

# THE SCREAMING BOOK OF HORROR



John Brunner, Alison Littlewood, John Burke, Robin Ince,  
Charlie Higson, Reggie Oliver, Bernard Taylor and others

EDITED BY JOHNNY MAINS

# *THE SCREAMING BOOK OF HORROR*

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JOHNNY MAINS



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This book is dedicated to Les Edwards

*'Imagination is the real and eternal world of which this  
vegetable universe is but a faint shadow'*

William Blake

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# INTRODUCTION

Johnny Mains

In the words of Shirley Bassey ‘*It’s all just a little bit of history repeating*’. Not a traditional start to an introduction to a horror anthology I agree, but nonetheless, it’s true.

In 1988 Chris Morgan (former *Pan Horror* contributor, reviewer turned editor) waged war against tales that described ‘the most disgusting, most nauseating events possible’. Undoubtedly sick of the growing trend for gruesome and bizarre works, many appearing in the series that carried him, Chris served up *Dark Fantasies*. It was a book light on gore that amped up the scares and resulted in an affecting collection of tales. When I borrowed the book from my school library, I thought it was pretty rich for someone who presumably made his money from the genre to be so *sniffy*. In my mind, horror was horror. I didn’t think there was much difference between stories of rats eating into bellies, to those of people haunted by ghosts. They both had the same effect on me, which was to keep the light on that little bit longer come bedtime.

The late 80s saw mainstream horror anthologies wiped from the shelves of local bookshops save for the ever-present Stephen King, a few reprints of Lovecraft and Stephen Jones’ annual *Best New Horror*. Growing older, I watched horror publishers like New English Library being swallowed up (by Hodder) before meeting a suffocated end. The horror authors of my teens became nothing more than a memory in high street bookshops (save, again, for King and Herbert). I accepted the change in the landscape with a shrug and began to buy as many vintage anthologies and collections as possible. However, what struck me with every anthology I picked up from a jumble sale,

## INTRODUCTION

car boot or second-hand bookshop was that I had got something terribly, terribly wrong! When I first read *Dark Fantasies* I thought Chris was talking about an overtly gruesome and tasteless trend that had grown in the previous decade, but the more books I bought (the older the better), it became clear to see that *loads* of these anthologies had disgusting stories in them! Maybe they weren't as explicit as the stories of the 1980s, but they were there. Christine Campbell Thomson's *Not at Night* series; Charles Birkin's *Creeps* series; Dashiell Hammett's *Modern Tales of Horror*; the early *Pan Horrors* (containing a mix of stories from the above anthologies): these books served up a variety of stomach-churning stories. Some were dated, many out of print, but they could be found relatively easily and the more I read the more I discovered that this kind of story had always been around - always would be. The old anthologies, though, seemed to have the correct *balance* between the sick and the eerie, the nasty and the uneasy – they were better thought out.

Twenty-four years have passed since Chris wrote his introduction, 'No Slime, No Chain-saws'. Laws as to what can and cannot be seen in the privacy of your own home and the freedom of the internet have opened the doors once firmly closed. Sadly, some authors feel the need to write the sickest stories they can to gain notoriety amidst the swarms of peers publishing through digital or 'print on demand' methods. So maybe it's time to redress the balance once more, temper the claret with the unsettling, let horror wear its many, many different masks.

The anthology that you hold in your hands should remind you of a time when books weren't just engineered to shock and repulse. This selection invites both new and unpublished tales from established authors whilst providing space for the newer ones; some of whom you may recognise from other fields. Together we'll take you back to a time when your stomach took the occasional lurch, without making you lose your lunch. Be warned - a couple might be slightly un-pc (a true modern horror!). Several hearken back to the dread chill, supernatural

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terror and creeping paranoia that scared me as a boy. What I can say is this, as a relatively new editor to the genre (one that has a lot more to learn) I have selected stories to make this book earn the money you've paid for it – stories that might be found by a teenager fifty years down the line in a relative's bookcase or whatever passes for a second-hand bookshop in the future. And maybe inspire them to try and write a horror story for the first time. And so the tradition would continue.

