Creative Writing PhD by Published Works

A Critical Review of Four Novels

THE LAMPLIGHTERS (2011)

THE JACK IN THE GREEN (2013)

THE SKINTAKER (2015)

HEARTHSTONE COTTAGE (2019)

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare:

That this submission is not substantially the same as any that I have previously made or am currently making, either in published or unpublished form, for an award of any university or similar institution.

That no parts of the submission have previously been submitted for any such award. Until the outcome of the current submission is known, the works submitted will not be submitted for any such award at any other university or similar institution.

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1. Summary of Publications

The Lamplighters

Published by Samhain Publishing worldwide in paperback and ebook in 2011. Translated into Japanese by Tokyo-based publisher Takeshobo (2016), and adapted into an audio book by Audio Realms (USA, 2016). Republished worldwide in ebook (2019) and paperback (2021) by Crossroad Press, and in limited edition hardcover by Reel Fearz in 2021.

The Jack in the Green

Published in paperback and ebook by Samhain Publishing in 2013. Republished in ebook and paperback worldwide by Crossroad Press in 2019, and in limited edition hardcover by Reel Fearz in 2021.

The Skintaker

Prequel to *The Lamplighters*, published worldwide in paperback and ebook by Samhain in 2015. Adapted for audio by Audio Realms (2015), and republished worldwide by Crossroad Press in ebook in 2019, and paperback in 2022. Limited edition hardcover published by Reel Fearz in 2021.

Hearthstone Cottage

Published worldwide by Flame Tree Publishing in hardcover, paperback, and ebook in 2019.

2. Abstract

This critical review will reflect upon the thematic concerns and creative methodologies of four published novels, their plot summaries and themes, and their positioning in the genre publishing landscape.

Part One discusses the themes of *The Lamplighters* (2011) and *The Skintaker* (2015) in the contexts of myth-making and malice.

Part Two explores *The Jack in the Green* (2013) and *Hearthstone Cottage* (2019) as folk horror narratives in the context of monstrous feminine characterisations.

A published novelist, produced screenwriter and film director, I specialise in the horror and thriller genres. At Brunel I lecture in writing Horror, and Screenwriting in different genres. My work is informed by narrative theorists Robert McKee, Syd Field, Christopher Vogler, and Laurie Hutzler, each of whom promotes the practice of establishing characters and their worlds before developing storylines and structures. The interaction between world building, characterisation and plotting techniques provides the focus of this critical review as follows:

All four of the novels feature a fictional corporation, The Consortium Inc., which I created in part to provide an extra-personal dimension of conflict for the characters and communities depicted in each story, and also in which to explore my own political beliefs. The Consortium's deity, and healthcare professional of choice, is the Skin Mechanic (aka the Skintaker), a homicidal surgical alchemist who possesses the knowledge and power to bestow eternal life upon his followers. Considering Coupe's (1997) commentary on myth-making, I will reflect on the creation of the Skin Mechanic as an act of myth-making, and his development as a villain across the two novels *The Lamplighters* and *The Skintaker* in the context of Flahaut's (2003) notions of malice. I will also consider the nefarious activities of The Consortium Inc. as nature cult ritual versus corporate greenwashing.

With reference to Scovell's (2017) definitions of the sub-genre, my folk horror positioning of two of the texts *The Jack in the Green* and *Hearthstone Cottage* will consider the 'Folk Horror Chain' of isolation, landscape, skewed morality, and the summoning or happening. The critical review concludes with a reflection on how the demonised figure of the wise woman, shaman, or witch being wronged by rationalist men is explored in *The Jack in the*

Green and *Hearthstone Cottage* via Barbara Creed's (2015) analysis of *The Monstrous Feminine*.

3. Introduction

This critical review will demonstrate how my craft as a horror writer has developed over the production of four novels, and will show how each innovates to create new knowledge in the horror genre and, more specifically, the subgenre of folk horror.

My blending of personal experiences with political and pagan beliefs, of folklore and places both real and imagined in my novels, is by definition 'folkloresque'. Michael Dylan Foster helpfully defines my creative methodology in his introduction to *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*:

> "A folkloresque product is rarely based on any single vernacular item or tradition; usually it has been consciously cobbled together from a range of folkloric elements, often mixed with newly created elements, to appear as if it emerged organically from a specific source." (Dylan Foster, p.5, in Dylan Foster and Tolbert 2016)

This definition applies to each of the four novels examined in this critical review, in which I use an integrated folkloresque methodology to 'cobble together' (as per Dylan Foster's definition above) disparate elements from folkloric research and my own imagination to create cohesive works, with each adding significant innovation to genre fiction knowledge.

These innovations include my developing and changing attitude to female characterisation in each of the four novels, in tandem with explorations of the body as a location for horror narrative, and my development of landscape as character with reference to the folk horror subgenre.

The review will also demonstrate innovation in my world building via the emerging and increasing importance of the fictional Consortium Inc. across the quartet of novels, its relation to my own political beliefs and experiences (such as my opposition to and activism against intrusive capitalist ecocide by corporate entities like HS2 Ltd.) and its relevance to the 'cosmic horror' subgenre.

Michael Dylan Foster's consideration of the folkloresque also highlights, "A common aspect of a folkloresque item of popular culture is that it is imbued with a sense of 'authenticity' (as perceived by the consumer and/or creator) derived from association with 'real' folklore."

(ibid, p.5) This review will show how such 'authenticity' in my sequence of novels has resulted in the validating effect demonstrated by the critical reception to my novels included in digest in Chapter 7.

I will now provide context to the emerging authenticity within my sequence of novels via some personal background details that have informed my writing practice. In his conclusion to *Malice*, Francois Flahaut argues that for words to have the power of influence, "it is only if they are articulated as lived experience." (Flahault, 2003, p.167) Similarly, Laurence Coupe's *Myth* discusses the authenticity of pure individual experience (rather than mere allusions to sacred tales) which he opposes to a "cultural legacy equated with mere convention." (Myth, p.11)

During the past decade as a practising horror novelist, I have interrogated the authenticity of my voice as a writer. It is true to say that I have endured horror in my personal life, and have also enjoyed a lifelong appreciation of the genre in its many forms. Having a creative outlet by which to express horrors has helped me to process them. The creation of fictional fears helps me to overcome very real ones, and the methodologies involved in writing and publishing them often feels akin to ritual exorcism. For this reason, I do not feel overly comfortable analysing my own output. Like many writers, I would prefer the works to speak for themselves and to move on to the next project, and then the next. The question I have received with singular dread on conference panels, and in interviews and Q&A sessions, is, "Where do you get your ideas from?" The answer is only forthcoming after an inward look into the darkness. And so, into the darkness we must go.

I believe that I became a horror storyteller the day that I was born. I'm aware that may sound a naïve and grandiose claim and will now attempt to explain it, in the context of 'lived experience'. My father, deciding that he'd really rather not have a fourth mouth to feed, kicked my mother down a steep flight of stairs in the hope that her fall would abort me. Instead, I was born shortly afterwards at home on the sofa – six weeks early. A period on the local hospital's incubator ward sealed the deal. My mother, who thank goodness survived the fall, told me in later years that I 'popped out early' because I 'had things to do'. I have only recently begun to reflect on this series of events, this 'accident of birth' if you will, and I suspect it to be a defining one. You see, I really did have a horror story to tell from day one of my life on Earth, one that enfolded a personal, horrific experience into an everyday, domestic setting. Those are elements

that feature throughout my fiction writing and filmmaking work to this day. And thankfully, I still have plenty of 'things to do'.

