

GRAHAM MASTERTON BACKGROUND INTERVIEW

1. How did you begin your writing career?

I wrote stories and drew my own comics when I was very young. Most of my early stories had some kind of fantastic or science-fiction connection, because I was very impressed by Dan Dare, the space-pilot of the new British boy's comic *Eagle*, and by the stories of Jules Verne, such as *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*. Not all of my stories were fantastic, though – I also wrote a series of humorous stories that owed a lot to Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*, featuring a bumbling fellow called Augustus Blank who always managed to win out in the end by getting things drastically wrong. I also loved *Mad* magazine, and produced dozens of parodies of poems like *The Ancient Mariner* and *How They Brought The Good News from Ghent to Aix*, all illustrated with absurdist cartoons in the style of Will Elder and the late Wallace Wood. Around the age of 10 or 11 I discovered Edgar Allan Poe and started writing short horror stories to amuse my school fiends. When I was 14 I wrote a 400-page vampire novel called *Morbleu*, based on the idea of a giant corporation whose sole purpose was its own destruction. I got the idea from those boxes you used to wind up, and all that happened was that a lid opened, a green hand came out and switched the box off. Fortunately, the manuscript has been lost forever! When I was 16 I came across the work of the American Beat writers like Jack Kerouac and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and William Burroughs, and I wrote two surrealistic novels *Mysterious Babies* (now lost) and *The Electric Ambush* (which somehow managed to survive, but I don't think you'd understand a word of it.) I also wrote a great deal of poetry in my 'teens, for the express purpose of understanding how language worked and to develop my sense of rhythm. To me, it is vital that an author is "invisible" to the reader, and rhythm is essential in achieving this invisibility. So many sentences you read in novels these days have square wheels, and jolt the reader from one badly-constructed clause to the next. Writing poetry also helped me to improve precision of expression, and hugely expanded my vocabulary. This is not to say that I believe in using arcane words. I hate writers who use absurdly obscure language. But the more words you know, the easier it is to choose the right one. I became a newspaper report at the age

of 17 and then a magazine editor at the age of 21 and so I had very little time to write fiction in those days. But as the editor of *Penthouse* I was encouraged to write several “how-to” books on sex, based on conversations with real couples about their sex lives...what they enjoyed doing, what they would have liked to do, and what they felt they needed to know. These were all very successful, and gave me an entrée into the world of publishing in New York, so that when their sales eventually began to flag, I was able to find a fiction with very little difficulty. The result was *The Manitou*...and the rest is history.

2. What made you feel personally afraid when you were young?

I can't remember being afraid of anything much when I was young, except for dogs (which made me burst into tears of terror) and spiders. When it came to fear, I was always a seller rather than a buyer. I used to scare my friends by standing on the bedroom windowsill with the curtains drawn tight around my neck, so that it looked as if my disembodied head was floating near the ceiling.

3. Do you consider yourself to be a leading member of the horror genre?

I have never really felt that I am a member of “the horror genre.” I like almost all of the people I have met at horror conventions and have very friendly relations with my readers. In the past couple of years I have toured France, Belgium and Poland on promotion tours and it has been tremendous to meet readers face to face. But I am not really a joiner of clubs or associations and I never read horror fiction, ever. In fact I read very little fiction at all, which I very much regret, but it is almost impossible after a hard day in front of the pc to pick up somebody else's novel and get lost in it. It also doesn't help that I am super-picky about grammar, syntax and sentence construction; or that I can detect when a writer is tired, or bored, or hungry. I have been reading and re-reading the same book for nearly 25 years now, *The Process* by my late friend Brion Gysin. I rarely read more than half a page at a time, but his language is so limpid that he always impresses me. Brion was great: he was the laziest man I ever met in my life.

4. Where do you find your inspiration?

I am inspired by people. Real people, mostly. You may notice that almost all of my novels deal with the way in which ordinary people have to deal with unimaginable

terrors. So I try to develop characters who may not be secret agents or movie stars but who have simple qualities of humour and heroism. I find my ideas almost anywhere. In newspaper stories, in books about myths and legends. Most of my horror novels deal with an ancient terror being visited on the modern world, and the difficulty we have, even with our technology and our supposed sophistication, in dealing with it.

