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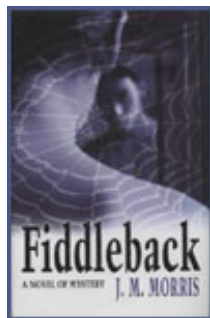
### Web of Intrigue

An Interview with J.M. (aka Mark) Morris  
by Matt Williams

Many horror fans will be familiar with the name Mark Morris. Since bursting onto the scene in the late eighties with his gargantuan horror epic, *Toady*, Mark has received continued acclaim for such novels as *Stitch*, *The Immaculate*, *The Secret of Anatomy* and *Longbarrow*. As well as being given a big "thumbs up" by his readers, Morris has also received praise from such luminaries as Ramsey Campbell and Peter Crowther, placing him firmly among the top horror authors working in Britain today.

The name J.M. Morris, on the other hand, may not be so familiar. Assuming an ambivalent moniker resulted in his latest novel, *Fiddleback* being published under a pseudonym; whilst writing with a female voice in the first person has led some to believe, not without reason, that the author is a woman. "When I first submitted the synopsis for *Fiddleback*," he explains, "I fully expected it to be published as the next Mark Morris book. However, Piatkus, my hardback publisher for the previous ten years, decided not to renew my contract, largely because by that time I was the only horror writer still on their books as the genre had slipped into the doldrums. It was my agent, therefore, who suggested submitting the book elsewhere under a pseudonym, partly because she didn't want potential publishers to dismiss it as an unsellable horror novel before even looking at it, and partly because she thought the book itself transcended the genre and that it might be worth approaching mainstream/literary publishers with it.

"There was also, of course, the fact that it was written in first person from a female point of view, and she thought - and I must admit, this simply hadn't occurred to me - that potential publishers would feel uncomfortable trying to market a female viewpoint novel written by a male writer. Personally, as a reader, I don't care whether the main character is male or female or whether the author is male or female, just so long as it's a well-written book with a good story and characters you can believe in and empathise with. However I'm told that, on the whole, female readers like their female-led books to be written by women. They don't like blokes muscling in on their turf and actually having the temerity to assume that they know how women think and feel. I must emphasise that this is what I've been told, it's not my own personal experience. Many of my and my wife's female friends have read and loved the book, though - without wishing to blow my own trumpet too loudly - I must admit that alongside the admiration, most of them have expressed surprise that I've been able to depict a female character so convincingly.



"*Fiddleback* was submitted to Macmillan under the name C.M. Morris, and was read by a female editor who not only loved the book, but was convinced that it had been written by a woman. It was she who decided that the book should be marketed as a psychological thriller, in order to appeal to readers of the likes of Ruth Rendell, Kathy Reichs, Nicci French etc. I was surprised by her assessment of the book, but not displeased. I was also delighted to be in print again so quickly - and to be published by such an excellent company is a massive bonus. It was me who decided that the name on the cover should

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be J.M. Morris rather than C.M. Morris, partly because my dad's name was Jack, and partly because writers whose first initial is J seem to do quite well for themselves - J.K. Rowling, J.G. Ballard, J.R.R. Tolkien. The book has not been promoted as having been written by a female author as such, but, so as not to alienate potential female readers, we kept the biographical details as sparse and ambiguous as possible on the hardback and didn't include an author photo. However, I have made a few personal appearances to promote the novel and it's a bit hard to hide the goatee."

*Fiddleback* tells the story of Ruth Gemmill's search for her missing younger brother, Alex, to whom she is very close. Confused by his disappearance, Gemmill heads to the bleak and sinister village of Greenwell to find him. Upon arriving she finds only unhelpful villagers and belligerent law enforcement. Then, suddenly, she catches sight of her abusive ex-boyfriend, Matt, someone she left behind years ago. Frustration soon turns into fear for her own safety as Ruth quickly realises that finding Alex is the least of her worries...

Marketed as "A Novel of Suspense", *Fiddleback* gives the impression of crossing genres, at first appearing to be a straightforward whodunit, then moving into crime territory before becoming altogether more surreal and fantastical. A deliberate move? Not according to the author. "*Fiddleback* wasn't a conscious decision to shift genres, and indeed when I submitted the synopsis to my old publisher, Piatkus, I fully expected them not only to accept it but to publish it and promote it as the next Mark Morris horror novel. That's not to say that I particularly thought of it as a horror novel. I guess I thought of it as a strange story, or as a mainstream novel with an ambiguously supernatural element. I wasn't consciously moving away from the genre. I love horror, and always will, but I felt I'd done my share of overtly supernatural novels, and wanted to try something different."

