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Urban Nightmares

Matt Williams talks to the writers of the *Urban Gothic* anthology.

Urban Gothic: Lacuna & Other Trips is a new collection of first-rate fiction from established and up-coming British horror authors. The first book from new publishing company, Telos (headed by editor and journalist, David J. Howe), *Urban Gothic* is as dark a collection of tales as one could hope for, described as 'a cutting-edge anthology of death and horror' and released to tie-in with the second season of UK Channel 5's popular *Urban Gothic* tv series. It features tales from established horror writers Graham Masterton, Christopher Fowler and Simon Clark, alongside contributions from talented newcomers Debbie Bennett, Paul Finch, Steve Lockley and Paul Lewis, as well as an introduction by actor and director Richard O'Brien and interviews with series creators, Steve Matthews and David Miller. In addition, *Urban Gothic* was recently nominated for the Horror Writer's Association Bram Stoker Award for 'Best Anthology' of 2001, an award given for 'outstanding work in the horror field'.

The stories in *Urban Gothic* bravely delve behind the gaudy veil that is modern-day London. Anybody who has visited the capitol will almost certainly have felt its careless disregard for its bustling interlopers. Feelings that come through strongly in stories such as 'Telling the Tale' by Steve Lockley and Paul Lewis, where a down-on-his-luck reporter finds that the stories he most wants to tell are those the city most jealously guards. Or 'Goblin City Lights' by Simon Clark, whereby another hapless reporter finds that good journalism can reveal secrets best kept under wraps.

Graham Masterton's 'The Scrawler' tells of a series of ominous messages scrawled across the capitol which presage a character's own fate. Says Graham: "I had the idea for 'The Scrawler' in 1972 when I was traveling to work at Penthouse magazine on the tube from Victoria to West Brompton. As I sat down, I saw that somebody had managed to chisel the words YOU'RE WORRIED AREN'T YOU? into the wall-tiles. How they had managed to do it, and why, was a complete mystery. There was something very disturbing about the danger to which the graffiti writer must have exposed himself, combined with the sheer arduousness of hacking foot-high letters into ceramic tiles. And what was he trying to achieve? Was he addressing one person in particular, or anybody

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who happened to see what he had written?

"In several of my horror stories I have imagined a strong feeling or emotion taking on flesh and becoming a threatening presence. These presences are an exploration of several ethnic myths, such as the Mexican demon Xipe Totec, 'the night drinker', a shadowy and terrifying trickster who persuaded a whole village that their sins had taken on the shape of a black and evil monster. 'The Scrawler' is the embodiment of the everyday doubts that all of us feel. Do people really like us, or are they talking behind our backs? Are our partners faithful to us? Doubts like that can etch their way into our consciousness in the same way as the scrawler etches his letters into concrete and tile.

"I particularly enjoyed writing about North End Road, where I lived and worked for many years. In this story it is seen from a long way away - both in terms of time and distance. I would have liked to have made the story longer, explored the atmosphere more and built up the doubt more slowly, but obviously there were constraints of space. Writing about London, however, inspired me to write my latest novel *Katie Maguire* which is set in Cork city, and in which an ancient Celtic curse arises to haunt the present-day inhabitants, much as 'The Scrawler' pursues his victims with his deeply-chiselled doubts."

Christopher Fowler's 'The Look' is a cruel, darkly humorous examination of the pitfalls of anonymity as a young girl seeks fame as a model ... whatever the price.

"David Howe came to me with the idea of this project and he, Tom and I met up to discuss it." says the author. "*Urban Gothic* is very much what I do, although I tend to sprinkle a lot of black humour around. This was a chance to do something a little darker. Once Tom and I realised we were on the same wavelength, I was left open as to subject. I'd been talking to a model friend of mine, and she told me about some of the demanding requests she gets from clients. As we talked, I could see that fame was a trade-off. You don't get to be worshipped without sacrifice. I wondered how much you'd have to sacrifice before you thought it wasn't worth it anymore, and I still think some people will go a very long way (further than anything in the story, certainly) to achieve fame. It's a very recent concept, only possible since celebrity has replaced talent, and a subject I've written on before; in *Soho Black* a man achieves success at the expense of everything including his life (and death). That novel was also based on the experiences of a real person, so perhaps the idea of 'The Look' isn't so far-fetched after all..."