Authenticity of voice via a lived experience is one thing, but finding and developing that voice is another. In *On Writing Horror: A Handbook by The Horror Writers Association*, HWA Grandmaster Ramsey Campbell says that writers must first imitate, "but only as a means to finding your own voice" (Campbell in Castle, ed., 2007, p.24), and this is exactly the path I followed. When my parents divorced in the early 1980s, my father insisted upon his weekend visiting rights. I dutifully arrived each Friday night for a two-night sleepover at his place. After dinner, he would then disappear to the pub where he would remain until closing time, leaving me to look after the dog. Happy in my own company, I explored the three TV channels available to me and fell quickly and incontrovertibly in love with the Hammer Horror and Universal Monsters double bills on the BBC. These films and their characters, supplemented with frequent trips to the local library, made me a horror enthusiast for life. I devoured Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe (1832-1849), and the mysteries of both *Udolpho* (Ann Radcliffe, 1794) and *Sherlock Holmes* (Arthur Conan Doyle, 1887-1927) before moving on to harder-edged fare, such as William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971), and James Herbert's 1974 debut novel *The Rats* (at the tender and impressionable age of twelve and thirteen respectively). I found that I began jotting down my nightmares in lurid, often gory, detail. Often, when you really love a thing, you begin to want to really do a thing.

The path from being an enthusiast to an actual practitioner was instinctive rather than by any kind of design. I always enjoyed English Literature classes at the series of state schools I attended, and was lucky to have encouraging and supportive teachers who pushed me to be confident about my writing abilities. I made a couple of early and abortive attempts at novel writing in my late teens, and wrote radio plays and comedy sketches for coursework assignments, garnering good grades and positive feedback. The world and its possibilities opened up for me when I was accepted onto a Certificate in Periodical Journalism course at the University of the Arts London – at that time the much more humbly named London College of Printing and Distributive Trades. The logic behind my chosen study pathway was that at least this was one way to potentially secure paid work as a writer. My gambit worked, and I started out as an intern for music paper *Melody Maker*, eventually becoming an online editor for Yahoo! Inc.

My obsessions continued and, when I started publishing fiction in the early noughties, I became fascinated by the potential of cross-genre writing. An early attempt at a short story (*Arrival*, unpublished) blended sci-fi, horror and (surprise!) childbirth. I submitted it to short story contests and it was at that point that I realised I really did want to become a published author. The follow up *was* published: *Pendragon Rising* (2004) took an obsession of mine, Arthurian legend, and reframed it as another obsession, a vampire story. The story was a runner up in the Library of Avalon's Geoffrey Ashe Award for Arthurian fiction. This minor success encouraged me a great deal and further short stories were published in magazines and anthologies. This work paved the way for my debut novel, *The Lamplighters*, a sci-fi/fantasy tinged horror novel. At this stage in my career, I was yet to discover the category of 'low fantasy', which has become a container for my work as much as horror has. Low fantasy (aka 'intrusive fantasy') is defined by Brian Stableford in *The A to Z of Fantasy Literature* as, "usually humorous or horrific as opposed to the enchantment of high fantasy." (Stableford, 2009, p. 256).

Concurrent to these works of short and long fiction, I wrote and directed my first film scripts, including *On Edge* (1999), which balanced the horrific with the humorous. These led to commissions for feature film screenplays, and script doctor/story consultant engagements. I began teaching screenwriting part-time and identified methodologies in my teaching research that informed my creative processes. For example, the aforementioned balance of horror/humour became a facet of my teaching practice. During a presentation for PDAP accreditation, an examiner instructed me that no one likes a comedian in the classroom. The previous year (2015) I was awarded a Student Led Teaching Award for 'Postgraduate Choice'. The students' nomination said, "Frazer has a unique way of making his lectures funny which means they are extremely engaging and entertaining. He uses humour to engage the class." In all honesty I felt more inclined to listen to the students, and this attitude informs not just my teaching practice but also my writing outputs, which I will examine in the following two chapters.

4. Mythmaking and Malice in *The Lamplighters* (2011) and *The Skintaker* (2015)

My storytelling practice is informed by a lifelong fascination with nature and the changing seasons. During my childhood in Staffordshire, I escaped the dour, suburban streets to roam fields and nature reserves whenever possible. These field trips provoked an enduring interest in the interaction between the ancient, for example the ruins I clambered over as a kid near Alderley Edge, and the modern, such as the industrial canal behind the Zanussi factory in Stoke-on-Trent where I spent many futile hours with a fishing rod and Tupperware tub filled with wriggling bait.

Even futile hours bear fruit, in time.

When I turned eighteen and moved to London, I began writing stories and scripts that often drew upon the tension between those urban and green spaces, and between the ancient and the modern. London's bookshops and esoteric events circuit provoked an emerging interest in Gardnerian and Alexandrian paganism and Wicca (or 'white witchcraft') and I shared with these belief systems a growing appreciation of the importance of the 'Wheel of the Year' (or the changing seasons) that had continued from my childhood explorations into nature. In the Wiccan calendar, the Holly King slays the Oak King in the transition from Winter into Spring (Aburrow, 1994, p. 89-91). I grew increasingly fascinated by the personification and deification of aspects of the calendar year in a narrative structure of death and rebirth. This fascination became the seed of an idea about the clash between modern day power structures and ancient beliefs, and one that I framed as a 'What if?' scenario.

Robert McKee emphasises the importance of the 'what if scenario' as an 'open-ended question: What would happen if?' (McKee, 1998, p.112) My 'What if' became: What would happen if the most powerful and privileged in society could tap into a power that could give them what they craved most – extended longevity? The answer to this premise is a character, namely Marla Neuborn in *The Lamplighters*, and Rosie Shields in *The Skintaker*. The delivery mechanism for the characterisation is the creation of a mythology for my story world that hinges on the above fascination. To create dramatic tension, opposing forces are a narrative

requirement. As Henry James wrote: “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?” (James, H., in Besant, W., 1885, p.69)

In my writing practice, the relationship between character and plot provides a central focus for the development of new works of fiction. I often imagine an ending and work backwards from there to determine, via a character journey, how the story will reach this resolution, a process described as ‘writing back to front’ in my lectures and workshops. By deciding upon an ending, the writer can design an opening. Simply slotting a character into the resulting narrative rarely works out well in my experience, and so, the character’s life story must begin to speak to the emerging theme of the plot. An example of the latter dynamic is *The Silence of the Lambs*, written by Thomas Harris (1988) and adapted into a feature film by director Jonathan Demme from an adapted screenplay by Ted Tally (1991). The plot is, in its simplest rendering, about using a serial killer to catch a serial killer. The character story is about Clarice facing her past trauma in order to grow beyond it. Clarice Starling is depicted as a resolutely ambitious yet wounded fledgling when we first meet her, and she must step up to the task in order to graduate in all senses of the term. She achieves this by entering the labyrinth of mythical storytelling, inching her way around in the dark while the minotaur-esque Buffalo Bill stalks her using his night vision goggles.

The impact of this narrative on my younger self is evident in both *The Lamplighters* and *The Skintaker*. Both novels employ the plotline of a vicious killer stalking characters who have entered his world. And both feature protagonists who are somewhat emotionally wounded when we first meet them. Marla has suffered a period of unemployment and self-doubt following an accident involving children in her care. Rosie’s childhood trauma of the house fire that killed both her parents still manifests into adolescence via *acne roseacea*, a painful and debilitating skin condition. From a personal perspective, I have suffered from *acne roseacea* and so this equates to another example of writing from a position of authentic lived experience. I was able to occupy the tortured flesh of my protagonist and in doing so offer a unique insight into her experience. The character story in both versions of *Lambs* is about facing up to past traumas but in my novels, the convergence of character story with plot behaves differently to Harris/Demme’s works. Marla and Rosie will both assimilate with the killer, the former against her will, giving a tragic ending, and Rosie willingly, closing the story on a (admittedly perverse) note of hope. The positioning of Marla is a knowing use of the tragic victim trope and one that I felt compelled to explore in my debut novel with the added innovation that her demise is, in fact, her unconscious desire all along. She wishes to be part

of the jet set, and to experience an affluent world beyond the reach of her limitations. When she becomes subsumed into the fleshly rebirth ritual of The Consortium, her wish is granted but not in the way she was hoping for, or expecting. Rosie's positioning as a vulnerable character (who refuses to become a victim and therefore demonstrates agency through her actions as she develops) represents a progression of my female characterisation across these two novels. This critical review will consider this progression further in the next chapter via my thematic positioning of the female characters in *The Jack in the Green* and *Hearthstone Cottage*.

