the other had significant input; maybe with revised passages, with key ideas, or key scenes. It combines all the joys of writing solo – the creation, the pleasures of creating characters and stories – with the discipline of having to prove the worth of what you have written to someone else even before it is shown to an editor or publisher.'

'We've written more or less continuously since that meeting in the pub, but things have changed. Our output over the past five years now exceeds our output over the previous fifteen. Why? Laziness in part, but more accurately a lack of confidence, a lack of focus and direction, and definitely an overload of life. We had divorces, births, deaths, miscarriages, work pressures, house moves, marriages – all the things that make life the rich tapestry it is, but we had them constantly and although over a fairly long space of time, it was diverting. Somehow the continual problems that came up never let the conscious mind concentrate on the business of writing - certainly the creative side suffered.'

'We did write a lot during that period but everything needed revising and that has been done during the past five or so years, as well as writing tons of new stuff. The fact that we actually wrote quite a bit during that long relatively barren period, and that revising it all was fairly easy, suggests the unconscious writing mind was working overtime all the while.'

A Shared Road

'Today, our relationship is like a comfortable old shoe, without the possible smell that might suggest. But in the early years we were very volatile; there were rows and pregnant, tense

silences over the changing of just a single word. The stories were very personal to us and for someone else to suggest change was difficult to accept.'

'The friendship was also developing; we were young and going out with girls; Len was in a rock band; and we were growing up. We have always been individual people – obviously – and as such we have different tastes and opinions on things. This manifested itself early on in the writing and caused some friction, with both of us thinking their opinion over a story was correct. Then we began to learn the benefits of writing together – the story boarding, the two heads better than one scenario – and for a while we used the differences to write better stories: friction fiction.'

'The next stage in the evolution of our friendship and writing partnership – two distinct things – was a more supportive style of discussion where we admitted our faults as writers and used our strengths to outweigh any weaknesses. The one who could write description would help the one who could write character, and vice versa. The one who could start stories but struggled to finish, helped the one who could write endings if he had a beginning to take him there. That way, we developed as writers and the honesty that was generated has helped our friendship.'

'Then it became a lifeline to sanity for both of us, as we battled through the nonsense that life threw at us. During these times, the friendship became far more important than the writing – actually it always had been, but we occasionally lost sight of that fact.'

'These days, we are so comfortable with each other that there is total honesty. We can complain, criticise, praise without fear of hurt feelings; about writing and about each other.'

The Guide to the Right Road

'Much of our very early work was influenced by what we were reading at the time. We read a lot of the Pan series of Horror, anthologies 'edited' by Alfred Hitchcock, and worked our way up to the anthologies of August Derleth and Peter Haining. Even prior to discovering horror, there were the comic books of *Amazing Stories*, *Fantastic* this and that. It was all very persuasive to formative teenage minds. So it's no surprise that our first stories were short horror pieces, either completely atmospheric with very little going on, or very gory with the supernatural more or less tacked on at the end.'

'Then we began to collect books, and did so with a passion that saw us at the Enfield market every Saturday and some Wednesdays taking away box loads of paperbacks of horror, ghosts, and the supernatural. There seemed to be dozens of titles published in those days. We would regularly travel up to London where there were seemingly plenty of bookshops where we could buy the newer hardback and paperbacks.'

'Amongst these books were anthologies by Richard Dalby and Hugh Lamb. The stories in them were often subtle and disturbing. That moved us into ghost story territory and we began to become influenced by the people who were influenced by M R James. We like James, but preferred people like Wakefield, Malden, Caldecott and Benson. The stories that formed the *Shadows At Midnight* collection were all from this period (1974 - 1980). Some of the stories that

became *Echoes Of Darkness* (published by Sarob Press in 2000) were written during this period too but they were revised later on, well about twenty years later on actually.'

'Between 1980 and 1997 we felt as if we were thrashing about under the influence of several factors. There was no direct influence on our style - it was a middle period, albeit it a long one - where we were finding our own true voice. As mentioned earlier we wrote loads during this 'barren' period but it all needed revision later, at a time when we had found out who we were and what we wanted to write.'

'For this fifteen-year period (yes, we know, 1980 to 1997 is seventeen years but who's counting?) we tried crime novels, mainstream stories (a collection was almost accepted by Penguin!) and suspense novels, as well as stories that could be categorised as horror but were actually a whole raft of styles from slipstream through ghost, from horror to psychological.'

