

'New Wave' Gothicism and Spiritual Panic: Strieber

"I want to go down in the cracks of life and find there a complete reinterpretation of our world, one that somehow satisfies the old dragon at the bottom of the soul."
-- Whitley Strieber --

In sitting down to write about the novels of WHITLEY STRIEBER, one is sorely tempted to use the subtitle "The Creature Walks Among Us." His three published novels -- **The Wolfen**, **The Hunger**, and **Black Magic** -- are concerned with the invasion of our society by races and powers undeniably alien yet disconcertingly capable of coexistence. As Detective George Wilson pronounces in the early pages of **The Wolfen**: "We are being hunted down by whatever has these claws. They exist, don't forget that. They have for thousands of years. . . People used to call them werewolves. Now they don't call them anything because they've gotten so damn good at covering their tracks that there are no legends left."

STRIEBER'S evil forces are submerged in a peaceless coexistence -- the legends have indeed given way to a more subtle, more pervasive, more mythic evil. It is not mere irony, or passage of years, that causes the punk rocker at the outset of Tony Scott's stunning adaptation of **The Hunger** to sing that "Bela Lugosi is dead." STRIEBER'S novel studiously avoids use of the word "vampire" to describe the blood-hungry Miriam Blaylock, precisely because -- her decadence notwithstanding -- she may as well be a next-door neighbor, one of the faceless thousands whom we pass each day on the city streets. Like the Wolfen, she is our immortal dark side, a monstrous manifestation of our craving for the shadows of death and forbidden desire.

STRIEBER'S novels, more blatantly than the works of his peers, treat death and sexuality as quintessential themes and motifs. His books are permeated with images of whiteness, bleeding and eternity. Their themes are uniformly deadly, focused upon life in death and death in life -- and, of course, the ability to stay the progress of death. The Wolfen survive; Miriam Blaylock defies death through satisfaction of the Hunger; and the evil that lurks behind the KGB-controlled terrorists who stalk an American missile-control center in **Black Magic** has "the patience of eternity. Men had conjured it before, and they would

conjure it again. . . Just give them time." For STRIEBER, life and death are not divided, but inserted within each other.

STRIEBER'S message befits a "new wave" Gothicism: darkness and chaos are at the root of reality, the source of life, and the fate of the future. Time is not precise, but elongates, shifts suddenly from day to night when confronted with the chaos of life. His images conjure an apocalyptic vision of evil, an assurance that the order man has created is worthless in the face of the shadowy secrets of the creatures who walk among us.

Perhaps no better indicia of his perspective are his comments on **Black Magic**, which will be released in paperback this fall by Pocket Books: "In a sense, Jamshid Rostram is my most terrible antagonist, because he is so close to the truth. His motivations and his inner agony are very real. They are common to many people brought up in cultures which have been suppressed by the West. They are a form of spiritual panic, brought on by fear that long-held beliefs may prove hollow, and long-followed ways lead to dead ends."

Black Magic is STRIEBER'S excursion into the realm of espionage fiction; although primarily a horror story, "the medium of action is spy vs. spy." The book concerns the use of extra-low frequency radio (ELF) as a means of controlling human thought and emotions from outside. "It was extensively researched," notes STRIEBER, "and as far as I know, all of the material in it is at least tangential to the truth. I'm pretty well convinced that both the USSR and USA are hard at work on ELF weapons, and that the material in the book about the massive Soviet ELF project is true. There's probably also a massive American project, but I couldn't find out anything about it. Right now, the ELF 'state of the art' seems to be that a field can be produced which will cause anybody entering it to become totally confused -- for example, some poor pilot trying to fly a jet. Potentially, ELF could be used to affect emotional states -- perhaps send whole nations into deep depressions or enforce artificial elation, as happens in my book.

"ELF is going to offer governments a whole new level of control over people. And since the waves are so long they will penetrate practically anything...."

Although his first three novels have met with substantial critical

and popular success, with both **The Wolfen** and **The Hunger** produced as motion pictures, STRIEBER certainly cannot be considered an overnight success. "I was one of those people who wrote a number of novels before I began to publish," he comments. "In my case, the problem was that I wanted to write humor. So far, I am the only person who found my novels amusing. In fact, one editor was moved to shuddering rage by the last one I wrote. My sense of humor is, perhaps, too macabre for most tastes."

"When I shifted to horror fiction it was because I wanted to write 'important' novels. I believe that one of the most important functions of literature is to allow the reader to become an explorer in his own emotional world. To me, the best fiction allows me to learn about my own inner life as I read the story. But it is never didactic.

"I find a great many chances for this sort of exploration in horror fiction. Perhaps it is something wild deep inside me -- and in all of us -- that I really need to learn about in order to be a complete human being. At any rate, I believe that our genre is not only fun, but downright therapeutic!

"My own work almost always follows a certain pattern: I want to go down in the cracks of life and find there a complete reinterpretation of our world, one that somehow satisfies the old dragon at the bottom of the soul. There are some lines in a poem of Auden's, **As I Walked Out One Evening**, that go this way:

The glacier knocks in the cupboard,

The desert sighs in the bed,

And the crack in the tea-cup opens

A lane to the land of the dead.'

"My books always involve going down the crack in the tea-cup . . . where the Wolfen lives, where lonely Miriam Blaylock wanders, where Jamshid Rostram lurks with his terrible guardian. . . ."

In June, Simon and Schuster will publish STRIEBER'S fourth novel, **The Night Church**. "This one is about a secret religion that meets in Catholic churches late at night. But it is much more than a religion, it is also an ancient science, devoted to breeding out of human stock the next step in the evolution of life on earth.

"**The Night Church** is about what I see as an inevitable future meeting: that of religion and science -- and the dangers connected with putting the power of modern technology into the hands of the true believers. It is also a book about Catholicism, which has been a lifelong fascination of mine. And what else? It is a love story, tragic and heroic, about a man and a woman battling the demon that lives, in a sense, within them both."