I will turn now to thematic elements of these stories, and will consider how character story and plotline interact with theme. In *The Art and Science of Screenwriting*, Philip Parker describes a creative matrix in which all aspects of a dramatic narrative speak to one another, theme with plot, style with tone, and so on (Parker, 1998). Robert McKee emphasises the importance of a 'Controlling Idea' in a narrative, expressed as a resolving value and cause, which in turn reveals itself to the writer (and later, the reader) as an 'emerging theme' (McKee, 1998, p.114-116). From my perspective as writer, the Controlling Idea (of value plus cause) in *The Lamplighters* is: Evil triumphs because the one percent is all-powerful. *The Skintaker*'s is: Good and evil assimilate because nature does not differentiate.

Nature versus human-made civilisation is key to the interaction between character and theme in both these novels. Laurence Coupe quotes Edgell Rickword, who was writing about 'the cultural meaning of May Day' from a Marxist perspective, in *Myth* (1997): "It is the story of the death and rebirth of the year. That (is) the basic theme of all the mythologies of human life," (Rickword, 1997, p.130-131 in Coupe, 1997, p.67-68), and identifies that 'the enemy' is: "the Old Year, the Greybeard of hate, all that became socially resistant to advance." (ibid)

This personification of the spirit of nature represents the mortality that the Consortium Inc. seeks to vanquish. The character of the Skin Mechanic (in both *The Lamplighters* and its prequel *The Skintaker*) is the enabler of an elixir of life for the corporation's privileged social group. The Consortium is a hyper-capitalist, neoliberal organisation with its own religion of 'new paganism' in my sequence of novels. Its activities cause the natural order of things to be rewritten according to the needs of the 'one percent'. This highlights the main opposing points of view, from which I derive much of the background conflict in the two novels, with the protagonist trapped in the middle. In *The Lamplighters*, the opposition becomes mortality

(Consortium) versus servitude (the Skin Mechanic). In *The Skintaker*, the main opposing forces are commerce (Richter) versus faith (the Skintaker), in essence the modernity of 'free market' industry versus the transactional 'old ways' of nature worship. The tribespeople are saying 'money is not our God' – and Richter is saying 'not yet it isn't!' As a kind of skewed nature cult, the Consortium subverts the traditional to its own benefit, for example rather than offering up a sacrifice for example to guarantee a good harvest, the corporation provides sacrificial flesh to overcome its own mortality.

In my novel, the sacrifice (of Marla) is, in and of itself, the 'good harvest', and I believe represents innovation of a standardised trope in horror fiction that primitive cultures resort to human sacrifice from a desire to maintain 'the old ways'. In *The Lamplighters*, it is the super wealthy, technologically advanced one percent that is embracing human sacrifice as a very real means to an end in the form of immortality. In my text, the cult of the individual leads to individualised cultists wielding power structures over the less privileged and vulnerable. I also sought to reinvent an aspect of the science fictional aspects of the novel in my representation of the Consortium members themselves. Their otherworldly pallor and apparently endless lifespan mimics the Chthonic deities of the cosmic horror subgenre, but I was intent on avoiding the inclusion of now overfamiliar tentacled super beings from another dimension.

In his introduction to *The Supernatural Horror in Literature*, H.P. Lovecraft highlights a key component of cosmic horror or weird fiction, namely, "spheres of existence whereof we know nothing and wherein we have no part." (Lovecraft, 2000, p.21). I prioritised making the Consortium a real, describable, and therefore palpable and believable threat in order for them to elicit a genuine fear reaction from my readers. Again as an example of authenticity in my writing, I based the look of my villains upon the cosmetic surgery-enhanced visages of the corporate bosses I have encountered in Los Angeles and Cannes, at film industry events. My own personal suspicions of self-proclaimed Ayn Rand followers and eugenicists (such as the current owner/operator of Twitter, and certain UK politicians) also informed these characterisations, which I believe to be as chilling, if not more so, than any of Lovecraft's indescribable eldritch horrors. As Timothy Evans observes, "In seeking authentic experience, that unobtainable goal of tourists, these figures are either destroyed or utterly transformed." (Evans, p.113, 2005). Marla Neuborn is both destroyed *and* utterly transformed and so the culmination of the Consortium's nefarious plan does operate within the paradigm of cosmic horror. The ritual flesh transference and Marla's ascension to become a 'star being' aligns with Lovecraftian elements of a protagonist's awe in the presence of a gestalt/cultist, and/or,

epic/cosmic consciousness. My use of a conceptual 'star chamber' as a venue for harmful, occult, neoliberal practices is an intentionally ironic device. If you can't beat the one percent, you're going to have to join them, literally and figuratively in Marla's case.

The Consortium Inc.'s deity of choice, the Skin Mechanic is very much intended to be a demigod rather than an equivalence of Lovecraft's all-powerful 'Old Ones'. He is more of an Earthbound demon than an interdimensional being, making him vulnerable to his human environment. In my integrated folkloresque approach, I sought to tether my villainous deity to my own obsession with natural order in the landscape. Rather than having the Skin Mechanic echo Pennywise, the extra-terrestrial parasite of Stephen King's *IT* (1987), or the 'Creeper' creature from the (2001-2022) film series *Jeepers Creepers* (both of which hibernate for a couple of decades before emerging to attack once again) my big bad resurfaces during each and every annual harvesting season. The Consortium's is an ever-present threat, peaking with each turn of the pagan 'Wheel of the Year'.

Narrative cohesion requires that there is method to the antagonist's madness, and clarity of my antagonists' goal was also key to delivering a cohesive version of corporate villainy to my readership. In similarity to the promise of the Holy Grail bringing about a cycle of renewal in Arthurian mythology, the Skin Mechanic's flesh-based alchemy provides a crucible, or 'un-Holy grail' by which to bestow extended lifespan upon his enablers. He is offering a 'cup of Christ' to his followers, the reward being eternal life but only if they submit to his peculiar system of science and medicine. There is subtle method to his apparent madness. He knows that ultimately the Consortium will need him more than he needs them, and (in a future book) he will use this power imbalance to attempt to escape from Meditrine Island. As Coupe observes: "…the King of the Wood has to be replaced by a violent usurper." (Coupe, 1997, p.28) (I will look at further manifestations of corporate nature-horror in my folk horror novels *The Jack in the Green* and *Hearthstone Cottage* in the following chapter.)

Coupe identifies that in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz is killed by a younger man (Willard) but the mythology is used ironically (Coupe, 1997, p.29). In *The Skintaker*, my protagonist Rosie Shields journeys into her own 'heart of darkness' in the Amazon rainforest. Discovering her Uncle Gregory's and Aunt Francesca's betrayal of her parents, who died in a fire when she was a child, Rosie (now aged 19) is an heir-Goddess-becoming via the sacrificial, purifying pyre of the burning forest. Her rebirth in local villager Nimbo's skin as both acolyte and mate to the Skintaker is also ironic. Only by surrendering to an ancient past, and a culture

entirely separate from her lived reality, can Rosie forge a new and empowering path for herself. There is a striking similarity to her ensuing use of power to escape from the accepted structures of servitude, and that of the Skin Mechanic.[1]

Coupe unpacks Eliade's definitions of 'Sacred time' and 'Profane time' with the former being experienced via religious rituals and festivals, and the latter being the stuff of secular, everyday life (Coupe, 1997, p.57-58). In *The Skintaker*, Rosie Shields' life is a curious blend of the two. Her staunchly religious Uncle and Aunt give her everyday life boundaries and routine, amidst their Anglican doctrine and emerging function as missionaries to a foreign land. Their particularly unsubtle brand of 'conversion therapy' (signified by a church building with tangled jungle on all sides) is doomed to fail in a community relying on the subtle interactions between ecology and spirituality as part of their faith. To the Myahueneca tribe, the human life cycle is enmeshed in all life cycles. Coupe identifies the cyclical nature of human life and its interwoven creation/hero paradigms, with myth becoming the discrepancy between Sacred time and Profane time: "The creation paradigm gives us the idea of facing up to primordial chaos, manifest in the absurdity of repetition […] The hero paradigm gives us the possibility of a human protagonist acting with a superhuman power…" (Coupe, 1997, p.54-55)

Rosie Shields, in essence, travels back to a Creation myth (that of the titular Skintaker) becoming in and of herself a new vessel for the ancient. By rejecting her duplicitous Uncle and Aunt and allying herself with the Skintaker she shatters the profane worlds of her guardians' Anglican faith, and also that of the corporate forces invading the Amazon. The latter is represented by mercenary hunter/killer Richter and his paymasters, who are revealed to be early iterations of The Consortium Inc.

