

Interview Graham Masterton / D-Side

1-You got a high ability to imagine terrible physical abuses and scenes of torture. Does this particular easiness give you a feeling of freedom when you let yourself go into it? To invent and describe such scenes must be finally very soothing?

A: I don't find that writing scenes of intense horror is at all cathartic. The opposite, in fact, because it isn't easy to create a scene in which, for instance, somebody is burned alive, or has their hand gnawed off by a hungry dog, or is disembowelled. The scene has to be frightening and horrific, but at the same time I have to be very careful about the words that I use, because I don't want the scene to sound too lurid or gratuitously disgusting. Because of that, I have to concentrate more on the intensity of the emotions of the characters involved, and I have to use images which will create a vivid image in the mind of the reader without dwelling too lubriciously on blood and intestines and spattered brains. If you read my works carefully, you will discover that I am very controlled when it comes to the violent scenes, very reined-back, and that most of the horror comes from your own imagination. A typical example was the scene in *Family Portrait (Portrait du Mal)* in which two young girls are described as being clubbed to death like seals. I had several complaints about this scene from readers who thought it was too bloody and too graphic, but that was simply because it evoked images of baby seals being culled by having their brains knocked out by seal-hunters. There was no description of blood or brains in that scene at all. I don't deliberately set out to make a violent scene revolting, but we have to face the fact that we live in a dangerous and unpredictable world, and that for all of our domination of the planet we are physically very vulnerable.

2-Of course, reality is the best inspiration for the horror fiction, but people are more shocked by or reactive to fictions. In fact, fighting against something unreal is a way to be involved while staying safe. Do you think we can't face what we are? That we deny our very own sadistic tendencies?

A: I don't think on the whole that we are naturally sadistic, although that is not to deny that some people can be incredibly cruel. ("Beat me! Beat me!" said the masochist. "No," said the sadist.) I believe on the other hand that we can be vicariously excited by violence, and you are right to say that supernatural horror fiction is a way of experiencing the adrenaline rush of fear and aggression while remaining safely in our armchairs. Although I do write supernatural stories, I try to root them firmly in reality, with real and recognizable locations, and ordinary characters who have no special powers, with whom my readers can easily identify. In *The Devil in Gray*, for example, the setting is Richmond, Virginia, and all of the streets and locations are real. The hero is a police detective, but he is a particularly good one, and has a weakness for other officers' wives. Even in the 21st century, most of us still believe in the supernatural to some extent. God, after all, is a supernatural being, and millions of us still pray to Him as if He is really there. I think we find it difficult to face the fact that we might be completely alone on this planet, with no wise and paternal being to protect us, and I think that we create supernatural beings in our minds, both good and evil, in order to make sense of our own strengths and our own weaknesses. In some ways, believing in the supernatural is a way of avoiding our own responsibilities ("The Devil made me do it"). Most horror stories are a way of showing that we can fight our own moral weakness and our own turpitude and win – the triumph of good over evil.

3- You often make a link between sex and violence, sex and humiliation. According to you, is sex the absolute power's tool?

A: Of course sex is an extremely powerful motivating force, and many of us are both excited by sex and frightened of it. When we are in the grip of intense sexual feeling, it is like being taken over by a kind of madness. But I think that absolute power comes from force of personality, and fearlessness. People who are completely fearless can be very frightening indeed, because most of us are afraid of pain and terrified of death, and to meet somebody who isn't can be a hair-raising experience. Sex and violence are very closely related, and there is often a very fine line between rough sex and rape. Other people's sexual fetishes can also be highly alarming, particularly sexual activities such as bondage and self-mutilation. Some masochistic men are driven to carving their penises with scalpels, or even splitting them completely in half, and I'm afraid that kind of sexual compulsion brings tears to my eyes! I have even come across women who like to pour lighter fluid on their lovers' penises and set them alight before they plunge them into themselves. And then there are people who find that half-strangulating themselves can intensify their climax (RIP Michael Hutchence!). It is not for nothing that the sexual climax is sometimes called "the little death." But, as I say, it is utter lack of fear that is the ultimate power.

4- Your novel "The Devil in Gray", that takes place in the south of the USA, is an incursion into voodoo magic. In most of your books, you allude to many myth and beliefs from different civilizations but they are always portrayed in a very paroxysmal way. Do you finally strive for a denunciation of obscurantism through these extreme stories?

A: I use ancient myths and legends in my books for a very specific reason. They were mostly invented hundreds of years ago when there was little education and people had no scientific knowledge and almost no experience of the world outside their own towns or villages. They created myths to help them understand the mysteries of the world they lived in, and to help them cope with the ever-present dangers of disease, starvation and violent death. Because of that, most myths are extremely intense evocations of our most basic fears – very much less complicated and subtle than the kind of fears which trouble us today. In reality, the taxman is more frightening than Beelzebub, but we can still be terrified by the image of a horned beast emerging from hell. In *The Devil in Gray*, I use the ancient West African religion of Santeria, which had many gods (or "orishas") which represented different fears and anxieties, and different creative forces, too. Chango, for example, was the god of fire and thunder and lightning. Oggun was the god of war. Elegguá was a trickster, who punished wrongdoers by making them the victim of a theft or a serious accident. When West Africans were enslaved and taken to the southern states of America, their owners forbade them to worship their original gods, but they simply changed their names to those of Christian saints, and continued to pray to them and offer them sacrifices just as before. Chango became identified with St Barbara, the medieval martyr, and Elegguá became identified with St Anthony of Padua. I like to bring such mythical beings into my stories because it is fascinating to think how we would cope with them today, with all of our technology and all of our cynicism and all of our modern sophistication. When it comes down to it, we are still superstitious and frightened creatures.