'Then in July 1997 we were suddenly reborn.'

Accelerating Along a New Track

'We felt strangely revitalised. All our old stories were revised, the two Sarob collections were written and published, all the old stories outside these collections were revised and published in the small press, and we began to write new and stronger stories. After far too long in a personal wilderness we had found our own voice, and we had a direction. Everything in the last five or six years is down to that fact; we suddenly knew who we were and what we wanted.'

But to tell the truth, we're damned if we fully know what got us kicked off and started. We were pretty much settled domestically. Len had been re-married for five years, and happy; Mick had been married for ten years and his daughter was nearly four years old. We'd been writing on and off, mostly off, but had actually written quite a bit, when suddenly the old urge to write another ghost story, to get back to basics, hit us - to the extent that Len bought an old fashioned manual typewriter in the hope that it would kick start this new phase. The first (and only) thing he wrote on the cumbersome beast was the beginning to *An Office In The Grays Inn Road*, though at that time it had no title and was just a first page with no story to attach to it. Len showed it to Mick, who enthused, and we began to talk about ghost stories and our origins.'

'It sort of snowballed from there. Mick had picked up a small press booklet of ghost stories by chance some months before, when he was having a family weekend at a hotel in Tenterden, Kent, and we suddenly realised that there was a market for what we were writing. We realised that with publishers such as Ash Tree Press there was an interest in ghost and supernatural fiction, rather than the splatter stuff that had dominated the market for so long. Mick set about revising the older stories, editing them down to a length acceptable for these small press zines, and Len carried on writing new stuff, some of which were revisions of old stories long since consigned to the bin. Some of these he wrote almost word for word the same as the original - showing that the sub-conscious can carry an idea for pretty long periods of time.'

'Our style now is modern, not influenced by any other writer, and is the culmination of our years of collaboration - meaning our two voices have created a separate style based on the best, and worst, of both of us.'

'As the style evolved, so too did the content. The earlier ghost stories were very much influenced by such things as the atmosphere in an English country churchyard, the Green God Arthur Machen mythology, and the written style of the 1930's ghost stories. That meant we peopled our stories with crusty older gentlemen who drank port, played chess and discussed grave (pun again) issues at their smoky clubs. We actually wrote a novel that was set in a gentlemen's club. It was a series of inter-connected stories along the lines of the society in Straub's *Ghost Story*.'

'The story content of the ghost story period consisted of churches, country houses, haunted objects and the like. There was much made of ancient evil influencing the present, of innocents meddling in the present and unleashing past horrors. Haunted pieces of furniture, unholy ground, ancient practices long hidden.'

'As we began to write away from that style so the content evolved as well. We had content that was more urban, the settings moved into the towns and cities. The crime and suspense novels were all city based and featured tough cops and even tougher baddies.'

'Gradually, the complexity of the stories increased. The stories became less linear than before and the contents broader based. Modern influences such as email and the Internet became integral to the stories.'

'As we grew in confidence so we found more of our own lives being used in the stories. Not overtly, there are few if any autobiographical stories in our portfolio, but there are certainly areas of our lives that we have used. Feelings, too, began to be explored so that our own way of looking at life events became added to the stories and the way a character would behave was often influenced by our own perceptions and beliefs.'

'This took us away from our earlier crusty characters, who liked cerebral pastimes and would enjoy brass rubbing, church architecture and rather bachelor pursuits. As we were both unhappily married at the time, that is possibly why our characters preferred isolation to human companionship. The characters liked to be alone and were, more often than not, rather sad and only inspired by their obsessive personal desires. Nothing autobiographical there!'

'During the middle period of our writing, when we were both floundering to discover a direction in our own lives, it is not surprising that our characters seemed afloat on a sea of uncertainty as well. There were characters that hated themselves, who were selfish and adrift. The characters lived in stories that were themselves not fully formed so the people in them had incompleteness about them.'

'From 1997 onwards, as our present period took hold, so the characters took on a whole new demeanour. They actually developed as a story developed; being different at the end of a story than they were at the start. They are much rounder characters in that they are not wholly good or

wholly evil, there are shades of grey rather than the black and white images we wrote earlier. Now the characters feel like real people, people we might know in our lives.'

