

Ghost stories an interview with Colin Campbell

Ghost stories always fascinate people; the lure of the supernatural is very powerful, and Colin Campbell exploits this to the full in *The Lady in White*.

Q: Why do you think the supernatural is such a fascinating topic?

Colin Campbell: I think that really these stories are intriguing because of our primitive fears of, for example, the dark or of being alone, and also because of our fears for our own sanity. The stories I like most certainly play on this feeling of, 'Am I going mad or is this really happening?'

Q: There is a clever mix of fact and fiction in the story: the TV producer/reporter/documentary strand and the ghost story strand. Is this done deliberately in order to lead to confusion in the mind of the reader, so that we question whether we are dealing with reality or the imagination?



CC: That is exactly right. We know the protagonist is interested in the world of the unexplained. We also know that he is worried about his family and that he has been overworking. We can believe that maybe all of this is leading him to 'imagine' what is happening and that it's not real. He's not sure himself but he is terrified to even think about the implications for his own life if this is really happening.

Q: Where did the idea for the story come from? Is it based in reality or experience?

CC: The idea grew out of an urban myth I had heard years ago about a car running out of petrol in the middle of a forest and of the man going for help and leaving his girlfriend alone in the car and... I refer to this story in the book. I am fascinated by the idea of the urban myth. How do these stories spread and what is their appeal? I think I understand why we need to localise them. Telling stories about what happened to someone else, somewhere else has less impact than a story that happened to you or to someone you know, in a place you know. What I hope *The Lady in White* conveys is a sense that this could also happen to anyone because maybe it is happening in the mind and not necessarily in Ireland.

Q: So really it started with the idea of an urban myth about a mysterious hitch-hiker and the story just grew?

CC: Yes, but also – and importantly for me – there is a guiding theme which runs through the story: the theme of loss. Most of the characters in the story have, explicitly or implicitly, lost someone. The policeman has lost his family in a way that is only hinted at; the *Lady in White* herself has lost family; there is a memorial on the cliffs in Ireland erected by a family who have lost their son. The idea that really 'haunts' John is of losing his family and/or his sanity. I think the word 'haunt' here is really appropriate. We are used to the word in phrases like 'haunted house', but I suspect it is actually used

more to talk about fears or memories that haunt us. In a way I wanted the story to play with the two meanings of 'haunted'. Haunted by ghosts or by fears, or by both? For me, that is the central tension of the story.

Q: What would you like your readers to believe is the truth when they reach the end of *The Lady in White*?

CC: I would like the readers also to be left unsure what the truth is. I think tying up all the loose ends and explaining away everything that happened or that didn't happen, would kill this story or any good ghost story. I think ghost stories are better left unresolved in the minds of the individual reader.

Q: Do you have plans to write any more tales of the supernatural?

CC: The next story I want to write deals with the issue of memory and whether it is carried only in the brain or indeed in other, or all, parts of the body. It will be a mixture of a thriller, a psychological story and a story of the unknown. I don't want to give away any more than that. but I hope to set it in Poland and... I hope you'll get a chance to read it one day!

Q: *The Lady in White* achieves the aim of all the books in the Cambridge English Readers series. It appeals to readers who would normally chose the genre of ghost stories for their reading in their own language. Do you read a lot of tales of supernatural and ghosts yourself?

CC: I really like stories where the distinction between reality and the supernatural are explored. I am not sure if you would call them ghost stories or psychological stories, but they certainly keep me awake some nights when I am alone, so I have to be careful when I read them.

Q: And finally, do you believe in ghosts?!

CC: Not in the old sense of people covered in white sheets, but there are lots of things in the universe that we can not begin to understand so I wouldn't want to say I don't believe. And certainly, there are places I would not want to be in the dark, all by myself?

What about you...?