

Rediscovering the Fantastic: a true story

I was a little over six years old when I wrote my first piece of fiction. The headmaster of my primary school had us all sit down in assembly while he told us a story. I remember not liking the ending for some reason, and so when assembly was finished I went back to my classroom and wrote a different one. When my form teacher saw what I'd done she got all excited about it for some reason, and sent me down to show it to the headmaster. He must have been okay with it because he stuck a gold star into my exercise book and sent me on my way. I remember feeling bemused, because writing the story had been a private thing, something I'd done for myself, and yet here were all these people making a fuss of me. I couldn't make it out. I guess this was my first lesson in some of the contradictions of being a writer.

I wrote stories all the time after that. In the beginning they were mostly about mermaids. Then Doctor Who came into my life and it was all monsters. When I started to discover SF in my early teens I began filling my school exercise books with fifty-page epics about groups of friends who spend their summer holidays fending off alien invasions. For me at that time, writing was a completely natural activity, a kind of offshoot of reading that I never thought to question or analyse. I liked writing things down – in notebooks, journals, the crowded margins of my dog-eared copy of *The Penguin Anthology of Science Fiction*. It was just something I did. In my later teens and with my discovery of twentieth century poetry I began to understand a little more about what 'being a writer' might consist of. That this was the path I would follow was something I took for granted.

Looking back on it now, I think it was this taking for granted that made things go wrong for me. I took no notice of what I was doing, so perhaps that's why I barely noticed when I stopped doing it. After the age of fifteen, there was no outlet at my school for creative writing, no conception of the creative arts as a vocation. It was my essays that were being praised now, my writing about other people's writing. I was too inexperienced – and perhaps too much in love with the praise I was getting – to understand that one kind of writing was not at all the same as the other. Between the ages of twenty and thirty-three, I didn't write a single story and my poetry and journal writing became more and more a secret thing,

something I still practised out of compulsion but had no faith in. At some point during my twenties I chucked it all in the dustbin.

Without knowing it, I was losing my way.

It was Ramsey Campbell who brought me back on track, and Stephen King who introduced me to him. Back then I used to be one of those people who sneered at Stephen King without ever having read a word he had written. I fell in love with his narrative voice through the medium of audio, a recording of *Rose Madder* that was given to me by a friend who'd listened to it in his car during the long hours of driving that were part of his job as a sales rep for BMG Records. He knew I loved horror films (I do tend to make that kind of obvious) and thought I might enjoy it. He was right. I was delighted to admit I'd been wrong about King, who is that happiest and rarest of accidents, a writer in whom a highly advanced literary sensibility and an almost preternatural aptitude for story combine to work a narrative magic that is pretty much unique. He is one of the few novelists I can still read for the sheer unadulterated pleasure of turning the pages to find out what happens, and back when I first discovered him in the late nineties I could not believe I'd been stupid enough to deny myself such pleasure for so long. I found his non-fiction as compelling as his fiction, and it wasn't long before King's 1981 *Danse Macabre*, his inimitably personal history of twentieth century horror fiction and film, became a kind of bible for me.

It was within these pages – pages 396-403 to be precise – that I first encountered the name of Ramsey Campbell. I had quite literally never heard of Campbell before that, but Uncle Steve's description of *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* made the book sound so nastily inviting that I headed off to my nearest Waterstone's in pursuit of him more or less immediately. It was lucky that my renascent interest in weird fiction happened to coincide with that period in the 1990s when Campbell's novels were still readily available in paperback, because I firmly believe that the experience of reading him changed the course of my life and was the stimulus that helped me to identify who I was and what I wanted to do.

What Ramsey Campbell showed me – and it's a marker of how unformed I was, how ignorant as a reader, let alone as a writer, that I did not know this already – was that speculative fiction could also be literature. I started reading *The House on Nazareth Hill* feeling scared, not because I was afraid of ghosts or monsters (I took in *Texas Chainsaw*,

Phantasm, *The Shining*, *Halloween*, *Death Line* without batting an eyelid – my bizarrely worded personal intellectual rulebook always maintained that monsters on film were ‘allowed’ while horror on the page was an inferior genre and therefore *streng verboten*) but because no one had given me guidelines or permissions on how I was supposed to react to it. Was this junk, high quality junk perhaps, but nonetheless junk that it was okay to enjoy as entertainment but nothing more than that, or was I actually reading something that had a higher value, in the way I’d been taught that Bram Stoker and Mary Shelley and H. G. Wells and John Wyndham had a higher value?

I didn’t know, because no one had told me. For the first time in my intellectual life I was on my own.

Well, I can tell you now that I adored that book. I adored it because it scared me shitless, and because it was so well made, so *intended as writing*, that while reading some passages I found myself quite literally shaking, not just with fear but with excitement. I hadn’t known, you see, that this could be done, that you could write speculative fiction and also care passionately about language, about tone, about sentence structure, about imagery and allusion, about *words*, for God’s sake. That you could be a horror writer, and also write books that had substance and lasting value, books that mattered.

I rushed back to Waterstone’s and bought all the other Ramsey Campbell books they had on the shelves there: *The Long Lost*, *Incarnate*, *Midnight Sun*. As my delight and excitement mounted (these novels are masterpieces, FFS) I found I was also feeling an increasing sense of anger. At myself, for having been so prejudiced and blinkered, and at the so-called literary establishment, for so self-righteously encouraging those prejudices in the first place, for so rigidly defining what literature ought to be and who ought to be writing it. Most of all I was angry at the time I had wasted, the years spent fiddling around trying to work out what I was supposed to be doing with my life when my six-year-old self had known it all along.

Anger is sometimes power, though, and in fact I soon stopped being angry and started writing. My first short story was ‘The Beachcomber’. I still have the original manuscript somewhere, poorly typed and naive and rather awkward, but the very act of conceiving it – of completing a piece of original fiction after ten years of not-writing – was an act of personal transformation.

It felt like I was back where I should have been, that I finally understood what I was for.

My first published story, ‘The Beachcomber’, heavily rewritten and revised, appeared in the British Fantasy Society journal *Dark Horizons* in 2002. Ten years and more than fifty published pieces of short fiction later I’ve just recently finished drafting my first novel.

Writing has not become easier for me as I’ve gone along, if anything it’s become harder, because the more I write the more I become aware of my failings and limitations. One thing I know for sure though is that I owe everything to the writers who’ve gone before me, who have discovered all on their own just as I did that the idea of a rulebook – for reading, for writing, for thinking – is an insidious and constraining delusion. If there are any rules for writers at all they are merely these: use your imagination, stretch your mind, never stop listening to your heart.

We’re all on our own in this game – but we can at least be on our own together.