Coupe highlights J.G. Frazer's belief that the hidden meaning of myth lies in the cycle of vegetation, versus Sigmund Freud's belief that it lies in sexual reproduction. The Skintaker/Skin Mechanic exists at an intersection where he attempts to reconcile both with violence. (Coupe, 1997, p.126) Rosie's life is in turmoil due to the duplicity of her guardians and her debilitating skin condition. Her exposure to the violent and liberating possibilities of the Skintaker and his cult helps her to overcome both and entertain the prospects of a new

[1] Both characters' stories will continue in a future (planned) sequel, to be entitled *The Skin Mechanic*, converging in the growth cycle of a new protagonist 'Cal' (short form of 'Calendula', who will discover they are the offspring of Rosie's pairing with the Skintaker).

equilibrium where she can exist in harmony with the untamed aspects of nature – within and without.

In her instructive *Emotional Toolbox: The Character Map Book*, Laurie Hutzler identifies that a protagonist must make a 'Leap of Faith' following an examination of the repetitive, harmful behaviours and repeated mistakes that are preventing them from embarking upon the next stage of their evolution (Hutzler, 2006). I find this approach useful in character design and development. I have employed Hutzler's character mapping as a methodology to ensure that a character can only realise a new equilibrium in their life if they confront the mistakes and/or defining problem of their past. Of course, in *The Lamplighters* the new equilibrium ultimately plays out very much in the favour of the antagonist (the bona fide antagonist of The Consortium Inc.) evil endures, life goes on according to its plan. Marla does acknowledge the misdemeanours of her past during her time on Meditrine Island, and attempts to reconcile them by rescuing the boy-thing Eric. But her misplaced trust in Eric is ill-fated, and shows that the harmful cycle continues via her guilt about past behaviours. In *The Skintaker*, evil does endure, and the plan to kidnap the Skintaker succeeds, but even the Consortium has not forseen Rosie's involvement in its scheme. She both supports and upsets the new equilibrium. Her journey through the rainforest enables her to decipher the mystery of past events, and she sees her guardians punished by the purifying flames of their own religious doctrine. In both novels, the 'Leap of Faith' becomes a literal one with the secular human surrendering to the transformative practices of the Skintaker/Skin Mechanic. Only by embracing the monstrous, willingly or otherwise, can the protagonists of my novels actualise their truest selves. The authenticity of their lived experience means that they can endure the pain of transformation. They have nothing left to fear, not even death, which they learn from the same force tasked with destroying them. This leads me to a consideration of the intersectionality of protagonist and antagonist, and of good and evil, in my novels.

In her preface to *Malice*, Charlotte Mouffe says that Flahault's reading of *Frankenstein* (1818), "dramatizes the desire to be oneself fully and unconditionally" (Mouffe, in Flahault, 2003, p.ix). In *The Skintaker*, Rosie Shields is both Victor Frankenstein and an empowered version of his creature, using the creative engines of her mind and body to achieve transformative change. She has been the victim of monotheism (via the doctrine of her Aunt Francesca and Uncle Gregory) and her debilitating skin condition (failure of the organism, acne rosacea as a form of stigmata) but her transformation via purifying flame and the alchemy of flesh regeneration results in her owning her physical and intellectual selves. As Flahault

describes, paraphrasing Simone de Beauvoir, "One is not born a self, one becomes one." (Flahault, 2003, p.41) Encountering the Skintaker is at once threatening to Rosie, but only by doing so will she be able to access the person she must become. "In order to think about wickedness and to distinguish it from goodness, we must simultaneously acknowledge that we are connected to that fount of limitlessness, and acknowledge its ambivalence. This is much more difficult that it seems, for it means accepting the unacceptable; accepting, as we lose a part of this fount, that we are condemned forever to enjoy only a part of ourselves." (Flahault, 2003, p.30)

As described above, both Marla and Rosie navigate their character map and arrive at a point where they are beyond terror. And yet, prior to this revelation, it is perhaps true that, "What human beings fear most is death." (Flahault, 2003, p.37) Both novels position youthful fears of mortality (Marla's/Rosie's) versus the elder statesman's fear of a damaged reputation, the persona and life they have built up disintegrating. Chief of Security Fowler is career-obsessed, doggedly maintaining the status quo for his wealthy patrons whatever the moral cost. Uncle Gregory is the figurehead of his ministry, and if it fails, he will be seen to have failed his God and his partner, Aunt Francesca. Both Gregory and Francesca, as God-fearing characters, believe in life everlasting for the righteous and so should fear death less than Rosie does. But they are also aware of their misdemeanours no matter how they have attempted to justify and reconcile them within the parameters of their Anglican faith. Having 'saved' Rosie from her childhood fire, and having basked in adulation for this act as heroes, they consign themselves to a bonfire of their own vanity within the burning church when it is revealed that they did away with her parents out of shame – a form of 'honour killing'. Rosie's subsequent forest fire transformation mirrors this conflagration with her pagan church of the great outdoors contrasting Gregory's church house in the settlement. Timbers fall inside the church, trees fall in the forest. The former has been subject to the folly of human design, while the trees have not.

My high contrast approach to setting in both novels draws on established genre elements. The 'old dark house' of Gothic novels is present in *The Lamplighters*, but is not the only or main setting. The billionaires' mansions are airy and bright, providing a façade behind which dark secrets lurk. In his discussion of settings that inspire dread, Flahault identifies "a constant which is so widespread (we find it in terrors of this kind) […] the opposition between two spaces" (Flahault, 2003, p.40-41). In *The Lamplighters* the reader sees this opposition in the daylight world of the mansion with its shimmering swimming pool, versus the subterranean

primordial chaos of the cellar and its stained mattress, or the cave system and its altogether hideous contents. The Big House is a living thing, described as being formed from driftwood that has washed up on the island over decades, it is "not sane" (my subconscious nod to Shirley Jackson's *Hill House*) and is a chaotic precursor to the ordered white stucco and glass of the billionaires' mansions. The driftwood carvings and ancient stone foundations of the Big House contrast with the uniformity and conformity of the modern buildings. They tell a story, whereas the modern structures are anodyne and, at best, a blank canvas. The Big House contains a games room with billiard tables, and dusty books line the shelves, just as they line the windows of Vincent's lighthouse. In the mansions, the children's bedrooms contain no toys and there is no reading material anywhere (save, tellingly, for Chief of Security Fowler's rulebook manual). The Skin Mechanic's lair contains the source of the billionaires' longevity, ritual chemicals that Marla finds packaged in unbranded household goods elsewhere in the mansions. The act of Marla using these packaged ritual materials for cleaning and maintenance of the homes is a precursor for the larger, life threatening, ritual to come.