This, if I've done my job, is an anthology in the grand tradition of anthologies; books with an eclectic mix of authors and definitions of what makes 'horror', put together with the one aim - to entertain...

...and maybe to have you sleep with the light on.

Johnny Mains  
Devon, 2012





## CHRISTENINGS CAN BE DANGEROUS

John Llewellyn Probert

“Hello Helen, how are you? You’re looking very well I must say. And how’s Martin? How lovely to see you both again! And this must be baby Julian. He looks a healthy little chap. Is he excited about the christening? I mean, I know he’s only six months old and to be honest probably the only thing he gets excited about is having one of your nipples in his mouth, but it’s the sort of thing you’re supposed to say on occasions like this isn’t it? And I have to confess I used to get excited about the very same thing so I can’t say I exactly blame him. Of course what makes me rather more gleeful right at this moment is that the man you married instead of me probably isn’t even getting to enjoy that at the moment, never mind any actual sex, what with that squealing shitting vomiting thing you have there in your arms probably taking up every hour God sends. Do you still believe in God by the way? I can’t say I do.”

It was no use. No matter how many times he tried rehearsing what he thought he ought to say to his ex-girlfriend it wasn’t long before Tom Marston’s carefully thought out words degenerated into a tirade. He was just going to have to wing it when he met her again, he thought, even though his plan to have something rehearsed had been with the intention of avoiding any spontaneous eruptions into anger and self-pity. Surely Helen might be expecting that anyway? Even though it was two years since they’d broken up?

No, he thought. No she wouldn’t. Women were funny like that – expecting you to be pleased for them even if their personal happiness had been paid for by your own misery.

## CHRISTENINGS CAN BE DANGEROUS

He stubbed his cigarette out on the tombstone he had found himself standing next to, the butt extinguishing itself with a muffled hiss that seemed to continue even after he had flicked it into the damp undergrowth. He stood and stretched, pulling his black overcoat tight around him as the chill October wind that swept across the muddy fields and tugged at whatever creatures might still be alive huddling in the hedgerows did its best to find its way through his clothes to pick mercilessly at his bones. Above him the dull lumpen texture of the sky threatened rain from spindly coils of grey that almost seemed to be edging their way towards him.

What a bloody day to hold a christening.

He looked across at the church. The squat grey building that had stood more or less unscathed since the twelfth century seemed to stare back, not just at him but at the lichen-encrusted sarcophagi that surrounded it, and at the forest behind him. Marston seemed to remember from some school history lesson that as well as places of worship, the main purpose of churches in the past had been to act as refuges for the community in times of trouble. The sight of invading barbarians swarming over hills like those he could see in the far distance would be the signal for all and sundry to run like hell and hole themselves up in their very own local impregnable stone fortress. And of course they had grown yew trees in churchyards so they could use the wood to make bows and arrows. Marston looked round him until he found what he knew to be the largest and the oldest. Taking care not to get tripped up by the uneven ground, the thick wet grass that obscured its pockmarked surface also concealing some of the older grave markers, he made his way over to take a better look at it.

It wasn't a particularly impressive specimen. In fact anyone trying to make a decent longbow out of its wood would have ended up well and truly thrashed by a marauder holding anything approaching a decent sized toothpick. The wood wasn't so much rotting as desiccated, and it crumbled at his

touch. The other side of the tree must have still been alive, as green leaves clung to some of its branches. But it looked as if it would not be that way for long. Whoever looked after this place probably assumed the rot was due to some sort of fungus, Marston imagined, slapping the dust from his fingers. Either that or an infestation by insects – the kind that sucked all the nutrients from that on which they fed, leaving only a fine powder in their wake.

Of course, Marston knew better than that.

The hissing noise came again and Marston jumped. He took out another cigarette and lit it, laughing to himself about how much his hands were trembling as he did so. Well, a graveyard wasn't such a bad place to be scared in, he thought with a grin. He flicked the match towards the tree, at a spot where a gnarled and twisted root snaked into the dry soil at its base.

The dry soil which fell away at the touch of the splinter of wood.

