

GRAHAM MASTERTON INTERVIEW

By Areti Ntaradimou – from Greek newspaper *Eleftheros Typos*, April 2008

In an older interview you have stated that Harry Erskine, the main character of *The Manitou* is actually you. Are there any other characters of your books that represent you or aspects of your character?

I think it is inevitable that a writer's own personality makes an appearance in every character that he or she creates. It is flattering to any writer if his readers believe that the characters in a novel are real individuals, with entirely separate identities, but of course each character is only the writer speaking in different voices, like a ventriloquist. They are glove-puppets, with the writer's hand up their trousers (or skirts). Harry Erskine is quite like my real personality in many respects, although he is a great deal untidier than I am, and much less honest. He is a fake fortune-teller, after all, and he makes a living out of deceiving gullible old ladies. I can tell fortunes, too, the Tarot and the DeVane cards, but I have never knowingly deceived any gullible old ladies. I am incapable of taking life very seriously, and this characteristic tends to appear in many of my heroes (or anti-heroes). Besides that, I believe that most of us react to situations of stress and extreme horror with laughter, rather than screams. It is a very human way of coping with situations that make us feel terrified and helpless and hopelessly mortal. Only a few hours after 9/11, the internet was crowded with jokes about it – not out of callous disrespect to those who died, but because people needed to bring the terrible enormity of it down to an understandable scale. I enjoy cooking very much, which is why many of my characters have a taste for good food. The hero of my novel *The Hymn* was a restaurant-owner, and one of my newer heroes is John Dauphin, a very tubby Louisiana restaurant inspector who has an overwhelming passion for fried shrimp and chicken po'boys (Louisiana sandwiches). The last time I visited Athens my friend Lefteris Stavrianos bought me so many grilled lamb chops that I nearly ended up rolling down the Acropolis! Other personal traits which come out in my characters: I love art, and poetry. But most of all I love a good laugh.

In your books you have vivid influences of the folkloric myths not only of the west, but also of the east. Why is that?

The reason I use myths and legends in my stories is that they were first devised many centuries ago by people who had no scientific way of explaining anything terrible that might happen in their lives (such as sickness or crop-failure or sudden death). Because of this, they created demons and devils who they blamed for such tragedies, and the images of these demons and devils was extremely potent and frightening. What I do is confront ordinary, modern-day people with these demons from the past to see how they manage to deal with them. I use myths from both western and eastern mythologies because there is such a contrast between them. In *Tengu*, for example, I introduced a Japanese demon who

wanted revenge for Hiroshima, and in *Death Trance* I brought in zombie-like creatures from Bali, called leyaks, who are always keen to drag you into the graveyard.

Another intense aspect of your work is brutal violence. Is it by choice or is it unavoidable (meaning that it is necessary for the plot?)

The violence that is happening in Iraq and Afghanistan and in many other parts of the world is far more brutal than anything I have ever written. Have you seen the pictures of street-markets in Baghdad, after a suicide bomb has exploded? There is nothing in any of my books as sickening as that. Heads, arms and torsos strewn across the sidewalk – the bits and pieces of innocent women and children. We face our own mortality every day, and we also face the threat of extreme violence, whether it is deliberate or accidental. That is all I am writing about, and in my stories it is a necessary part of the fear that I am trying to create. But never mind – in my books it is only fear, not reality, and when you close the book you will find that you are quite unharmed.

In his introduction of your official site, Stephen Laws writes that you actually wrote *The Manitou* in one week. Is this true, and if so, how was it possible?

The Manitou was only 120 pages long, and for a newspaper reporter and magazine editor, used to meeting deadlines, writing a story like that in five days was not difficult. I wrote the novelization of the Richard Dreyfuss movie *Inserts* in three days and the novelization of the Paul Michael Glazer movie *Phobia* in four. These days, though, I tend to take a little longer, since I like to fill in more detail of the geographical setting and explore the motivations of my characters in rather more depth.

Although you are best known for your work in horror genre, you have written other genres too. Would you say that the characters, the plot, the interaction between genres (and I mean in fiction only) have similarities? And if so, what kind of similarities?

I have written disaster novels (*Plague, Famine*), thrillers (*The Sweetman Curve, Chaos Theory, Genius, Holy Terror*), political thrillers (*Sacrifice, Condor*) and also historical epics (*Rich, Railroad, Maiden Voyage, Lady of Fortune*). If they share anything, it is the way in which I try to create background, mood and atmosphere. Many years ago my friend William Burroughs advised me to become what he used to call “El Hombre Invisible”, the invisible man, and to write in such a way that my own presence would not stand between the reader and what was happening in the story. For that reason I make a point of trying to make the reader feel as if he or she is actually “there”, inside the story, rather than reading it on the page or watching it like a movie. Readers should feel the sun on their back, the wind through their hair, and hear noises all around them. And smell smells, too! How many novels have you read that don’t have any smells in them? Or weather, for that matter, except for rain. What all of my characters share, whether they find themselves in a horror story or an historical epic, is the same wry philosophy that life is a bitch, and then you die, so you might as well make the most of it. Or to put it in Latin, *nil illegitimae carborundum* – don’t let the bastards grind you down.

It seems nowadays horror literature doesn't live up to its goal. It does not seem to create fear at least in the way it used to. Why do you think this happens?

Simply because there is so much of it. When I was growing up, almost the only horror novels available were Frankenstein, Dracula, Tales of Mystery and Imagination by Edgar Allan Poe and HP Lovecraft. These days, horror enthusiasts can read about almost kind of horror they like, from chainsaw massacres to mutant guinea-pigs, and familiarity dilutes the feeling of fear. But I also think that the writing tends to be less frightening, because it is less restrained, less evocative and (quite frankly) not as technically good as it used to be.

How would you respond to those who consider horror genre (as well as science fiction, epic fantasy, etc) not real literature but a not very literate subspecies?

In some ways, what I have just said answers your last question. There are too many examples of so-called horror literature which are amateurishly written and concentrate more on blood and guts and disgusting acts of sadism than they do on character, atmosphere, style and plot development. They are more like messy road accidents than literature. I know that some of my novels contain extremely graphic horror, but I hope that these scenes are justified by the story, and the motivations of the characters, both good and evil (and halfway in between.) You cannot paint all horror novels with the same bloody brush. There are some excellent stylists writing in horror today, and it is a pity that their work has to be categorized as genre fiction, because I have read many allegedly literary novels which in comparison are complete tripe.

In answer to a question you haven't asked me: I love Greece, and my Greek readers are both loyal and humorous and appreciative. I am looking forward to returning to Greece sometime next year, so Lefteris had better get the grill fired up. We will drink wine, and talk, and laugh, and then fill our mouths with so much food that it will be the silence of the lamb chops.