

Graham Joyce

Smoking Poppy

by Paula Guran

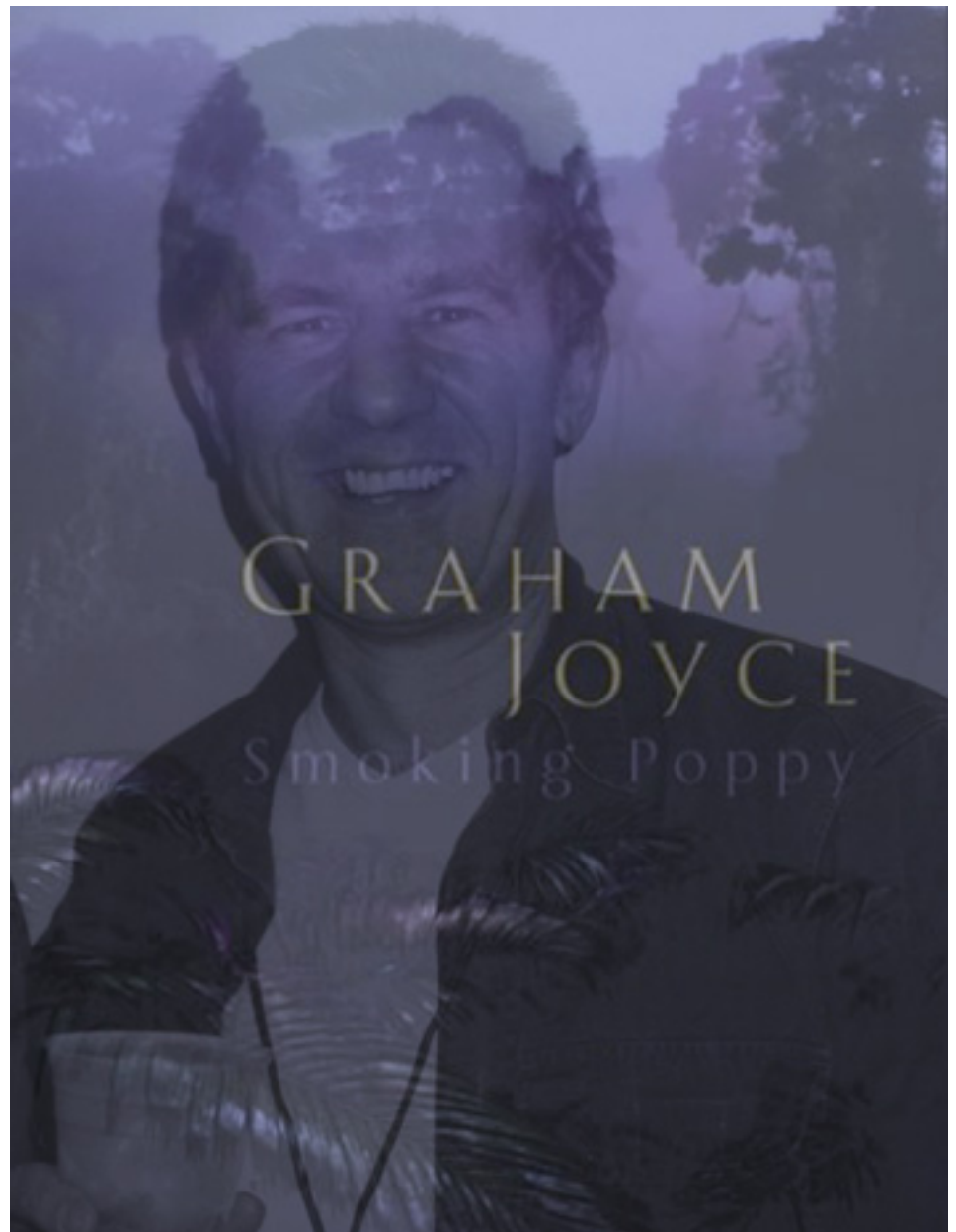
“Graham Joyce writes the kind of novels we keep hoping to find, but rarely do.”
— Jonathan Carroll

Picture a crystal clear glass of cold water. Now drop a gobbet or two of deep blue ink into it. It swirls and spreads, slowly infusing the colorless water with a tint. It’s just enough color to make the water something out of the ordinary.

