

Voudun It? - An interview with Stephen Gallagher

by Matt Williams

Novelist, screenwriter and director Stephen Gallagher has had a colourful and varied career to date. As well as writing some of the best psychological suspense/chase novels to emerge from Britain in recent decades, he is responsible for penning radio serials, contributing four-part stories for two consecutive seasons of *Doctor Who* as well as writing material for successful TV series' like ITV's *Chillers* and BBC's *Bugs*. Most recently he penned a first-rate episode of BBC's *Murder Rooms* (a series of fictionalised dramas based on the relationship of Arthur Conan Doyle and his supposed Sherlock Holmes 'model', lecturer Doctor Joseph Bell) called 'The Kingdom of Bones'. In addition, virtually all of his novels have been optioned, with two of them, *Chimera* and *Oktober* (which he also directed) being adapted for TV.

His latest novella *White Bizango* is a short but fast-paced tale, the kind you have to finish in one sitting. It follows Louisiana detective, John Lafcadio and his attempt to track down an unconventional killer - someone who practices the art of voudun (a branch of voodoo) to dispatch his gullible victims. Unfortunately the killer also has designs on Lafcadio who soon finds himself face to face with the terrifying effects of superstition and ignorance.

White Bizango differs somewhat from Gallagher's other books, particularly its origins and unusual subject matter, as he explains. 'It's one of those areas where it's hard to untangle the personal and the professional. When my daughter was four years old we had a mega-trip over to the US which started with all the theme parks in Florida but then, just at the point where you'd normally come home, we hopped down to New Orleans ... she hadn't started school yet, so this would be our last chance for such an extended stay. In New Orleans we met up and spent some time with my old friend Mike Chafetz and his family (I'd met Mike at when he was an exchange student over here in the 70's, and we'd co-founded the University's SF club). Now, here was a revelation ... you go to a place with a head full of received images, a kind of crude cartoon of a city, and get them wiped away by a much bigger, more subtle, more textured, more real experience. But at that stage I wasn't researching, I was just doing it. The difference being that you still take stuff in, but you're not mentally organising it to any particular end.

'After we'd stayed there for a while we headed off in a rental car and kind of explored our way through Western Louisiana and into East Texas, where we stayed a while with writer Joe Lansdale and his family in Nacogdoches. And that was great and very different ... Joe has this big, lovely, private, rambling home in the woods, and we just sat and unwound while the children disappeared off into the trees and more or less stayed out of our sight for the next three days. They'd appear when they were hungry, just trot through the kitchen and grab a hamburger off the table ... I remember at one point they'd painted themselves blue. No explanation, just these blue-faced kids passing through.

'After we came home I got a call from Joe to say that he and Karen were putting together an anthology for *Dark Harvest*, and was wondering if I had anything in mind to submit. That gave me the arse-kick I needed to write a short story called "Homebodies" which was essentially a dark-slanted riff woven around our three children and that situation.

""Homebodies" turned out to be the start of the imaginative process that led me to *Red, Red Robin*, so a couple of years later found me back over there researching the novel. Now that was a completely different process. The first time had been a family trip, but this was work. I went out alone and with big

lists of contacts and locales and details and descriptions that I needed to get. I started out in Philadelphia, where the bulk of the novel is set, and then went down to Louisiana to get all the stuff for the finale. I re-covered much of the ground that I'd already seen, but this time with an agenda. In the end, *Red, Red Robin's* endgame mainly involved the city of New Orleans and the lake and the swamps to the north. All the rural and small-town stuff that I'd written stayed unused until *White Bizango* came along, and then suddenly there it was, a ready-made setting. Any gaps that I needed to fill, I called on Mike; hence the dedication at the beginning of the book.'

Gallagher personally investigated the voodoo/voudun angle in order to give his story the necessary authenticity - which made for some usual research. 'My first encounter with voodoo in any form was in those tourist shops you get in the French Quarter,' he says. 'I shouldn't have been as surprised as I was, really, because they're just the equivalent of those stalls you get around St Peter's in Rome selling Pope-in-a-snow-globes. Then I learned that the "spiritualist churches" that I'd been seeing actually represented the merging of Catholic symbolism into the voudun worldview, which made me realise that voodoo was neither as exotic as I'd assumed, nor as remote from real experience.'

'The story's not so much based on any true incidents, however, as on a coming-together of themes that I saw in the research. I started thinking about voodoo and looking into it because I'd been asked to, by a TV producer as part of an initiative that very quickly fizzled out. Nothing came of it other than to switch me onto the subject. That often happens.'

Fiction it might be. However *White Bizango* emphasises the reality, not the myth surrounding the cult of voudun. 'Most of what's sinister and unusual about voudun has been added in the telling by writers and film-makers,' Gallagher stresses. 'At heart it's just another symbol-driven religion with a pantheon of characters whose story offers a handle on the unknowable mysteries of life. The malign stuff exists, but it's not at the core and it's not the whole picture.'

