

The Ambassadors

People who keep the pages coming: RAY RUSSELL of Tartarus Press



Together with his partner Rosalie Parker, Ray Russell has run Tartarus Press since 1990. Based in a remote fold of the Yorkshire Dales, the company specialises in beautifully bound limited editions of literary supernatural and horror fiction. Tartarus also publishes paperbacks and ebooks.

What led you to publish stories of the melancholy and macabre?

My first real literary and collecting love was the writer Arthur Machen, and Tartarus Press was founded to try and

put some very rare and obscure Arthur Machen material back into print.

Was there a particular Machen text that attracted you?

I discovered that chapters five and six of *The Secret Glory* ¹ by Arthur Machen had never been published, back in the 1920s. I got hold of them and transcribed them, and various friends wanted a copy of my work so it made sense to put it into a book form, without actually knowing how to create a proper book at the time.

What was it about that book?

The Secret Glory is a very strange book. It is Arthur Machen's tale of the Holy Grail. He didn't quite know how to end it and someone, probably his publisher, told him that after four chapters he might as well end it there. But chapter five is one of the most beautiful bits of writing in the English language by Machen so it seemed a waste that it wasn't available to people.

What led to you base your operation in the Yorkshire Dales?

It was relatively arbitrary. We were starting to publish pretty much full time and realised that we could live anywhere

in the country as we were working from home, so we chose the most beautiful part of the countryside we could find.

Is Yorkshire one of the more haunted and occult counties?

I think all the counties are haunted and occult if you know the right places to go.

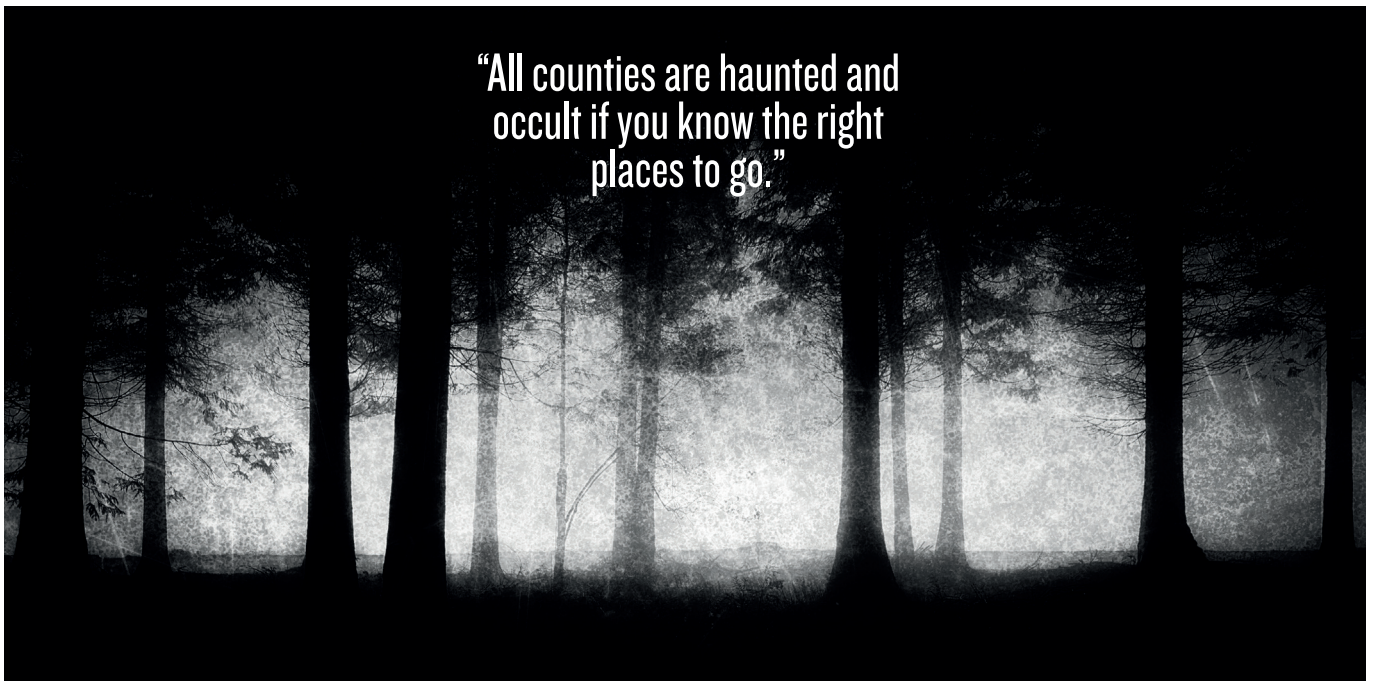
Do you focus on out of print texts or do you prefer new writers?

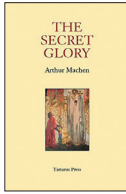
We publish both and we have always had an open submissions policy. People send us work based on what they think our interests are, which isn't always correct, but it sometimes sends us in directions which we had never considered.