Marston breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't stood on that particular bit – the layer of soil must have been as thin as tissue paper and he could have found himself stuck. Not, he reassured himself with a grin, that it was probably that deep, and just to prove his point he went over, crouched down and peered into the hole.

Blackness stared back.

Rather than leave it alone he struck another match, held it close to the hole and peered into its depths.

Where he saw something move.

How big it was he had no idea. All he did know was that at the same time the thing moved he again heard the hiss that he had earlier presumed was the death of his cigarette.

He moved a little too suddenly, causing a chunk of earth to fall into the hole. Immediately a screech like his grandmother had once made when she had spilt tea on herself pierced his ears, causing him to tumble backwards and strike

his hip on one of the gravestones. He jumped and, in danger of losing his balance, grabbed at one of the tree branches, expecting it to fall to pieces in his clutching grasp; but it was more resilient than the others and it was only when his hand had closed around it that he realised it was covered with tiny thorns. Once he was steady he opened his palm to see the skin was peppered with pinpricks, some of them bleeding freely. He reached with his unsullied hand into his pocket and then, realising that it would be a shame if it went to waste, made his way gingerly back to the hole near the base of the tree. He squeezed his fist tight and watched as blood began to drip onto the powdery soil next to the exposed tree roots, wondering why he was really doing all of this.

Was it because he had hoped to evoke a response in Helen? Was it because he hoped she had missed him? Missed him so much that she would come rushing back into his arms? Abandoning her husband and their new baby? What new level of pathetic stupidity had he managed to plummet to this time?

Marston leaned against the trunk of the tree, clenched his bloodied fist, and as more blood flowed he wished that the worst thing imaginable would happen today; that they would all regret having this hypocritical ceremony in this horrible place, that Helen would regret inviting him, would regret hurting him, but most of all, would regret leaving him.

His memory of their time together was like an abscess, or a tumour – something that refused to be ignored, and that at the time had kept deceiving him that things were going to get better while all the time slowly killing him. If only they had psychological surgeons as well as physical ones, he thought with a grimace. He needed everything to do with Helen cutting out of his head, and then perhaps he could carry on with his life. He wished he could deny her the satisfaction of presenting her perfect family to him today, but he also knew it was necessary if she were to learn her lesson.

He straightened up. He had spent long enough back here,

he thought, scrabbling past leaning tombstones and stumbling down the front path and out of the churchyard, straight into a dark-haired girl in her mid-twenties, who looked at him in both shock and recognition.

“Jesus Christ, Tom!” she said, backing away.

Typical, Marston thought. Of all the people for him to bump into at this time why did it have to be his sister?

“Hi Trish,” he said, apologising and backing off at the same time. “I thought I saw something a bit weird around the back of the graveyard and it spooked me a bit.”

“Yeah, right,” said the girl, putting the rape alarm back into the pocket of her black raincoat. “And I don’t suppose there’s any chance that you’ve been in the pub before coming here, is there?”

“Pubs aren’t open yet,” he said.

“Gin in the glovebox again, then?” she grimaced. “Anyway, what the fuck were you doing wandering around this dreary bloody place for?”

“Oh, I didn’t fancy sitting in the car,” he said. “Too claustrophobic.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot you sometimes get that too.” She looked around her and scowled at the grim surroundings. “Well my excuse is only slightly better. I thought the christening was at ten, not eleven. I’ve been wandering up and down the lane here.” Marston must have come across as uninterested, but actually his mind was still occupied with that horrible screeching cry. “Well come on then,” she said when he failed to respond to what she had said. “Aren’t you going to ask if I was scared?”

That last word brought him back to her, but he still had no idea what she was talking about.

“Scared?” he said. “Why might you be scared?”

She glared at him and then thrust the newspaper she had been holding into his hands.

He frowned as he read the headline.

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“Another local girl missing?” he said with a grimace and then gave a mirthless laugh. “God, they must be stuck for news if they have to talk about which of the kids from the village has decided to make a better life for herself!”

Trish didn't even react. She was too used to his sarcasm. And too tired of it. “You know that's not what it means,” she said. “Read the column.”