In *The Skintaker*, the stilted mission house, literally and figuratively floats above the primal earth, lofty on its higher ground just like those who built it, lit by lanterns that keep the fire safely contained inside them. The cave temple with its womblike interior carved with ancient pictograms, lit and heated by the naked, unfettered flames of torches. The latter is a pagan space, a labyrinth of possibilities completely at odds with the ordered compound of the missionaries, even though both are places of worship. The church is locked up at night, Gregory's sermons are exclusively day-lit rituals. By contrast, the Skintaker's ritual workings continue well into, and throughout, the night. Found amidst a ritual work-in-progress, his character is also seen to enjoy the liminality of his surroundings. "Light makes it possible to distinguish things and beings […] and fashion a sense of an inhabited world. Darkness, by contrast […] gives substance to the intrusion of nothingness." (Flahault, 2003, p.43)

As an extension of the possibilities embodied by his lair, the Skintaker/Skin Mechanic is a "boundless and omnipotent entity" (Flahault, 2003, p.44). Flahault describes Frankenstein's monster as a "a new kind of ghost" (Flahault, 2003, p.46) manifesting "the fear of being unable to keep one's own boundlessness at a distance" (ibid). My monster is a form of living death. He is life unstoppable, and through him the threat and the promise become one and the same – even after death you will know no rest. If the un-life is that represented by the Consortium, one might opt for mortality after all. Flahault goes on to argue that in ancient creation myths, "only non-being exists absolutely or indefinitely," and that beings (including

deities) exist, “as the cost of a definition, a demarcation.” He concludes that it is therefore, “impossible to be simultaneously just (guaranteeing order) and all-powerful (controlling other powers).” (Flahault, 2003, pp.22) To his worshippers and captors, my antagonist can control mortality, but he must kill in order to do so. There is a constant tension between the order provided by the ritual and the chaos of the acts of murder required to perpetuate it. In contrast to the Skintaker, Uncle Gregory reaches a “transgressive finality” (Flahault, 2003, p.50) by projecting a “fantasy of all-powerfulness” (ibid). The word of God is absolute, and by presenting himself as its mouthpiece, Gregory fatally defines himself as pure and infallible when in reality he is as flawed and guilt-ridden as the souls he seeks to save. The purifying flames of the burning church are a transgressive finality to the sequence of events set in motion by Gregory’s and Francesca’s murderous intentions.

The Skintaker/Skin Mechanic instead manifests or embodies “a desire for self-begetting in completeness” (Flahault, 2003, p.58). He is a self-actualising being just as Rosie is – both Victor Frankenstein and the Frankenstein Monster in one body. He is a lifegiver but paradoxically he must murder people and destroy lives in order to create and perpetuate life. The ‘eternal child’ figure of Eric in *The Lamplighters* echoes this function in a minor key. He is forever a child, physically, but with a monstrous adult mind. He puts out the eyes of his now-elderly father Vincent so that he might not witness his transgression even as he performs it.

If the character of the Skintaker is a mirror for Rosie, then supporting character Richter is a crack in the glass. Rosie succumbs to self-doubt, fuelled by unresolved survivor’s guilt over the deaths of her parents. She interrogates her motivations, suspicious of where her anger is coming from. Richter simply justifies his actions, however extreme, as progress: “Moved to act, he becomes ever blinder to the unconscious desire which motivates him” (Flahault, 2003, p.61)

This illustrates the importance of a character’s want versus need (aka the conscious versus unconscious desire) highlighted by McKee (McKee, 1998) and Hutzler’s ‘Leap of Faith’ to break a cycle of repetitive, often non-conducive behaviour (Hutzler, 2006). Richter wants progress, and he needs to destroy in order to achieve it, but he will also destroy parts of himself by cancelling out a culture and replacing it with his own. He is colonising the rainforest with his own *id*, and there is no room left for anything other than his will. Rosie’s direction of travel is on a parallel path, even though she is traveling in a more spiritual direction. She must burn the corrupt flesh from her bones in the purifying flames of the forest fire before being clothed

in the skin of the young Myahueneca boy, Nimbo. Hers is still an act of cultural appropriation, a colonial act. She can now present herself as being homogenous, but is still a white woman sheathed in tribal clothing. This contrasts her childhood. Plucked from the fire by her duplicitous uncle, this causes her affliction. The deckhand's attempted assault seeks to deny her agency. Her choice of a partner in the form of the Skintaker is exactly that – a choice. Rosie has agency then, but she has still taken advantage of another (Nimbo) to achieve it. She is a heroine, placing the lives of others above her own, but she is still capable of acting upon instincts of survival and self-preservation. It became important to me to ensure that neither Rosie nor Marla became one-dimensional heroines, overpowering evil in order to stamp the world with their own brand of 'goodness'. When the ritual workings of the Skintaker/Skin Mechanic become actualised in flesh, it becomes difficult to see where he ends and the protagonist begins. To return to the idea that my protagonists in these two novels are a blend of victim and monster:

> "The terror or pity experienced before the monster is mingled with the enjoyment of its limitlessness and the omnipotence to which it gives form (Victor + Creature) the two characters offer the same violent contrast between interior and exterior, a discontinuity, a rift which breaks all social bonds for them and, at the same time, gives them up to the higher passion of being one's own origin" (Flahault, 2003, p.81-82)

I do believe the Skin Mechanic is his 'own origin'. Venerated by his worshippers, he then becomes outcast when he refuses to bow to the demands of the status quo (represented by the royals ruling his lands). The powers of creation he used for the longevity of his people and their culture, become a weapon against them. His creative powers are also destructive then[2], particularly when his motivation for revenge (initially as the Skintaker, and later as the Skin Mechanic) enslaves him to his passions, and then to the Consortium which kidnaps him in order to harness those powers. The part of him that asks, 'why me?' externally, just as Shelley's Creature does, is internally stalked by the spectre of bitterness and revenge, his inner Victor Frankenstein.

When Rosie and Marla cross paths with their nemesis, they are initially and understandably fearful of him. This fear gives way to a kind of awe when faced with the spectacle of his unlimited powers of potential. Their meeting describes a process in which:

[2] Rather like a horror writer's!

"The figures of the absolute which these characters deploy brings this reader closer to the sources of his or her own physical vitality." (Flahault, 2003, p.88) I would argue that Rosie/Marla are never more alive and physical than when they encounter the Skintaker/Skin Mechanic.

Marla is encouraged to take a jog at the behest of fellow Lamplighter Jessie, who wishes to use her to draw Fowler's surveillance away from her own plans. Marla finds herself at gunpoint and reprimanded for trespassing. She is instructed by Fowler that no gatherings of more than two people can take place on the island, a place which offers only the illusion of freedom. When she later encounters the Skin Mechanic at the Big House, Marla enters 'The Ordeal' phase of her adventure (Vogler, 2007). After escaping from the attic that harbours dark totems placed there by Eric in tribute to his surrogate father and deity, Marla returns to the natural world of the island. More horrors await in the ravaged form of security guard Adam, with whom she had hoped to pursue a relationship. Utterly alone now she climbs to the top of a tall tree and sees, for the first time, the world of the island from above. Her escape has facilitated for her one true glimpse of freedom. When she sees the lights of the boats approaching, she imagines that she will be able to continue that freed state off and away from the island.

Rosie's meeting with the Skintaker ultimately leads her to a physical, intellectual and spiritual rebirth with the shedding of her old skin awakening a new and revitalised self. Her transformation echoes the vision questing and ritual dancing of shamanic figures, during which the shaman 'becomes' the totemic animal, or spirit, that they are portraying. The Myahueneca ritual is her induction into the process of becoming, or joining with, the 'other'.

Ernst Cassirer likens such mythic dramatisations to Western mime performances:

> "The dancer who appears in the mask of the god or demon does not merely imitate the god or demon but assumes his nature; he is transformed into him and fuses with him. Here there is never a mere image, an empty representation; nothing is thought, represented, "supposed" that is not at the same time real and effective. But in the gradual progress of the mythical world view a separation now begins; and it is this separation that constitutes the actual beginning of the specifically religious consciousness." (Cassirer, 1955, p.238—239)

Rosie finds her specific form of religious consciousness within the Skintaker's inner sanctum. The cave that she initially feared becomes her safe haven when she uses her physical

prowess to dislodge the keystone at the entrance, preventing Richter from pursuing her inside. This is Rosie's 'Return with the Elixir' (Vogler, 2007), where she considers the pictograms describing the Skintaker's history and her place in that unfolding story as an extension of it, and of him. Instead of returning to the 'ordinary world' of society as is a traditional feature of the hero's journey, Rosie finds her new equilibrium in the very place previously known to evoke the deepest primal fear in outsiders. She is authentically renewed within the womb-space of the Skintaker's cave lair, and may yet make a home there.[3]

Having considered aspects of characterisation, theme, and plot structure, I would now like to turn to tone. Something I was keen on avoiding in my novels was the 'preachy' tone that I had noticed in, for example, the film adaptations of Dennis Wheatley's novels that I had watched as a teenager, such as Hammer's *The Devil Rides Out* (1968). In this narrative, characters flirt with the world of the occult in order to overthrow its architects before shining the holy light of Christian doctrine upon it. Interesting stuff is happening in the shadows in Wheatley's work, and its heroes often obliterate them with an overbearing sense of good versus evil, right versus wrong. I believe the positioning of Christianity (Wheatley was devout) versus pagan, 'anti-Christian' beliefs is summed up by Flahault in his discussion of G.E. Lessing (1896) who write of polytheism as, "ideology and darkness and the coming of a God on the side of reason and progress." (Lessing, 1896, in Flahault, 2003, p.133).

