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The Smoking Poppy Interview

Matt Williams talks to Graham Joyce, March 2002



Since his first book, *Dreamside* was published in 1991, Graham Joyce has become a firm favourite with readers and critics alike. Every one of his novels - from British Fantasy award winning *Dark Sister* to the Booker Prize nominated *The Tooth Fairy* - is uniquely cultured and vividly characterised; full-bodied tales with characters as complex and interesting as their surroundings.

Joyce's latest novel, *Smoking Poppy*, tells the story of Danny Innes. Middle-aged, estranged from his wife; embittered and lonely, he receives a call from his wife with the news that his daughter, Charlotte is in jail in Thailand accused of drug smuggling. Upon arriving in the country, Danny discovers that things aren't quite as straightforward as they seem. Soon he is following a trail into a mysterious and unfathomable country where he finds opium, drug gangs and spirit haunted villages. And himself.

Smoking Poppy is the first time that Joyce has written in the first person, a fact that hasn't gone unnoticed by his many readers. "I'd always resisted the first person narrative in novels," says the author, "though I've written a fair few short stories in this mode. I have a beef with the first person voice, in that the Modernist and Post-Modernist assumption is that the subjective position is somehow superior because it undercuts the notion of authority, and that the god-like third person is a Victorian lie, a psychological deception. Well yes it is, but then so is the smugness in the notion that you are doing something radical by avoiding the Third Person, when after all it's just another technical device cloaking your intentions. What's more the first person encourages an indiscipline in writing that is often excused on stylistic grounds. I'm just fed up with post-modernism I guess. Having got that rant off my chest I decided to break my own constraints about the thing because I wanted to hatch out a voice that was representative of conflicting voices within me. Danny's voice is a meld of voices from the social background of my formative years and the slaverling, chattering, semi-educated person I am now. Once I'd got the voice mix, the rest followed."



Joyce's characters - especially the narrator, Danny - undertake quite a journey in the book: physically, psychologically and spiritually. *Smoking Poppy* explores of those three layers, using poetic metaphor and incisive narrative to bind his tale into a cohesive whole. So what influenced the narrative?

"Well the convention of a physical journey matching an inner progress is off-the-peg, but it is useful. I was thinking of *Heart of Darkness* and *Mosquito Coast* and so on. The landscape had to be arduous to match Danny's psychological breakthrough, and there are the *Pilgrim's Progress* references in there, too. But it became even more useful because of the elusive nature of spirits in the tribal culture - spirits that move in and out of the spirit world without it seeming remarkable to the tribal people. This is happening to Danny,

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but it takes him a long time to realise it."

If I had any problem with the book, it was that the character of Danny, being such a earth-bound and straightforward type, should pen such an eloquent narrative. Is the reader to assume that Danny is writing about his experiences several years after they happened?

"This is the difficulty of how to make your characters speak with an articulate and telling voice," replies Joyce, "especially if their social background is unlikely to equip them with the appropriate language. I built in as much as I could to deal with this question - Danny is one of those intelligent working-class technicians who probably failed the sloppy old eleven-plus exam (just as I did). But his native intelligence has to shine through. I also made him a voracious reader and general knowledge expert, all meant to prefigure this question. But at some level you have to swallow the Modernist convention I've just been moaning about if you want to mix the literary with the vernacular. If he's not everyman, he's certainly every-bit-of-me."

Joyce explores the concept of 'family' very deeply in this novel. Danny's love for his daughter is a multi-shaped thing. He feels she is lost to him, both physically and spiritually, and to regain control of these emotions he feels he must 'return' her to the child-state. This gives the book a 'Catch-22' feel. Danny wants the impossible and is hell-bent on achieving it. His daughter, now a young woman and no longer a child can never identify with that - until, perhaps she has children of her own.

"When you become a parent you start defining yourself by your family. I remember thinking that was anathema before I had children: a kind of loss of soul, existential death. All that is swept away when you have children. That 'living through' your children - the thing that infuriates you about your parents - becomes an expansion not a retraction at all. And it's deadly dangerous for everyone if not handled right. You don't see any of this until you have children of your own. You can't even guess at the awesome pull of it."



There is a lighter tone to *Smoking Poppy* than in recent novels, something the author definitely intended. "I noticed that some of the humour I managed to get into *The Tooth Fairy* had eluded me in the next two novels, so I was trying to fix that. I want to get a measure of horror and humour in the writing, even though that cuts against some of the genre expectations. It can foul the engine though, and getting the fuel-mix right is something I'm always fussing about. I'm getting closest to where I want to be with the novel after *Smoking Poppy*, which is called *The Facts Of Life*."