Over the last couple of months three girls from the local area had been found dead, their torn carcasses discovered during the early morning. Marston read down to the bottom of the page, then turned to Trisha and shrugged.

“So?”

His sister bit on a nail that already deserved no further punishment.

“Didn't you read what it said? About how each body they've found has been a little bit more ... torn? A little bit more eaten away? Doesn't that suggest anything to you?”

Marston thrust the paper back at her. “It suggests that you are stupider than I thought if you believe there's something hiding around here waiting to gobble people up and you still went for a walk on your own.”

Trish lit a cigarette and blew smoke into the air.

“Yeah, well,” she said, “I'm going through another one of my self-destructive periods at the moment.”

Marston looked her up and down.

“You haven't tried anything stupid have you?” he said.

Trish fluttered her eyelashes at him.

“My god, my dear brother, was that concern I heard in your voice? Anyway, no I haven't. But I just don't feel like particularly looking after myself right now.” She looked over at the church. “In fact I don't know why I even bothered to come. Even lying between sheets I haven't washed for two weeks might be better than having to go into that grim bloody place.”

Marston followed her gaze. While they had been talking

the sky had darkened and now the squat stone church looked almost black in the mid-morning gloom.

“You’re not wrong there,” he said, realising she was standing close enough to him that he could easily put his arm around her. He congratulated himself when he was able to resist the temptation. “Why the hell did they decide to have it here in the middle of nowhere?”

Trish shrugged.

“Must be some sort of family tradition. I was amazed I got invited at all. After all, Helen is your ex.”

Marston pushed at the spindly iron gate that led into the churchyard. It swung open freely.

“Well I hate to suggest it’s anything other than the fact that she liked you,” he said. “But these posh christenings do tend to rely on numbers to ensure their success and a good write-up in the society pages. I very much suspect that you and I are merely pew-fodder my dear.”

“Oh, that makes me feel a lot better,” she said. “Pew-fodder in a place that used to scare the shit out of us as kids.”

Marston followed her up the path.

“I’d forgotten all about that,” he said.

Trish halted and swung round to face him, her expression one of mock surprise.

“No you hadn’t, Tom. You can’t have. You can remember old Mr Gable going on about it in just as much lascivious detail as I can.”

Marston grinned. Their old history teacher’s story about this place might have been a bit difficult to swallow, even for a twelve year old, but he still remember being terrified by it.

“OK, you’re right,” he said. “I just didn’t want to bring it up, really, not on a day like this. But seeing as you have, I’ve been round the back of this place and I even think I’ve found the tree.”

Trish laughed out loud at that.

“Oh yeah, sure,” she said. “The tree they planted over the



remains of Old Mother Duckett. After they'd burned her, of course."

"And her children," Tom added. "You mustn't forget those."

"Shit, how could I?" Trish shivered and hugged her arms around herself. "That was the bit he used to bloody love going on about. The babies she used to kidnap and turn into spiders the size of rats."

"It was dogs when he told my class the story," said Tom.

Trish grimaced. "Yeah, well, maybe your class needed a bit more excess to get the desired effect." She paused as if considering something, then took a deep breath and said, "Go on then."

"Go on what?" said Marston, feigning puzzlement.

"Go on and show me the fucking tree," said Trish. "I can see you're dying to, and we've got sod all else to do here while we wait for everyone else to arrive."

Tom led the way as they trudged round the back of the church to the yew tree he had bled onto earlier.

"Bloody hell it looks awful!" said his sister.

"I don't think it's supposed to be pretty," said Tom from behind her.

"I don't mean that," she said, taking a step back. "I mean it looks diseased, as if there's something really wrong with it."

"You might be right," was the reply. "Even the ground's crumbling. If you look into that hole you can see the witch's bones."

She glanced over her shoulder at him.

"Fuck off."

Tom pointed into the darkness.

"Well, you can see something. I had a look earlier, but to be honest I was a bit too scared to do more than glance into it."