White Bizango was written specifically for Pete Crowther's PS Publishing, though, as Gallagher explains, it ended up being closer to a novel than the novella Crowther requested. 'Pete invited me to offer something, and my sense was that the voodoo ember might grow us something interesting. I pitched him the fragment that I had along with some thoughts on where I might go with it, and he came back with just the kind of enthusiasm you need to make you push yourself a bit. I suspect that's one of the reasons why Pete's always got the best out of me as an editor.'

'Then I let it simmer, which is novelist-speak for doing bugger-all about it for a while. But when I saw that Pete had actually scheduled it for late 2002, that was arse-kick number 2.'

'As I was writing it I realised that the development was going to take me way over the novella wordage target. On the other hand, it felt too special for me to go chopping it off at the knees ... I reckoned I'd let it run to length and then either see if it would take cuts to bring it down to the 30,000, or be prepared to set it aside and offer something else in its place. In the end it went to 50,000, which is the same length as a '50s paperback novel like a *Gold Medal* or a *Monarch*. That was the comparison Pete made when he read it and said he wanted to run it exactly as-is. But it seems to be such a fast read that people zip right through it and assume it must be shorter!'

Most of Gallagher's novels, with the exception of *Valley of Lights*, have a strong British feel to them - though like last novel, *Red, Red Robin*, *White Bizango* features a US deep south setting. How comfortable does he feel writing with an American voice?

'The whole American thing started in 1978, when my wife and I took a month to make a coast-to-coast journey and see as much of the country as we could. After I'd left my TV job in 1980 we went back and lived in Phoenix for a while and did the coast-to-coast thing again in the opposite direction. Out of all that came a number of things ... my first story sales to *Fantasy & Science Fiction* a massive unmanageable novel that I never finished but out of whose ashes came *Valley of Lights*.

'The "American voice" is a bit of a con in my case. It's basically plain English with the British-isms removed and some extra care with certain style and vocabulary choices. I supply the rhythms, the reader's mind supplies the accent. The effect I'd hope for is like the one you get when a European cinematographer photographs an American movie. It's a thing apart. You know the landscape but the feeling's different.'

Was he influenced by Texan, Joe Lansdale, a writer noted for his deep south settings (and coincidentally, the author of *White Bizango's* introduction)? 'I hadn't read any Lansdale when I started using American settings, and I certainly wouldn't try to evoke his style,' says Gallagher. 'No-one else writes quite like him, and if anyone tries it's going to show. I *do* remember reading Elmore Leonard and trying to work out what made his stuff tick. Not so much for the surface polish as for what's going on underneath. They were like crime novels played out as Westerns. I was particularly impressed by *City Primeval*, in that at heart it was a mythic clash of champions without ever losing sight of its own nature as an entertainment. You could see the eternal being expressed through the everyday, which I thought was brilliant. How many times have we seen straight-faced and serious attempts at allegory and higher meaning that make us cringe? And yet here's a pulp writer, achieving it without breaking sweat.

'I also think Steinbeck and Harper Lee show the power of a plain style. As does Orwell in our own culture. But again, I wouldn't consciously take on the voice of anyone. I'd like to think that all the books manage a strong feel of wherever they're set.'

Will we be seeing more from Detective John Lafcadio? 'I wrote a John Lafcadio short story called "Jailbird For Jesus" and put it on the website to coincide with the book's publication,' says Gallagher. 'It's since been picked up by Maxim Jakubowski for his *Year's Best British Mysteries* anthology.

'As for anything further with the same character and setting, I blow hot and cold on it. I've never done sequels or series character stuff before, but if I were to then Lafcadio would be good for it. I've got some reasonable ideas for another one, too. But just for the moment, the slate's pretty full.'

Stephen Gallagher has been away from the novel scene for a few years now. Does he see himself spending more time on film and script-writing projects in future, or are there new Gallagher books on the horizon?

'I still split my time between prose and screen stuff and I haven't downshifted on either, but there's a tricky marketing situation in that my latest novel went out as a simultaneous submission to NY publishers just days before 9/11, and it very quickly became apparent that nobody right then had the heart for a story that kicks off with a harrowing bereavement. That's changed since, and market predictions that the foreseeable future would only bear the fluffy and the feel-good have proven to be false ... but by then, of course, our powder was blown. I discussed it with my agent, Howard Morhaim, and we agreed to withdraw the book rather than see it going the rounds with everyone's fingerprints on it. Something similar happened to me once before, and experience has shown that the only way out of it is to write something else. *Oktober* didn't sell, and I took it off the market for a couple of years. In a couple of

months I'm due to record the commentary for the DVD.

'And I'm working on a new novel this year. It's a contemporary story with a big fantasy element and it's nothing like anything else I've ever done.'