One of the book's darkest tales is 'Lacuna' by Debbie Bennett, a story whose themes of paranoia, and helplessness will strike a chord in everyone. "I got involved with *Urban Gothic* as David happened to

mention it to me once when we were chatting on the phone," says Debbie. "I'd only ever seen one episode on television before then. I've been involved with the small press for many years but mostly in an editorial capacity, although I have had several short stories published and actually have a contract with a London literary agent. I asked David if I could have a go at an *Urban Gothic* story as I wanted to show people that I can write, although I confess to being rather nervous as I knew I'd have only a month to produce 10-15,000 words and I'd never even seen a TV script, much less worked from one!

"When the storylines came through, we each had to choose one we felt happy with - fortunately we all chose different episodes. 'Lacuna' resonated with me as I work for Customs & Excise and have seen the "official" side of drugs - I thought it would be interesting to have a look at the street side. Also the novel I've written is very much centred on the drugs scene.

"The TV episode is very fragmented, with many short sharp scenes, not always in chronological order. I wanted to keep this idea as it gives the whole thing a very "trippy" feel to it, but it was difficult to work it into a narrative, so I settled for mini-chapters, interspersed with present-tense scenes and diary extracts. Hopefully the overall effect is to create an atmosphere of menace, but unreality - did any of it actually happen or was it a bad trip? I've also tried to pull in some religious analogies - from Greek to Egyptian mythology - as well as the Christian idea of purgatory."

Simon Clark's 'Goblin City Lights' is a similarly dark tale, one which examines the seedy and seductive side of London, the hellish hide-holes of characters that exist on the periphery of everyday existence.

Says Simon: "Writing 'Goblin City Lights' presented a marvellous opportunity for me. David Howe wanted not just short horror stories set in London but l-ooo-ng stories set in London. His only other requirements were to be daring and ambitious. My approach was to create a story written in the first person and in the present tense (not my usual style) and to describe events in a flowing way without the customary restraints on the narrator's point of view. So I imagined the point of view of the narrator to be the unrestricted swooping camera of Citizen Kane. For instance, I described London as from a bird flying over the city streets, yet a bird that could plunge out of the sky through roofs and ceilings, pausing here and there to describe some potent incident, before plunging down through the earth to join the central character as he rode the Tube a hundred feet beneath the surface. For me, this experimental approach worked, and it's a way of writing I want to return to again in the future.

"I think not being a Londoner and not living in a London, or even a big city helped me to write 'Goblin City Lights' the way I did. For

me, as an outsider, London is a vast exotic world populated by equally exotic and interesting characters. To travel on the Tube is amazing in its own right. Firstly you are travelling deep underground through some very piquant locations. Secondly, the passengers seem to glow with their own secret stories. That guy by the door could be a gangster; the beautiful woman opposite must be an actress, while the hook-nosed elderly gent furtively glancing over his hand-written notes has to be an author of handbooks of satanic arts. These aren't Tube passengers: they're characters in a vast Gothic fantasy. I only have to spend a few hours in London and the stories come marching out of the ground at me. Strange, fabulous London. One minute frightening, the next a place of near supernatural wonder.

"The *Urban Gothic* project was the perfect vehicle for me to explore the mysterious spirit of London.

Paul Lewis and Steve Lockley's story, 'Telling the Tale', the longest piece in the collection, takes a different tack, as Lewis explains:

"When David Howe invited us to become involved with the *Urban Gothic* project we immediately staked our claim on Thirteen, the closing episode of the series, as its themes and myths were similar to those we'd explored in our novel, *The Ragchild*.