5. Do your family read your books?

My wife Wiescka reads my books first. She is my sternest critic, and if there is anything she finds boring or illogical or over-explanatory, out it goes. No arguments. My mother reads my books too but says that they make her feel queasy. My three sons have read one or two of them but rarely bother. They have their own lives to lead.

6. What do you like to write about the most?

I write about anything I find amusing or exciting or interesting. I like history, especially the history of the pioneering days in America, and I also like science – which is why I enjoy writing pseudo-scientific thrillers such as *Plague* and *Genius* and *The Sweetman Curve*. My grandfather Thomas Thorne Baker was a scientist. He was a leading figure in the early days of the development of television and wireless, and I used to spend hours in his laboratory when I was little, messing up his chemical scales.

7. You seem to be incredibly productive. How do you manage to write so much and so quickly?

I don't think I write exceptionally quickly, but I never have writer's block and I write consistently. Finish one book on Friday, start a new one on Monday. This is mostly a product of my training as a journalist. When you've brought out one issue, you can't sit around preening yourself, you've got to get on with the next.

8. What do you have planned for the future?

At the moment I have a number of new horror novels lined up, including what I hope will be a spectacular epic about witchcraft. I am actually writing a thriller about a criminal conspiracy (CHAOS THEORY) which is all I can usefully say about it at the moment.

9. Do you enjoy writing short fiction?

I love writing short stories. They can be elegant, waspish, mysterious yet highly-polished. Writing a novel can be a long, long trudge.

10. Tell us your favourite things.

Favourite book: *Lolita*, by Vladimir Nabokov. Sad, funny, perceptive, sly, with a wonderfully-satirized suburban setting. Favourite movie: *Elvira Madigan*, directed by Bo Widerberg, Charming doomed, beautifully filmed. Or possibly *The Suitor* with Pierre Etaix., which is hilarious. Favourite music album: of all time? Almost impossible to say. But *StageFright* by The Band would be tolerable if I was only a desert island and could never listen to anything else.

11. And your own favourite books that you have written yourself?

Black Angel (aka *Master of Lies*); *Descendant*; *Walkers*.

12. Please tell us something about your new novel published by Bragelonne in France, LE DIABLE EN GRIS (THE DEVIL IN GRAY).

My new book LE DIABLE EN GRIS brings together two subjects in which I have always been very interested: the American Civil War and the West African religion of Santeria. It gave me a chance to create a frightening but deeply ironic situation in which the slave-owning Confederates – faced with overwhelming defeat by the Yankees – turn to the supernatural forces that can be summoned by their own slaves in order to turn the tide of the war.

Although the story is set in the present day, in Richmond, Virginia, which used to be the Confederate capital, the background is the Battle of the Wilderness, in which the Rebels scored a resounding victory against a much more numerous and better-equipped Union Army.

The battle was fought in dense scrub and woodland, and the woods were set alight by the soldiers' guns, so that many of them were trapped and burned to death.

According to my story, the Confederates called on the ancient African war god Chango to help them. Chango was one of many gods which the African slaves had continued to worship after they had been brought to the cotton-fields and tobacco plantations of the Deep South. Since he slaves were forbidden by their owners from praying to "heathen" deities, they gave them the names of Catholic saints to conceal

what they were really doing. Chango was syncretized with St Barbara, the virgin martyr of the Middle Ages, even though his original form was that of a god who swung a great war-axe and could bring lightning and thunder down from the skies.

Thus developed the religion of Santeria, which is extremely mystical and connected to the forces of the earth, the wind, the ocean and the sky. It is still practised today in various forms in the southern states of America and in the Caribbean.

I love the southern states, and Richmond in particular. It is warm, sophisticated, languid, and the food is wonderful – especially if you have a passion for soft-shelled crabs and fried shrimp! But it is also very poignant to visit the Confederate cemeteries, where thousands of young men lie buried.

Copyright Graham Masterton 2006