With its emphasis on fractured psyches and fragile personalities, *Fiddleback* concentrates more on psychological suspense than straight-ahead horror, something Morris was keen to promote. "I'm more interested these days in how characters react to one another," he states, "particularly characters who are psychologically damaged in some way or under extreme stress, rather than in whether someone will get away from the demonic entity that's chasing after them and wants to tear their head off. I'm also more interested in evoking a mood of dread or unease in the reader rather than giving them a thrill-ride and scaring them out of their wits. I've been reading a lot of stuff by writers like Robert Aickman, Rupert Thompson, Geoff Dyer, Magnus Mills - most of these writers aren't even published as genre writers, though they could easily be - and finding myself more deeply disturbed than I would be if I were reading a book about giant killer slugs. I think a great many genre writers are drawing back from the overtly supernatural these days, simply because horror readers have become more discerning and sophisticated than they were even fifteen, twenty years ago. Look at recent work by Graham Joyce, Tim Lebbon, Mike Marshall Smith, Conrad Williams, Nicholas Royle. If the supernatural is there at all, it's kept in the shadows, used sparingly and thus far more effectively. I mean, Ramsey Campbell and Dennis Etchison have been doing it for years. It's only now that many of us are starting to catch up."

Morris strikes a note of foreboding early on when Ruth runs over a hare en route to the village of Greenwell. From this point, a note of disquiet settles over the story as Ruth comes up against the villagers' universal hostility and indifference. I wondered if the "hare incident" was based on a personal experience, and if so, in what circumstances. "It wasn't based on personal experience, but, as I'm sure you know, the hare is a mystical symbol - it's tied in with pagan beliefs concerning the changing seasons, and it's also associated with witchcraft, in that hares were often thought to be witch's familiars. In the context of *Fiddleback*, the hare is like a warning sign for Ruth, an indicator that from now on in things are going to get very strange and unpleasant indeed,

and that if she's thinking of turning back then now is the time, because once she's crossed that town boundary it'll be too late."

As the book progresses, its heroine, Ruth Gemmill is drawn deeper into a web of intrigue: the more she believes she's uncovered, the more confused she becomes. As a result, the fiddleback spider image becomes a metaphor for Ruth's inability to unravel the mystery of her brother's disappearance. "The spider is a potent image," agrees Morris, "and in the novel is symbolic of a number of apparently disparate but ultimately inter-connected themes within the narrative. As you say, there is the 'web' idea, the whole notion of predatory entrapment. Then, of course, in more simple terms, the spider, and more particularly the way it appears and disappears, is symbolic of Alex himself, of the notion that he is close by, almost within touching distance, and yet frustratingly elusive. And thirdly, because it's a fiddleback spider (i.e. one that is not native to this country), there is the suggestion that something is seriously wrong, off-kilter, in Greenwell, that things are not what they seem."

Several of Morris's books feature younger characters who feel the need to return to their roots - often the village or small town they left in their teens - to re-experience or recover childhood memories. The creepy abandoned train station in *Fiddleback*, for example, a childhood haunt where Matt, the book's abusive central character, played in as a kid. The village of Greenwell with its unattractive surroundings (to an extent, internalised by Ruth's fruitless hunt for her brother); the characters' desperate need to escape to the city. Such fictionalised melancholia, however, doesn't necessarily reflect the author's upbringing, as he explains. "I had a very happy and settled childhood," says Morris, "with wonderful parents, and a sister who still shares my love for horror movies, and great friends. In fact, I look back on my childhood with an almost Bradbury-esque nostalgia. We moved around quite a bit as a family when I was young, and even lived in Hong Kong for three years, but in 1972, when I was nine, we settled in Huddersfield, and it's here - surrounded by woods and fields - where I did most of my growing up.

"In that respect, I found childhood a very fecund time. It's when, I think, we're at our most emotionally vibrant, before the worries and responsibilities of adulthood start to intrude. As children we don't have to think about earning money or doing the shopping or taking the car in for a service or paying bills. Within the individual, even rarified world of a child, everything happens on a much grander, much more personal scale. We show our emotions much more readily - we scream with delight when we're having fun and bawl our eyes out when we're hurt. Time means nothing. Days are long and bright and colourful and full of excitement. There's always something to look forward to - Christmas, birthdays, Bonfire Night, *Doctor Who* on the telly, a game of football after school, baked beans on toast for tea, curling up in bed at the end of the day with a book of ghost stories...

"In my fiction, I often try to capture, or re-capture, these very raw, very uninhibited emotional states. But I often twist them around, and inflict trauma and fear and terrible things on my childhood characters. I don't do this because I'm a sicko, but simply because damaged characters, characters with secrets, characters with issues, are far more interesting to write than happy, stable ones. Most serial killers do what they do because of an event, or series of events, in their childhood. Most child-abusers were themselves abused as children. Childhood is the most important, vulnerable, formative time of our lives, and this is why I'm fascinated by the notion of people going back, or of past events impacting on the present. It's a major, major theme for me, and I have no doubt that it will always remain so."