Trish snorted and, taking out her cigarette lighter, bent down to look in the hole. Tom knew she could never resist the

opportunity to show him up for his inadequacies, which made the act of cutting her throat a little less painful for him than it would have been otherwise. As he held onto her hair and directed the crimson spray into the hole he once again regretted that it had to be his own sister that was to be the final sacrifice.

But it was apt, too.

Just over an hour later Tom found himself sitting in the cramped pew of the packed church, waiting for Helen's baby, Julian, to be christened. As the "tiny bundle of joy" (as it had been referred to by its maternal grandmother) was handed to the priest to be anointed accompanied by the words of the holy scripture Tom congratulated himself on how well everything had come together. In fact, he had to stop himself from grinning at how lucky he had been, right down to finding somewhere to hide Trish's drained body before anyone else had got there.

The reason that Helen and Martin had decided to hold the christening here had had nothing to do with family tradition and everything to do with the fact that Marston had asked her if, as a favour to him in view of all they had meant to each other for so many years, they would hold it somewhere that had special meaning for him. Of course, he had lied a little bit. The church didn't have any special meaning for him at all.

But it was going to.

He could still remember the conversation he and Helen had had in the Costa Coffee where she had agreed to meet him. No doubt she had been expecting another confrontation, but instead she had met a man who had said he was quite prepared to let bygones be bygones, a man filled with nothing but good wishes for her and her new family. And seeing as she and Martin had no real plans as to where they wished to hold the christening of the new addition to their family would they mind terribly if he made a suggestion? A request, even?

And she had agreed. Because, as he had ruminated on just

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a little earlier, women could be funny like that – so wrapped up in their own happiness that they assumed you were happy for them too, and wanted nothing but to share in their joy.

Even joy that had been won at the cost of your own misery and heartache.

As he watched the priest carry the tiny wriggling figure to the font he imagined that not a single person here was thinking of the legend of the witch who had been executed here in the seventeenth century, the witch who had been buried beneath one of the yew trees in the graveyard so that “her marrowe mite feede the woode and gyve it strengthe”.

Only that wasn't exactly what had happened. Quite the opposite, in fact, as Marston had discovered one grim afternoon late last year when he had sought the tree out and investigated the crumbling soil about its roots, the soil that had caved in at the slightest pressure revealing the dark damp space beneath it.

Marston could still remember crawling in there, expecting to find nothing, or at the very least a few old bones.

Not a living, breathing creature.

He could think of no other name for it. What he had found barely resembled a human being – just the head, shoulders and upper torso of something very old, very wrinkled and very, very weak. As he had lit another match to take a closer look at the rasping, wheezing thing it had opened its tiny black eyes and looked at him, and in that moment he had known that here was the method of his revenge.

The witch (or whatever the thing was) had needed feeding, though, and it had taken him some considerable time to summon the courage to do what was necessary. Now he hoped that it had drunk its fill, replenished its powers, and now all he had to do was wait for his reward.

And not for long, it seemed.

The priest, in the process of anointing the child's head with water in the shape of the cross, was the first to notice that

something was wrong, as the child suddenly went limp in his hands.

But that was nothing compared to what followed.

Baby Julian's parents watched in horror as something black, coiled and hairy tore itself free from the screaming child's flesh, slowly and sinuously untwisting itself until it was the length of a man's arm. The jointed appendage, tipped by tiny claws seeking purchase on whatever might be close by, was swiftly followed by seven others, and together they gripped the edge of the font as the christening gown split and a bulbous mottled body ripped its way through the reddened silk. At first his mother thought the child was still crying until she realised that the appalling squawking noise was coming from the pointed beak that sat beneath the thing's myriad of tiny pink eyes.

The creature leapt at Helen, tearing at her throat before being wrenched away by Martin, who threw the creature to the flagstones, not knowing whether to stare in horror at the thing his son had become or attend to his bleeding wife.

The church door banged open, distracting the congregation momentarily until a scream brought their attention back to the font. Marston's eyes took in the shredded christening gown, the deep cuts across the mother's throat, and caught only a glimpse of the thing that until a moment ago had been baby Julian as it scuttled across the flagstones and made its way outside to join the rest of its new family.

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