'We have been altered as people because of what we have experienced in life and it would be unnatural if that didn't translate itself into our writing and our characters.'

'Rather than the stories being artificial as many of the earlier ones might have seemed, with the influences being from the outside rather than from personal experience, they now seem more real. The stories are often based, or certainly contain some reference to, events that have changed us, and this makes them deeper, more liable to strike a chord with the reader.'

Walking Two Parallel Paths

'When we began to start writing in earnest again, in '97, it was obvious we had a lot of ground to make up. We'd been out of circulation and hadn't sent anything out for possible publication for about 15 years, so the name wasn't known.'

'That began to change as stories were accepted by the many small press magazines that existed at the time, but even so there was a wide gap between our experience and achievements. Coupled with that was a sense that we had something to share with people that might help aspiring writers. We had been around a long time, had learned lessons the hard way, and it seemed to us that we might be able to give a little something back to the genre.'

'So, one Monday night at Len's house, after a regular session of story discussion, nostalgia, and okay a few beers, we said – and neither of us will admit to having actually uttered the words – 'Let's start a small press magazine.' *Enigmatic Tales* was born.'

'It seemed to be well received straight away. So much so, in fact, that we were swamped with good quality submissions. That led to *Enigmatic Novellas* being launched, followed by the similar *Enigmatic Variations*, both for longer stories; and later *Enigmatic Electronic* on the web, which allowed us to publish stories that didn't fit the guidelines of *Enigmatic Tales*. All seemed to go well, and we managed to sell out of all the copies produced. We were also able to push length up to two hundred pages with a regular quarterly schedule thanks to funding in part from the Arts Council.'

'Running Enigmatic Press certainly refined our editing skills but when we first started we were real novices. We tried replying to each rejection, explaining at length why we were declining. That was part of our mission to help newcomers. But it did mean that we trod a fine line between explanation and rejection. It only backfired once when a UK writer wrote back a really rude letter 'explaining' his story and coming to the conclusion that as it was marvellous we were clearly deficient. He has since disappeared without trace.'

' Meanwhile, the Enigmatic name became synonymous with traditional supernatural stories. We were known as Mick and Len the ghost story men. Really, all we have ever done is publish and accept stories we liked. Our taste may not suit everyone but it is all subjective isn't it? What we like will not please everyone but that is not what we have tried to do. We have simply tried to

create forums where writers can see their debut story published, more established writers can be published in a half decent product, and the exposure the writers (and artists) get is reasonable.'

Later, when the Arts Council funding failed to be renewed, we were unable to continue at the same production quality or title quantity, and we'd really didn't want to compromise our standards so we closed Enigmatic Press. In a way, we feel now that it was probably not such a bad thing. Our time was being eaten up with publishing and editing, we were getting hardly any time to write and had precious little energy left over for real life. When we'd begun, we'd been charged up with the excitement of it all, and gradually there developed a genuine enjoyment at the creation of something that seemed to be worthwhile making an effort over. But in the end, it was just a hard slog.'

'Shortly after Enigmatic closed in 2000, Sean Wallace of Cosmos Books (and later Prime) offered us the chance to edit without the hassle of publishing. *Darkness Rising* was created from the vision of Enigmatic but gave us a wider brief with regard to content and with less work involved. The sheer weight of hours required to edit, produce, handle distribution, artwork, and proofing is immense. With *Darkness Rising*, we were reading stories, editing them, and sending a completed volume of the series to Sean. He and his team did the rest.'

'The more editing we have done, it is inevitable that we have become better at it. Nowadays it is relatively easy to know within the first page if a story will be suitable. *Darkness Rising* under Prime offers such a wide range of stories that content is rarely an issue, so it comes down to quality. With our desire to offer new writers a platform, there is a possibility we select stories other editors would reject. That doesn't worry us as we maintain that subjective argument throughout – we accept stories we like, just as we write stories we like, not stories we think need to be written a certain way to please someone else.'