5-Also, there are a lot of ludicrous moments, very funny, like when the hero, a cop, is dressing up to trick a ghost. Is humour a way for you to take the drama out of the religion, to look at it objectively?

A: I use humour in my stories because most people, when they are frightened, react in one of two ways (or both). They scream, or they laugh. Even in the most horrifying situations, people make jokes, and I think humour makes my characters more believable. I have read so many horror stories in which nobody laughs, and that just doesn't ring true when you think of all the jokes (very sick, some of them, admittedly) which immediately appear on the internet after any kind of accident or disaster.

6-Some writers, like Faulkner, or directors, like Elia Kazan (with Tennessee Williams), have used the south as a backdrop when they wanted to talk about sexual corruption, brutality and eroticism. Can you explain the very special atmosphere that prevails there?

A: The heat and the humidity play a large part in the atmosphere of the southern states, but it is the formal social manners and the mock-gentility which give writers so much scope to create stories of hypocrisy and corruption. The south has also been strongly influenced by the French, whose attitudes towards sex and self-indulgence have always been more sophisticated than other European countries (at least in the eyes of those other European countries!). The south is very languid, the pace of life is very slow, and the exoticism of the flowers and the wild-life also contributes to the feeling of decay.

7-Women in your stories are very sexy and well-endowed but often savagely murdered. Do you try to laugh at vanity, I mean, do you try to put the physical existence in front of its superficiality, fragility?

A: My novels are mainly entertainment, not morality plays, and since I have a choice between having ugly women in my stories or sexy and well-endowed women, I prefer to have sexy and well-endowed women every time. I am not laughing at vanity. If a woman is beautiful, then I think she has every right to be a little bit vain. I am not trying to punish the women in my books for being attractive, but attractive people are just as vulnerable as ugly people.

8-Is your role into *Penthouse* has guided you for the choice and description of such women?

A: When I was editor of *Penthouse* I was up to my ears every day in sexy and well-endowed women, but there was one thing that my experience taught me, and that is that sexy and well-endowed women have just the same fears and neuroses and lack of confidence as other women, and that even if they look like something out of every man's erotic fantasy, they are just people, after all, and most of them were very nice people indeed. Many men are very frightened of women like that, but they should realize that a very large pair of breasts doesn't make a woman into either a dominatrix or a plaything, and that sexy women need warmth, affection, friendship, understanding and love, just like we all do.

9-Men, for their part, are often losers, cops at the end of their tether, bad fathers, and most of all, very blasé. You put them into incredible situations and so they have to face the failure of their lives. It seems that you want them to be aware of their mistake, even when it's too late, like a sort of redemption, not in a religious way but as if you didn't want to accept their status of victim (of time, everyday life etc...)...

A: I think every good novel should involve the development of the characters involved. After all, the experiences I put them through are very extreme, and it wouldn't be at all realistic if they emerged at the end of the book without having learned anything or changed their lives in any way. I think readers find it easier to identify with ordinary characters who have personal problems and a degree of disappointment and failure in their lives, because all of us do. But in the end I think it is worth making the point that no matter how much disappointment you have had to suffer, no matter how much of a failure you think you are, you can always change, always improve, always work hard to make your life better and more fulfilling.

10-In your work, you also pay several tributes to other writers like Oscar Wilde or Lovecraft. Did they have a great influence on you? What are the others writers you feel close to?

A: I was first introduced to mystery and horror by Edgar Allen Poe and Jules Verne. As a schoolboy, I was fascinated to discover that Jules Verne had written so many other books apart from *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea* and *From The Earth to the Moon*. As I grew older, I became interested in the so-called Beat writers like Jack Kerouac and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gregory Corso. I wrote a great deal of poetry, and I would recommend to all budding authors that they should do the same (even if they don't want to become poets). Writing poetry helps you to disassemble language and put it together again, rather like an automobile mechanic, and it gives you an ear for rhythm and pace. It also trains you to create fresh similes and metaphors. I got to know the late William Burroughs when he was living in London, author of *The Naked Lunch*, and he was working with the artist and writer Brion Gysin to deconstruct language – sometimes using random phrases that he had literally cut out of newspapers. It was William Burroughs who urged me to “pick up my typewriter and walk” – in other words, not to sit and write my thoughts on the page or screen in front of me, but to step inside my own books, feeling the wind and hearing the sounds and smelling the smells. I have always tried to make my stories an experience which the reader can actually live for themselves – no matter how horrible that experience can sometimes turn out to be!

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