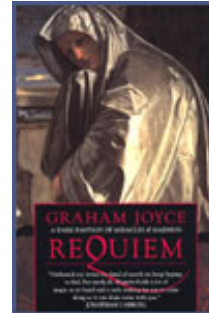
In previous novels Joyce has utilised his experiences in places like the Greek islands, Rome and Jerusalem to lend his novels a degree of verisimilitude. His research for *Smoking Poppy* was just as thorough, as he explains: "I'd scratched out the opium metaphor so I had a choice of visiting the Golden Triangle or The Golden Crescent as the opium-producing spots are called. And I sure as hell wasn't going to Afghanistan. When I got to Thailand I found the tourist treks couldn't get me deep enough into the bandit territory, so I hired a couple of guides and tailored a trek. Then I stayed in a tribal village near the Myanmar border. The bandits came sniffing around but after a small bribe they cheerfully showed me the easy jungle lab process of converting opium into morphine."

As with previous books, the characters' behaviour is determined by the environment in which they find themselves. Danny's friend and companion, Mick, appears relatively unaffected by the move to Thailand, at least initially. His behaviour there is often an exaggeration of the way he behaves at home in England. Whereas Danny, already struggling with worry over his daughter and internal conflicts of his own, finds the atmosphere of the country oppressive,

even dangerous to his spiritual and psychological makeup. Would the author agree that the exotic climes to which these characters travel act as barometers of internal conflict? And that Thailand - and especially the poppy plants - are metaphors with which to manipulate and measure the characters' journey along the path to spiritual and moral redemption?

"In the structure of any story, you have to boss your characters into a zone where they are unfamiliar with the rules or the currency," he responds. "You can do this with landscape or you can do it with events that have turned the world five or forty-five degrees. Either way they have gone into the zone. Thailand itself is a metaphor for the dislocation Danny is feeling in his life, and the poppy sequences dramatise that most acutely. The poppy, the idea of it being milked, of it bleeding and re-sealing and bleeding again was a way in which the landscape could talk to Danny to get him to understand. He has to be turned over before he has a chance of redemption."

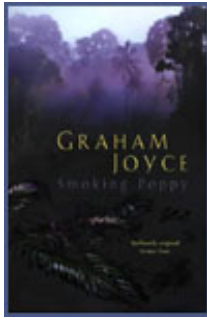
There are ghosts in *Smoking Poppy*. Not ghosts in the gothic sense but those which haunt characters' psyches. In previous novels - such as *Requiem*, *The Stormwatcher* and *The Tooth Fairy* - the author has used 'shadow tutors' to guide and inform the characters in their quests for spiritual satisfaction. But what do we make of the ones in *Smoking Poppy*? "They could be any of those things," he suggests. "They take the shape, tormenting or otherwise, of what is most needed at that moment. I believe in ghosts, I really do. I just don't happen to think that they are the spirits of the dead. I see them as spirits of the living, of a fractured or distressed psyche. Not just as psychological metaphors but as independently acting influential forces."



I wondered if the author had a particular stance on drug trafficking - given that he describes the trade and its detrimental effect on the indigenous population in *Smoking Poppy*. What about the positive effects of the drug? I'm also intrigued by one of the character's suggestions that the flower might not even have been indigenous to earth - that it might, in fact, be an alien!

"Being addicted to the poppy is not a problem if the stuff is growing in your back yard. The tribal people only have field medicine, and so long as you aren't a chronic user you could be an opium addict until a ripe old age without it causing too much damage. But when the government, under pressure from the Western powers who had directly caused their own heroin epidemics, torched the opium crops it left hundreds of tribal addicts who then had to go down into places like Chiang Mai to find the drug. By this time the only form they could get it in was heroin, which meant shared needles which meant an Aids epidemic. How is it we shit on these people every time we make a move?"

"The alien thing was a hippy joke of course, but it is extraordinary how the opium has morphed, and at every stage it has somehow tricked the scientists into believing that they had got rid of the addictive properties of the drug, when in reality that element increased exponentially. From the East India Trading Company to the CIA lending their planes to the Hmong traffickers in the Seventies, it seems like the intelligent spirit of the plant is sitting back laughing and going 'Work harder! Till the soil for me! Work harder!'"



Graham Joyce's latest novel, *Smoking Poppy* was published by Gollancz (UK) in October 2001, in hardback at £12.99. It is available at all good bookstores and the usual online retailers.

For more information on Graham's novels and short fiction, visit his website, at <http://www.grahamjoyce.net/>.

Matt Williams is a regular DVD columnist here at The Alien Online, and is also the webmaster of the official Graham Masterton website. He's also runs a record label, called

[Liquid Note Records](#).