The Road Not Taken - Yet

'Our current workload is substantial, with a number of titles in the pipeline for publication over the next year or so. There is *The Seminar* novella coming out from Sarob Press in Summer 2003. It's a witch story about six teenagers on a writing seminar who battle against the forces of evil. The story is based at a country manor house in Dorset England, which is owned, and the courses run by, The Senice Foundation. Far from being altruistic, the Foundation is actually a cover for a centuries old witch who uses the Foundation as a recruiting agency for fresh victims to feed her constant need for new bodies with which she rejuvenates herself. It also becomes apparent that Lisa is the blood relative of the original Isabella and she has been lured to the manor house for a sinister reunion.'

Prime have recently released *Incantations*, our third story collection, and the fourth is already written. Sarob Press has accepted *Falling into Heaven* for Summer 2004 publication. There are stories in there that evolve from the style of the stories in the third collection, but far more that push aside any pre-conceptions people might have about our writing. These are stories that have the supernatural as a backdrop, but that aside they could be mainstream stories. Stories such as *Sliding Down The Slippery Slip*, which has a lesbian orgy as its plot but masks so much more; *Calling Down The Lightning* with the Irish Trouble as a background but could be about

relationships; *Soaking Wet Without A Boat*, which is about levels of pain, physical and emotional; or *Flour White, Spindle Thin*, about a couple facing up to an inability to have children.'

Our first completed and retained novel *Shelter* is currently being read in USA and we have everything crossed for that. This is story about a Moroccan Water God and an ancient curse. The evil is entirely mythical and is a creation very much in the mythos of the Tashkai we created in *Moths*. Set in the present day, the catalyst for the evil begins on active duty in North Africa after the Second World War when William Charteris, head of a titled family from England, fathers a child by a local Arab girl. The girl, and the resulting son, is Verani, an ancient race of creatures who need humans to feed from and to perpetuate their noble species of Moroccan Water Gods. The consequences, once William and his loyal associate Tom Hooper bring the boy to England, reach into the present day. Why a Moroccan Water God? The story is about revenge and the intrusion of real life problems into a successful life. The mythical creature is a symbol of the issues we all have to face in life at some time, but made dramatic and frightening by the creation.'

'Our current writing project is story boarding the novel version of *The Hidden Language Of Demons*. As the story began life about twenty years ago as a novel, it is quite ironic we are revising the novella back to, and way beyond, the original length. The novella was well received but a few people mentioned that they wanted more depth, more background about the characters. This is what we are doing now, while also adding far more than was ever in the original story and giving it a title change. The story now begins when the triplets are boys, and then carries them through their early life, filling in background and giving the reasons why they each took different paths. It then fleshes out the rather staccato style of the novella version, adding depth and width.'

'After that? Our short story creative juices have been moving for some time onto a more mainstream wavelength and it is probable we will write some non-supernatural stories for specific markets.'

'These stories are likely to echo a series we wrote and abandoned in the 1980's. Stories about people and their lives without a supernatural backdrop. The only reason these stories might not linger in the darkness so much is partly to try something new, partly to try different markets, and partly to give voice to the various lines of creation that still persist in both of us. But supernatural stories will never be abandoned. Especially as the frisson of excitement that we still get quite regularly from reading supernatural stories remains far deeper than ever.'

'With so many demands on our time we have had to be very careful we don't get into overload. Editing, and previously publishing as well, took up far more time. That has eased with editing only, and an annual anthology should fit in nicely but we'll have to wait and see. That's not to say that if an interesting offer to edit a decent anthology came along we wouldn't be interested, of course, but our priority has always been our own writing.'

'You see, when you write, you are exploring your own soul. When you create characters you are giving them the flesh of your own life force, letting a little bit about yourself be revealed, pushing out into the world naked and alone, to be judged and stared at.'

'If our writing life can be segmented into early, middle and present, it could be said the early stories were born from a desire to write and to create a replica of what we wanted from life - a little peace and contentment. The middle period was thrashing about in primal uncertainty with various pressures and difficulties distracting from any planned route. There was plenty going on in the sub conscious mind and that enabled the stories from this period to be so successfully revised later on. The present period is one of maturity and some satisfaction. We are developed as people, though one never stops learning or growing, and this is reflected in the writing.'

'So far as direction is concerned, we had so many changes, during the middle years, as we sought success in different styles and challenges, that spanners in the works were a weekly event. We would start a project only to be deflected onto another path. Only now, when we feel confident, have we put the spanners toolbox away.'