Another theme that comes through strongly in *Fiddleback* (and novels such as *Stitch* and *The Immaculate*) is the characters' experiences in higher education. The realisation that there's a big wide world beyond their home village or town

- especially important to Ruth's brother, Alex who really blossoms when he moves to London to stay with his sister. "It's to do with my fascination with how our characters form and change and are influenced as we move through life," Morris explains. "We move from one stage to another, from one location to another, and we accumulate people and experiences as we go. And all of it we take with us to one extent or another, if not physically, then mentally or psychologically. Childhood friends may fall by the wayside, we may grow apart from them, but we always retain a special place for them inside ourselves, and not as the people they are now, but as the people that they - and we - were then. To make characters interesting, they need to have fluidity, movement, and as a writer you often do this by changing their environment, by throwing them into a new, often hostile, situation, and observing and recording how they react to it. Hence the boys in *Toady* having to deal with the devastating consequences of their actions; hence Ian Raven in *Stitch* coping with leaving home and becoming a student for the first time; hence David Wisher and his mum, Susan, leaving London and starting a new life in their inherited home in *Longbarrow*; and hence Ruth's experiences in the unfamiliar town of Greenwell where she has come to look for her missing brother.

"Of course much of the way the characters feel is based on personal experience. Whenever we're thrown into a new situation, especially if we're on our own, there's a sense of dislocation, a heightened - sometimes almost surreal or hallucinogenic - feeling of strangeness, of uncertainty. It's often not a pleasant feeling, but at the same time there's an underlying sense almost of exhilaration. We go through so much of life with a plodding sense of complacency that it can often take a change - and sometimes a seismic change - to bring us alive, or even to bring out the best in us."

*Fiddleback* is written in the first person, a form many writers find difficult to maintain convincingly - though not in Morris's case. "I loved writing *Fiddleback* in the first person. I'd always shied away from it before in my novel-length work because I wasn't confident I could sustain interest in one character throughout an entire novel. With my earlier works - particularly *Toady*, *Stitch* and *The Secret of Anatomy* - I'd had a huge cast of characters and I'd cut from one character to another, writing what amounted almost to a series of set-pieces which revolved around the central thrust of the story. With *Fiddleback*, though, I knew as soon as the ideas started to percolate through that for the story to work the narrative would have to be more intense, personal and linear. And once I started writing, I found it incredibly easy to maintain the momentum. I know it's a cliché, but the story virtually wrote itself. That's not to say that I didn't then go back and change huge chunks of it when it was finished, because I did. The final version of the book is very different to the first draft - particularly the end, which I tinkered with and swapped around a great deal before I was happy with it. And now I find I'm writing most of my stuff in first person, and I'm loving it. My next novel will be another first person book. After that I may go back to third person just for a change - who knows?"

This is a novel that centres on its revelatory final chapter. However, as he explains, the author went through several versions before settling on its current incarnation. "In my initial draft as submitted to Macmillan the ending was far more ambiguous and slightly more fantastical. Of course, I can't go into specifics because much of the impact of the book does hinge on its final revelations, but it was actually my editor at Macmillan who suggested I reign in the surreal elements and give the novel a more... shall we say understandable conclusion.

"I was worried that the ending might come across as a bit of a cop-out for some, but most people seem to think it works. With one or two exceptions, even many of my contemporaries, most of whom are themselves renowned writers and prolific readers - and I'm talking about people like Mike Marshall

Smith, Nick Royle and Pete Crowther here - have been incredibly enthusiastic about the book. Certainly I think it's the best thing I've ever written."

Psychological suspense *Fiddleback* may be. However Morris is quick to reiterate that it doesn't spell the end of his horror writing. "I'm hoping to keep writing books and stories under both names," he states, "but the Mark Morris stuff, for the time being, will probably only be published by quality small press publishers, simply because the genre is still in a pretty parlous state - at least from a mainstream publishing viewpoint. As Mark Morris, I've currently got a lot of stuff on the go. My PS Publishing novella, *The Uglimen*, came out a month or two ago, and I've got a story in the next issue of *Cemetery Dance* magazine. I've also just sold a 47,000-word story to Pete Crowther, which will be published in a book of novellas by *Cemetery Dance* next year, featuring work from myself, Tim Lebbon, Simon Clark and Mike Marshall Smith. Then I've got a short story collection called *Long Shadows, Nightmare Light*, which will be published by Silver Salamander. My new novel, too, provisionally called *Nowhere Near An Angel*, will be published as a Mark Morris book by PS Publishing next year. This was originally going to be my J.M. Morris follow-up to *Fiddleback*, but *Nowhere...* has a male protagonist, and Macmillan have specifically stated that they want all future J.M. Morris books to have female lead characters so as to retain the female readership that *Fiddleback* will hopefully have gained. So rather than abandon this novel, I've decided to write it as a Mark Morris book and then go back to Macmillan early next year with a proposal for the next J.M. Morris. *Fiddleback*, meanwhile, will be out in paperback in the UK and the US in the spring, and there should be French, German and Dutch editions of the book around soon too, which is exciting for me, as this is the first time I've sold translation rights to my work."

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