While I have enjoyed Wheatley's stories and their adaptations, I wished to include more nuance in my work, the logic being, if there's such interesting stuff in the shadows, why not allow it to co-exist with the light? After all, there are no shadows without the light to cast them. In *Malice*, Flahault considers the ideas of Christian narratives versus the secular narrative of literature and how works that rebel against reason are not perhaps taken as seriously (by philosophers) as those which 'show themselves to be permeable to reason' (Flahault, 2003, p.107). A challenge in the composition of my work has been to make the characters and events believable enough to hold the reader's attention, but also strange enough to convey the themes and elements of the fantastic. Balancing these elements and avoiding a novel being interpreted or received by a genre savvy audience as 'too preachy' has perhaps been my largest challenge of all[4] when writing the novels discussed here.

[3] I chose to leave this on an ambiguous note, partly because I already had a sequel in mind, and partly because I wanted the reader to imagine how Rosie's next chapters may unfold.

[4] Some readers, of course, prefer moral positioning when reading novels, but I am a firm believer that if you try to please everyone you will end up pleasing no one.

I believe that 'The Principle of Creative Limitation' (McKee, 1998) has been a guiding one throughout the preparation and execution of my work. McKee describes a process by which a writer's creative muscle atrophies if it does not have some kind of creative boundary to push against (McKee, 1998, p.91). In my film work, I am limited by constraints of time and budget, and these have turned out to also be my greatest creative freedoms. With only a couple of hours of daylight in which to get my shot, for example, I have been forced to think on my feet, and to get inventive in order to achieve something that will fulfil the requirements of the narrative. No such constraints existed in the writing of my first novel[5] *The Lamplighters*. I could dream big and write bigger, with sun-kissed beaches and superyachts, explosions and complicated 'visual effects' that would be cost-prohibitive in a speculative screenplay. It was helpful therefore to have the creative limitation of avoiding being 'too preachy' when drafting *The Lamplighters* in the period 2009—2010. In that first novel, and its successors, I have been free to discuss issues such as ecology, gender politics, consumerism, through the narrative device of flawed characters. I believe that allowing characters to be flawed is a mechanism by which to avoid that 'preachy' tone I had detected in Wheatley's work. In my books, no one is wholly 'good' or 'evil', they are capable of both extremes on a sliding scale that creates tension in the plotting and growth (or lack of) in the character's developmental arcs. Some, such as Rosie Shields in *The Skintaker*, will undergo a process of transformative change. Others, like Marla Neuborn in *The Lamplighters*, will become self-fulfilling prophecies, the last to realise that their transformative change into a new state of being, and a new equilibrium, will be revealed to them only as the endgame of antagonistic forces.

That's not to say 'good versus evil' is not a concern of my novels. It absolutely is, but this dynamic rather plays out in the arena of supporting characters and is not absolute. When supporting characters lock horns, they demonstrate to my main characters (and by extension, my readers[6]) the folly of dealing in absolutes. My protagonists must learn to live with their own shadows in order to see the light. To create this effect I have made use of the character archetypes of both Vogler and Hutzler, in particular the former's 'character who cannot be put down', and the latter's 'character of imagination'. These archetypes are loyal to a baseline morality, in essence a controlling idea for their behaviour, and must learn to imagine that they are capable of so much more. I have also acted upon the advice of genre theorist Stephen V. Duncan who describes the process of surrounding main characters with supporting ones who

[5] (later books have been subject to contractual publishing dates)
[6] All three of them!

mirror, support, and/or challenge their dramatic function. Duncan calls this process 'developing the third wheel' (Duncan, 2014, p.163-164), which suggests the delicate machinery involved in balancing these characters in order to support the main thrust of the protagonist's story. Flahault also identifies this facet of characterisation: "Know thyself – in other words, learn to see yourself from the point of view of the third party." (Flahault, 2003, p.147)

The development of a hierarchy of supporting characters is, I believe, most effective when attached to the controlling idea at play in the main characters' stories. For example, in *The Skintaker* my approach to character hierarchy was based on the thematic element of 'old' versus 'new' religions. "It is customary to counter the polytheistic religions, which are regarded as barbaric to one degree or another with the moral shift which inscribed it necessity at the heart of […] monotheism." (Flahault, 2003, p.132)

In *The Skintaker*, the simple, old ways of interacting with nature and venerating its deities represented by the Myahuencan characters was in opposition to the Anglican characters of Gregory and Francesca, with Rosie and the Professor as a filter between these two opposing points of view. Gregory regards the tribe as savages in need of saving and, as shown in Flahault's reflection above, his own religion represents reason and progress versus the dark ideology of the pagan religion of the forest. The Professor sees the Myahueneca as a valuable source of knowledge transfer, even speaking of what he has learned from the experience when he is moments from death. He is a scientific folklorist, embracing the technology of the age (wax cylinder recordings and cine film) to record another culture. Writing from an integrationist folkloresque perspective, my Professor is an emerging occult expert, whose "knowledge is both powerful and dangerous. It is powerful because it can be used to combat supernatural evil, and dangerous because it necessitates a precarious proximity to the same supernatural forces it seeks to understand." (Tolbert, p.127, in Dylan Foster and Tolbert, 2016). The Professor gets too close to his subject, and fatally so.

Rosie also gets too close to the occult world at the heart of the rainforest's darkness, but her proximity is on an altogether more primal level. Experiencing the Myahuenecan rituals and customs first hand, she begins to see them as friends and allies. Notably, Rosie joins them in combating the forest fires, taking her uncontested place alongside the tribe – transcending her outsider status, she is becoming one of them. Her understanding is not simply academic like the Professor's, rather it is primal and experiential, culminating in her physically becoming sheathed in the skin of the tribe into which she is being accepted. To reiterate, hers is still an

invasive act, a colonial infiltration and occupation of the tribal body-politic. My intent was not to shy away from the fact that Rosie is still an outsider, her act of cultural appropriation (of another's skin) making her to some extent complicit in the industrial capitalist attack upon the natural order of things.

Amidst this man-made chaos of fire and conflict, we find Richter very much in his element as arch manipulator. He does not see himself as the villain, however, in his mind-set, he is a hero, and of course to his employers he will be a hero if his actions bear fruit. Throughout the narrative, Richter's primary function is to draw out the Skintaker in order to entrap him. Unlike Nimbo in the novel's opening, who attempts to steal honey from a hive without provoking the bees, Richter's stock-in-trade is provocation. In his twisted, emancipatory mind-set, Richter is the 'American hero' archetype. Flahault describes this figure as not being a mediator, but rather someone who: "…re-establishes justice by pacifying a conflict and striving to prevent evil from coming about. The evil is done, and he punishes it." (Flahault, 2003, p.151 -152)

This role becomes populated by Chief of Security Fowler in *The Lamplighters*. Fowler's desire for law and order is shown in the rulebook manual that he presents to Marla upon her arrival at Meditrine Island. Fowler has a problem in that he knows someone else is on the island killing his men. When Marla begins to bend the rules at Jessie's behest, Fowler watches her on his security cameras. Rather like Richter and his planned entrapment of the 'evil' to put it to 'better' use in *The Skintaker*, Fowler plans to use Marla to bring the stranger out into the open in order to impose law and order on the interloper and his movements. But Fowler gets the wrong guy, blaming Vincent for the violence against his men. Fowler remains ignorant of the Consortium's worship of his nemesis when Vincent returns from a symbolic grave to kill him. The Chief is so locked into his worldview as judge, jury, and executioner that he fails to see the real threat operating in the shadows. As Flahault describes: "When a conflict develops around an injustice, each of the two parties tends to adopt a confrontational stance" (Flahault, 2003, p.146)

Both Richter and Fowler express a conscious desire to maintain order on the behalf of their paymasters. These are 'Power of Ambition' characters, defined by Laurie Hutzler as manipulative backstabbers capable of anything to achieve their aims (Hutzler, 2009, pp. 19). It follows that their unconscious desire is to impose and maintain their own version of order on wider society. Their 'leap of faith' is based on convincing themselves that they, and only they,

are right. They will risk their lucrative place in the order of things by making a power grab for absolute rule over others. If these characters were cast in a traditional heroic mould, they would perhaps sacrifice their ambition and learn to help others whatever the cost.