That’s how Graham Joyce uses the fantastic in his award-winning fiction. There’s nothing “high” fantasy about it; no swords or dragons or quests or the like. His novels are set in our world, but fantasy seeps in around the edges and saturates the atmosphere. There’s often something dark and deeply disturbing in the mix, but never any gore or *grand guignol*.

Joyce and his work are grounded in the industrial Midlands of England. He grew up in the coal mining village of Keresley, near Coventry (a city that was largely destroyed during one night of the Blitz in 1940). Keresley itself (upon which the town of Redstone in *The Tooth Fairy* is based) is a “gritty, unlovely place” and his father, grandfather, and brothers all went down the pit. Although Joyce’s family saw education as a way out of the mines, Keresley is populated — like the coal towns of America’s West Virginia — by good folk who are somewhat mistrustful of anyone with a posh accent and polysyllabic vocabulary. They’re blokes who work hard, are proud of it, and don’t mind if they bend an elbow lifting a pint at the pub now and again.

Keresley is not noteworthy for nurturing the writing muse or encouraging escape from the British class system. Nor was Joyce spectacularly academic as a youth. Yet he still went on to major in English at university and to write. “The mining background doesn’t have much room for academics. Not that miners aren’t clever — there are plenty of miners who just missed the educational process through no fault of their own — but it’s all to do with expecta-



tions,” says Joyce. “Though there are some great Brit writers who have emerged from the mine shaft, like Barry Hines and Dennis Potter (whose work I love), and others like D.H. Lawrence (whom I liked once but who now makes me wince). I failed all the early school exams that were set up expressly to cement the British class system; and I made a pig’s ear out of the later ones that form a sheep-gate for university entrance. But because I loved reading I scraped a place at college, and I mean scraped.”

At university, Joyce “made a miraculous discovery: that intellectual authority was all about manipulating language. That it wasn’t about *intelligence* or the assiduous assembly of knowledge. It was about creating an argument, which in a way is what storytelling does. That will do me, I

thought, I can do that. I started making up arguments. Good ones, bad ones, bogus ones, sly ones, silly ones, outrageous ones. I very quickly cottoned on to the fact that that was what all the academics were doing and they were getting away with it. Once they know you are on to them, they quickly give you the badge to the club in the hope you won’t blow the whistle. I got a good degree and then a Masters degree.”

Of course along with the common in a place like Keresley you’ll often find the uncommon. Much of Joyce’s affinity for the weird comes from his maternal grandmother. “She was, classically, a seventh child of a seventh child,” says Joyce, “She had visions and premonitions all of her long life. The accuracy of her premonitions was reported to me and verified by my mother, who is herself an extremely skeptical and

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practical person. But I developed an awe for this old woman who could — by all accounts — see beyond the veil and who seemed to me to be so old that she probably knew everyone who was dead anyway. She would sit under a clock by the fire drinking stout — a black beer like Guinness. It was prescribed for her by her doctor, on the National Health Service. Two bottles a day, paid for by the state, to fuel her visions. The world has changed since then.”

In his novels, Joyce lifts the veil of the dark side by exploring his characters relationships and their “darkest hearts.” He writes, subtly, of how that darkness is manifested and the consequences of that manifestation. Although Joyce’s novels — *Dreamside* (1991), *Dark Sister* (1992), *House Of Lost Dreams* (1993), *Requiem* (1995), *The Tooth Fairy* (1996), *The Stormwatcher* (1998), *Indigo* (2000), and the latest, *Smoking Poppy* — differ radically, they seem to share another core aspect: in each novel, from *Dark Sister*’s Victorian house in Redstone to Jerusalem for *Requiem* and now Thailand in *Smoking Poppy*, a sense of place seems important

“I always think it’s a mistake to have weak location in a story because our environment demands a certain response from us,” explains Joyce. “I’m fairly sensitive to the weather. Sometimes I feel like an animal, one that knows when the rain is coming or whatever. So I like to choose atmospheric places. The two things you mentioned are obviously intimately linked. I want the mood or psychology or my characters to be played out in advance by the conditions of the city or landscape they move through. Saves me having to state it in blunt psychological terms for one thing. Having said that, there are some places on earth that just exude mystery or menace — like Jerusalem. The story starts unrolling itself from the old walls and you have to chase to keep up with it. You could have a fun time dumping a crime writer, a romance writer, a horror writer, and a comedy writer

in that city and within two days it would have given them all a new story.”