Does that mean you get inundated?

My partner Rosalie is very organised about submissions and she would rather have an open policy to make sure we don't miss anything. Every now and again she will shout "Eureka! I think I've found something." One of the obvious more recent books that bowled us over was Andrew Michael Hurley's ² *The Loney*. I remember her passing me the manuscript and saying "I think you'll want to read this, we may have something

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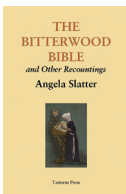




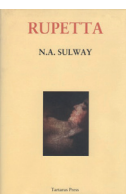
1 THE SECRET GLORY
BY ARTHUR MACHEN.
Tartarus Press, £40
Reflecting the author's obsession with the legend of the Holy Grail, here, after "sinning" in bohemian London with his old school servant, wastrel Ambrose Meyrick returns to his native Wales to find magic and mysticism in rural Gwent.



2 THE LONEY
BY ANDREW MICHAEL HURLEY.
John Murray, £7.99
Originally published by Tartarus, this "debut of unnerving horror" (S. King) concerns two brothers, one mute, who are left waiting each year by a spooky causeway with a house at the end while their parents visit a shrine in hope of finding a miracle cure for their son's condition.



3 THE BITTERWOOD BIBLE
BY ANGELA SLATTER.
Tartarus Press, £14.99
A collection of macabre short stories concerning coffin-makers, child-stealing plague maidens, pirates who vanish from the oceans and other unsettling gothic and folkloric fables. Extensively illustrated for additional creepiness.



4 RUPETTA
BY NIKE SULWAY.
Tartarus Press, £14.95
Rupetta is part machine, part human, and has lasted since her creation in 17th century France by having her heart regularly wound up for her. Like all good protagonists though, she's got a secret that if revealed could cause no end of trouble for others.

All Tartarus titles are available from Tartaruspress.com

here." But almost simultaneously we had two Australian writers contact us: Angela Slatter who wrote *Sourdough* and *The Bitterwood Bible* **3** which won the World Fantasy Award, and at the same time Nike Sulway sent us her novel *Rupetta* **4** which won various awards too.

Is there a golden age of strange and supernatural fiction?

The Edwardian period was a particularly productive phase, when the ghost story was moving into the modern era and it was no longer good enough just to have a sheeted figure appear at the denouement of the story. It was much more interesting to suggest that it may not have been a ghost at all, it might have all been in the mind of the narrator, and to have flawed characters telling those stories.

How do you find your audience?

I am not sure we do, I don't know whether they perhaps find us. It is partly by word of mouth and happenstance and chance, but we have slowly built up a nice kind of devoted, loyal audience. If there was a magic way of finding a readership I am sure all publishers would desperately be trying to.

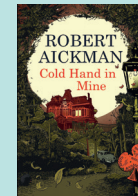
What was your first attraction to beautifully bound books?

Being a collector, especially some of the large paper limited editions that were published in the 1920s. Certain authors I was collecting I could only find first editions of. They were so obscure that they were never reprinted, so I had no choice but to splash out on books I couldn't really afford. I soon realised that there was a reason why they had some value because they were so beautifully made and designed.

Have you been accumulating unexplained events of your own?

I don't believe in ghosts, but I did once have a strange experience that I can't quite explain, although I can't believe it was a ghost that was behind it. I think most people in the ghost story world don't actually have a belief in ghosts. In fact, those that do tend to write the most boring stories, and the last thing you ever want to read is a book of "true" haunting. They are without any literary merit whatsoever. But when you ply people with a couple of drinks and ask them toward the end of the evening if something odd has ever happened to them, most of them have got a story.

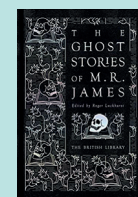
RAY RUSSELL'S RECOMMENDED CREEPY STARTER VOLUMES



COLD HAND IN MINE
BY ROBERT AICKMAN
"He is very much his own man, but his stories are psychological and he draws heavily on surrealism and plays around with Freudianism quite a lot. They are two of his major preoccupations."



THE DEAD OF NIGHT
BY OLIVER ONIONS
"He is moving out of the Edwardian period and writing more modern stories. He is just a very fine storyteller and master of the oblique, but traditional ghost story."



THE GHOST STORIES
BY M.R. JAMES
"James is the granddaddy of the ghost story. Anyone who tries to write a Jamesian story tends to fall flat because he kind of perfected the art."



LUNAR PARK
BY BRET EASTON ELLIS
"In amongst the story of a narcissistic egomaniac who is also an alcoholic on drugs, there is a very old-fashioned Jamesian ghost story hidden inside the novel."

And what was yours?

My partner told me her old family farm had a haunted music room, and after 20 years of visiting, in the middle of the day, after we had all being playing instruments in the music room, we went to make lunch. There was a lull in the conversation and we heard some notes played on the piano, and there was no one in the room. It didn't make my skin crawl, but it made me think, "What on earth was that? It just seemed very, very odd.