Marla and Rosie, as 'power of the imagination' characters, are more open minded to the possibilities of what they have glimpsed in those shadows. In *The Character Type Overview* (2009) Hutzler defines 'power of the imagination' characters as: "…the naifs, innocents and eccentrics, seemingly the last person anyone would think of as a hero. They are, in fact, the classic mythic hero or the reluctant hero that Joseph Campbell and Chris Vogler describe." (Hutzler, 2009, p.15)

Both characters' developmental storylines become enmeshed in the 'evil' represented by the Skintaker/Skin Mechanic, and both discover that the evil is, in fact, nuanced. The evil has a backstory that reveals a vulnerability and a desire for revenge that is to an extent relatable for both Marla and Rosie. Marla is driven by the mistakes from her past, and is made vulnerable by the attendant guilt that has since marred her attempts for renewal. Rosie has survivor's guilt, and becomes vengeful when she learns the truth about her parents. The trajectory that both characters follow upon interacting with the Skintaker/Skin Mechanic takes both Marla and Rosie into the mode of the 'monstrous feminine', and I will examine this character modality in my work below.

5. Folk Horror and Femininity in *The Jack in the Green* (2013) and *Hearthstone Cottage* (2019)

I first heard the term 'folk horror' in *Home Counties Horror*, the second part of Mark Gattis's television documentary *A History of Horror* (BBC Four, 2010), when the presenter attributed the term to Piers Haggard, the director of seminal British folk horror film *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1975). The terminology struck me as being the perfect way to describe the intersection of folklore and horror in rural landscapes. When I began work on my novel *The Jack in the Green* (2013), I did not set out to create a 'folk horror' work as such, but rather found that the novel retrospectively fits the parameters of the subgenre. I was perhaps more conscious of my writing practice in the subgenre when it came to drafting *Hearthstone Cottage* (2019).

In *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017), Adam Scovell identifies a paradigm of folk horror storytelling, which he describes as the 'Folk Horror Chain', and which is comprised of the following thematic and structural elements:

1. Landscape
2. Isolation
3. Skewed belief systems and morality
4. Happening/Summoning

(Scovell, 2017, pgs.15-18)

I will consider each of these elements in turn in the context of *The Jack in the Green* and *Hearthstone Cottage*.

To begin with landscape, I decided to set the former novel on the West coast of Scotland based on research I had conducted in the early 2000s when I travelled to Plockton and Inverness. The village of Plockton became a major source of inspiration to me, including names that I borrowed from the headstones of the local cemetery, and the surrounding forests and derelict buildings I explored during my stay. I also visited Boleskin House, the infamous former residence of occultist Aleister Crowley, which later became notorious for the ritual practices

of musician Jimmy Page of rock band *Led Zeppelin*. The cemetery at Boleskin also inspired my work, in the form of the remote churchyard where Mike experiences hallucinatory terrors in *Hearthstone Cottage*. In both locales, Plockton and Boleskin, I became fascinated by the way in which a localised landscape of community buildings and rows of houses became dwarfed by its surrounding, altogether untamed, landscape. The welcoming nature of such communities (for example, I was struck by the trust that a publican in Plockton had in his visitors when he told them to help themselves to drinks and to leave the cash on the bar) seems at odds with the great, encroaching unknown that lurks just beyond the village perimeter. Plockton itself became a notable folk horror film location, used in the opening scenes of cult classic *The Wicker Man* (1973) when Sergeant Howie makes his fateful journey via boat plane to Summerisle, where a young girl has gone missing. In that narrative, the welcoming village community tips over into the sinister, with animal mask wearing villagers driving Howie toward his tragic demise within the titular Wicker Man.

The fictional location of Drinton[7] in *Hearthstone Cottage* is based on my travels to ancient sites in Wales, Shropshire, Wiltshire, and Oxfordshire. The wild, isolated landscape in the novel is more wide open than that of Douglass, allowing for narrative opportunities wherein main character Mike Carter becomes lost in the landscape, only to discover an ancient landmark in the form of The Spindle Stones. These megaliths anchor the titular Cottage to the landscape via the hearthstone, which is revealed to be one of the magical stones from the circle. The stone circle was inspired by my visits to Avebury Stone Circle in Wiltshire and the Rollright Stones in Oxfordshire, both of which featured in televised folk horror stories *The Children of the Stones* (1977) and *Doctor Who and The Stones of Blood* (1978), and both left an indelible impression upon my imagination in early childhood.

> "Standing stones still occupy a folkloric sense of history and mystery, their use in Folk Horror is inevitable and popular, with many narratives pivoting around the very important role of some sort of monolith, stone circle, or other landform." (Scovell, 2017, p.48)

With the above quotation in mind, it is clear to me that I managed to reframe any initial concerns I may have had (about using a subgenre trope) as being authentic to the landscape. On my aforementioned travels, no pit stop or ramble was without a local ancient landmark and

[7] Scottish slang meaning 'drowned', or 'drenched', an allusion to the flooded village that displaces the community and becomes the loch.

its attendant legends. I have found these explorations becoming a sourcebook of ideas for my work. I have also noticed ancient sites growing in popularity, particularly during the various pandemic lockdowns of 2020—2021, with social distancing leading many people to rekindle an appreciation of the wild, ancient landscape (or to discover it for the very first time), albeit from a safe distance. Concurrent with this has been a resurgence in the production of zines such as *Weird Walk*, *Grimoire Silvanus*, *Myth & Lore*, and *Rituals & Declarations*, dedicated to the topics of paganism/Wicca, megalithic sites, and plant lore. Musician and author Julian Cope's *Head Heritage* forums, active since the publication of his *Modern Antiquarian* and *Megalithic European* field guides, have been buzzing with posts from urban-based explorers seeking directions to obscure stone circles and long barrows. It is as though the urban consciousness is seeking respite from the collective trauma of pandemic by reconnecting with the wide-open spaces of yore, and the stories that are inexorably interwoven into them. Similarly, my own fascination with these landmarks and locations always circles back to that controlling idea of the modern mind in the ancient landscape: "The British relationship with landscape is a complex one that is intertwined with the history of artistic practice […] embracing darker emotions towards the landscape but doing so to such an extent that is it is only conceivably possible in the post-mechanised age." (Scovell, 2017, p.37)

My integrated folkloresque approach, combining disparate elements into a cohesive whole, often includes personal politics. I added an author's note to *The Jack in the Green* in support of the protest movement against the imposition of the High Speed 2 (HS2) rail project. This monstrous, industrial carbunkle has destroyed numerous ancient woodland areas, some in the county where I live, despite the attempted greenwashing of the owner operators to portray it in an eco-friendly light. As Timothy H. Evans notes in his essay studying the folkloresque aspects of Neil Gaiman's writing, which suggests they are rooted in a critique of industrial capitalism, "folklore has provided a sense of authenticity for its creator's art as well as their political agenda by linking these to a perceived or imagined folk community." (Evans, p.64, in Dylan Foster & Tolbert, 2016) Inspired by the #StopHS2 and #HS2Rebellion movements, my approach was to present *The Jack in the Green*'s Douglass as one such community under imminent threat from such capitalist, industrial forces, and *Hearthstone Cottage*'s Drinton as post-threat case study of its aftermath.