Travel has aided this sense of place. After eight years as a training and development officer for the National Association of Youth Clubs in Leicester — a job he never can exactly explain except that it eventually involved a lot of national and international travel — he married Sue, a lawyer, and took off for Greece in a Citroën 2CV. The idea was to spend a year writing and it worked. They lived in a beach shack on the island of Lesbos without electricity or running water, but plenty of scorpions. His first novel sold, and on the proceeds the Joyces traveled on to Israel and Egypt before returning to Leicester, England. He became a senior lecturer in creative writing at Nottingham Trent University and continued writing. His novels have since garnered the British Fantasy Award an extraordinary four times (so far) and sold several hundred thousand copies.

Smoking Poppy, his most accomplished novel, took him to Thailand and into the hills of the Myanmar region. Like the novel, it was a journey of discovery. “I went to live with the ethnic hill tribes to research the novel,” says Joyce. “These people are not Thai and belong to a number of disparate tribes, having migrated to Thailand a couple of hundred years ago. But they brought with them the skills of harvesting the poppy. They are deeply animistic; the spirits live and work alongside you every day. You have to step around the spirits, and if you cross them there is big trouble. That was the journey I made.”

“What I discovered is that the world of the spirits is maintained by the tribes as a form of psychological hygiene. This is not the same as saying that spirits are simply psychological projections. Once out there the spirits have a will of their own. It’s a way of dealing with some very negative group or communal forces that threaten the harmony of the tribe. Which do you find the most odd? This, or Oprah Winfrey’s self-help TV programs?”

Myanmar — since the Taliban’s crack-down in Afghanistan on poppy growing — is now the biggest opium producing area in the world. The effect on the region has been devastating. “The effect is the torching of villages, the rape of the tribeswomen, the killing of the young men, the eviction of tribes from land that is pretty useless except for growing the poppy. All this so the Myanmar junta can grab the poppy production. Will the British or U.S. foreign offices do anything about this little local difficulty? Answers on a postcard please. While they proceed to industrialize the heroin trade we’ll sit back but in maybe three years we will have a new heroin epidemic in London, Paris, and New York.”

His next novel, *The Facts of Life*, brings him back to home turf. “Back to Grandma. It’s really all about her and her own seven daughters, my mother included. The novel is very loosely based on the family. My home town of Coventry got blitzed during the war. Flattened. Obliterated. Afterwards came the debate about how to rebuild a new city with all the conflicting post-war values of Britain. Socialism and capitalism. America and Europe. The rise of the working classes and the decline of the aristocracy. Technology and religion. While that’s happening seven sisters are sharing responsibility for bringing up a boy. His father was an American GI who died on Normandy Beach. His mother is one of the sisters. The question is: how do we raise this kid?”

The Facts of Life is slated for an October release in the UK. *The Tooth Fairy* is being republished there this month (with a much-improved cover.) In the U.S. Subterranean Press will publish his first collection *Partial Eclipse and Other Stories* this year and his novella “Black Dust” will be in the fourteenth edition of *Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror*. *The Stormwatcher*, as yet unpublished in North America, will be issued in a limited edition by Night Shade Books.

There’s also good chance Graham Joyce’s work will soon be seen on the big screen. Production on a film version of *Dark Sister* was announced last fall by Hollywood’s Sobini Films with Lawrence O’Neill attached to adapt and direct the picture. *The Tooth Fairy* has been optioned to Radar Pictures in a deal that includes Joyce as first writer.

Not bad for a lad from Keresley. ~

[For a review of *Smoking Poppy*, see Bookshelf in this issue —Ed.]

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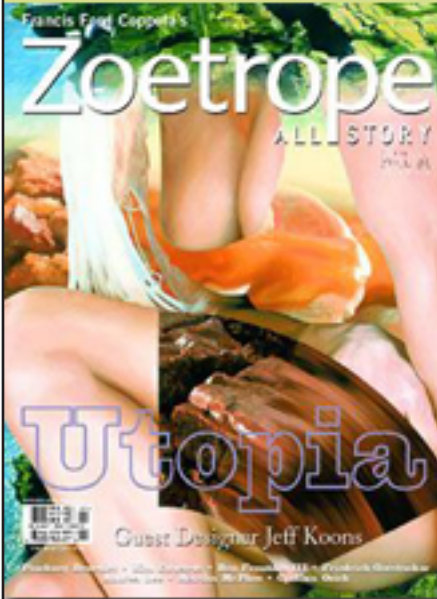
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