"We used Tom De Ville's original script, rather than the TV episode, as our source material. It was quite different to the finished show, so readers would be getting more than just a prose version of what they had already seen on the television. It was then a question of fleshing out the characters, and bringing some of our own ideas to the story without treading on Tom and Steve Matthews' own vision of how the mythos would develop. There was also the need to fill in a few gaps that you can get away with on screen but not on the printed page."

How did they come up with a suitable title for the story?

"There were 13 shows in the series," explains Steve, "but only half a dozen stories in the book - calling ours 'Six' wouldn't have had the same ring to it! Given the theme of the story, 'Telling the Tale' pretty much suggested itself. We were pleased with the end result, especially as it was the first time we'd been involved in a three-way collaboration. Hopefully Tom is pleased with it, too, even though we necessarily had to take a few liberties with the script..."

Perhaps the most impressive story is Paul Finch's extraordinary 'Boys Club', gangster-crime-meets-the-supernatural-head-on. A brilliantly written story, full of convincing detail. Which shouldn't come as a surprise given that Finch is an ex-policeman.

"The story I wrote for *Urban Gothic* was adapted from the original TV series' half-hour episode, 'The Boy's Club', says Paul.

"Tom de Ville, author of the original *Urban Gothic* series, came up with the idea for a secret club where only the elite of the criminal elite were welcomed and entertained - even those who had passed on - a sort of gangsters' Valhalla, and concentrated his fire exclusively on this, telling the tale of up-and-coming hoodlum Lennie Scratch, and how he thought that by offering the sacrifice of his bent-copper father, he'd be able to gain himself a membership card ... only to be made the victim of a terrible twist of fate.

"Of all the *Urban Gothic* episodes, this one impressed me the most, both for its ingenious sting in the tail and its undeniable atmosphere of evil ... and after viewing it, my initial words to the series' executive producer Steve Matthews, were: "That was probably the best horror story I never wrote."

"Thankfully, when the opportunity to adapt an episode for the book came along, I managed to secure 'The Boy's Club'. Not wanting to follow the original script slavishly, though, and thinking that a piece of extended prose offered us the opportunity to venture far beyond the confines of the club itself, I took it upon myself to add what I hoped would be a wealth of relevant background detail, not least in the character and personal history of Lennie's father (in the script George Scratch, in my story Mickey), who of course has a pivotal role to play ... he being the true heart of darkness that The Boys' Club seeks.

"I liked the idea of a wannabe like Lennie, even someone who basically knew the ropes and was ruthless enough to get stuck into crime, being repelled by the extreme levels of viciousness and betrayal that are needed to make an impact on the real criminal underworld. Having spent many years as a copper in Manchester, before switching to writing, and frequently seeing the results of violent crime close-up, I felt reasonably qualified to comment on this. I also felt the story presented me with an opportunity to explore an issue that had long fascinated me ... both as a copper and an author; some of the best police officers I knew were astonishingly close in attitude and background to some of the worst criminals. It's like there was a worryingly thin dividing line between the two ... when it came to the crunch, there was no difference at all between these men, except that some wore black hats and some wore white.

"Perhaps the real question 'Boy's Club' was therefore asking, was this: Mickey Scratch might well have been evil, brutal and corrupt ... but was he really a bad copper? And if the answer is, as I suspect, no ... then what does that imply for the rest of us? If we get the job done, does it really matter that we step on a few heads along the way, skim off a bit of cream here and there? When push comes to shove, we might still get the rewards we're due."

Urban Gothic is as vivid and varied a collection of stories as the

sights it describes. It might not do the London tourist industry a lot of good, but there isn't a weak story in sight and as such, it comes highly recommended.

Urban Gothic can be ordered from the Telos [website](#); ISBN: 1903889006; £9.99 (plus p&p)

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