Drinton itself is presented as something of a ghost town, with the blame for its predicament being, once again, attributed to The Consortium Inc. Both Mike's and best friend Alex's fathers work for the company, with their dam project displacing the community and

leading to ever increasing property prices beyond the reach of local young people. This backstory context was informed by my visits to the community of Knighton, which straddles Shropshire, England and Powys, Wales. Both sides of the border contain numerous holiday lets, which are often second homes to wealthy owners who have extensive property portfolios. Although these rental properties bring tourist trade with them, they effectively lock generations of local people out of home ownership in their own communities and this has resulted in a growing protest movement, and proposed Welsh Government legislation, against second home ownership in Wales. As with Tom McCrae, Mike is an outsider who brings a reminder of the corporate injustices these communities are enduring, the lived experiences of both Douglass and Drinton, if you will. As Scovell interprets:

> "A general rurality can seen in such narrative tropes as the insider/outsider, the modern city dweller entering the zone of the countryside and being shocked by its differing ways of life, an old magic being derived from the landscape, the rural becoming the testing area for scientists with their experimental urbanity, and where places are subject to a cultural form of violence; these are all potentially derived from the sideways tipping of reality through an emphasis on the rural." (Scovell, 2017, p.83)

Mike's frightening encounter with the silently aggressive villagers of Drinton is meant to accentuate his outsider status, othering him when he is at his most vulnerable and in need of help, and of community, as he searches in vain for his missing girlfriend following an argument. This sense of othering is central to the element of rural isolation in both novels. When I began to outline the story for *The Jack in the Green*, I placed the quaint, yet slightly threatening, aspects of my fictional community Douglass front and centre. The 'fish out of water' characterisation of American company man Tom McCrae does echo that of straight-laced Christian copper Sergeant Howie in *The Wicker Man*, but I believe any similarity ends there. Rather than a missing persons case, McCrae's visit is purely business-focussed, under instruction from his boss (again working for my fictional corporation The Consortium Inc.) to broker a land grab deal which he will use to create an environmentally damaging biofuels operation. McCrae is the outsider scientist, bringing with him acts of unbridled environmental violence. Here, the Consortium operates as a skewed nature cult, sacrificing trees to create biofuels. To refer back to Coupe: "…the King of the Wood has to be replaced by a violent usurper" (Coupe, 1997, p.28).

This larger, thematic struggle becomes embodied in character experience when woodsman Cosmo (his own personality fractured by PTSD caused by his active service in Kosovo) is killed by McCrae in a battle to assert himself as the 'true' Jack of the Greenwood figure. McCrae represents the order of urbanity to Cosmo's rural chaos. The sterile banality of budget chain hotels and hire cars, versus the wild unpredictability of Douglass. The naming of my fictional village was deliberate, Doug/lass being both male and female, rather like the 'Jack and Jill' trees that feature in the novel, joined at their roots. The image of the roots underlines the life cycle of vegetation, where one organism gives life to another in repetition. Just as Freud and Frazer identified the hidden meaning of myth as being rooted in sex and the lifecycle of nature respectively, Tom McCrae attempts to reconcile both with violence (rather like the Skin Mechanic as discussed earlier). His separation of the Jack and Jill tree's roots using an axe is symbolic of modern commerce as a disrupting influence on the natural rhythms of ecology. Tom must enforce the will of the Consortium upon the community, and Douglass's pagan commune must submit to capitalist market forces. Resistance manifests in the Christmas tree farmer and his family (who turn down Tom's offers of a settlement for their land) and in the misguided, but deciding, actions of the eco-warriors led by self-styled 'Jupiter Crash' (aka Brian). Again, I channelled real locations into the text with the woodland power station being inspired by a similar structure near my current home in Buckinghamshire. The human-made power that emanates from the structure seems to have a deteriorating effect on the surrounding fir trees, turning their foliage a dead, brown colour. I put these observations to dramatic use in *The Jack in the Green*, in the sequence where the eco warriors destroy the power substation but cause a raging forest fire as a result of their sabotage.

Such moral grey areas abound in the context of the green, and with that in mind, I will now look to the elements of skewed belief systems and twisted morality in both novels. As outlined above, the characters of Tom McCrae and Mike Carter are 'fish out of water' characters whose stories are entangled with the past in the isolationist places that they visit. The ordered world of (in Tom's case) luggage and check-ins, breakfast and meetings, and the expectations (in Mike's case) of what constitutes a holiday among friends, are challenged by the indelicate roughness and persistent traditions of Douglass and Drinton respectively. Both communities are polite and ordered in their way, but both have churches that are locked shut, and local legends of ritual sacrifice. Pagan sacrifice is a core element of folk horror narratives, indeed Scovell describes it as a 'thematic spectre' lurking within the folk horror subgenre (Scovell, 2017, p.63), and observes:

> "Whilst the complexities surrounding the interest in various characters of belief system are socially complex, its other definite contributing factor is that of its relationship to the landscape. It is not just free love and drugs that brings such occultism to the fore, but an embracing of the rural in all its cultural disguises." (Scovell, 2017, p.63)

I believe that this relationship is at the core of the hierarchy in *The Jack in the Green*. The village community is actively involved in keeping rural, pagan traditions alive, as demonstrated in the wassailing ceremony where cider is offered to the tree spirits to bring a favourable apple harvest the following year. The 'wearing of the Green', which I based partly on a real-life May Day celebration that I witnessed in Hastings, is another ritualistic form practiced and preserved by the community. Both the above traditions are Anglo-Saxon in origin, and again show my integrated folkloresque approach to world building. The economy of the village is involved in these practices, with the publican profiting from attendance at the events. Sub textually, the integration of capitalistic, performative rituals from 'outside' and into Scottish culture echo the corporate invasion of company man Tom and his American paymasters. Another culture clash, that of the idealistic clash between the Christmas tree farmer and these more ancient practices is actually a link between the pre-Christian and Christian in my novel. The local church is locked up, becoming nothing more than a symbol in the community after the vicar scandalously absconded with one of his flock. But the graveyard is the site of the cider ritual, due to the ancient trees located there. The Christmas tree is rooted (pun intended) in the pagan practice of bringing an evergreen into the home as a totem of life after Winter, and tinsel, as the aptly named Holly tells Tom, dates back to the pagan practice of hanging animal offal from trees as offerings to nature deities. The 'free love' offered to Tom by Holly, and the 'drugs' (the pub's strongly alcoholic offerings) Tom imbibes, open his mind and emotions to more primitive states of being, but the rituals are omnipresent in the village around him, and embodied by the villagers who continue their traditions. I must emphasise that I am not claiming primitivism to be a solution to my characters' (or the world's) problems. Rather, the pagan practices in my stories walk that knife-edge between progressive, libertarian freedoms, and conservativism. As Scovell writes:

> "Folk horror is the violent rejoining with tradition which, on paper, seems almost conservative, yet it even subverts this reading by often summing up pre-Christian values rather than more purely traditional ideologies; a strangely progressive form created through a conservative mechanism." (Scovell, 2017, p.38)

In each of my novels, I have sought to create dramatic hierarchies that show there is no straight answer, no hard-and-fast rule to how we should live our lives in a post-mechanised age. In doing so, I have created fictional community structures that align with Robert McKee's 'Law of Conflict', in which he describes a complexity of conflict operating upon three levels of influence: Inner conflict, personal conflict, and extra-personal conflict (McKee, 1998, p.213-215). From the protagonist's level (with an inward looking dimension of chemically enhanced states and primal experience of horror/terror) to the wider, personal sphere of the villagers/communities, and outwards to the extra-personal layer of influence of local industry/nefarious corporations, each level of influence in my novels demonstrates a relationship dynamic with the landscape. The protagonist's relationship is one of discovery, both of a 'new' world experienced physically, and also one of self-discovery.

Looking now at the happening/summoning in Scovell's 'Folk Horror Chain', as discussed above, Rosie Shields and Marla Neuborn become new versions of themselves following ritualistic trials-by-fire. They become absorbed into the ritual body politic of The Consortium (Marla) and its deity the Skintaker/Skin Mechanic (Rosie). Conversely, Tom McCrae and Mike Carter cannot escape older, buried parts of themselves. Their experiences of isolation within the landscape, and the many horrors those bring, harken back to something ancient embodied by those landscapes. The trauma of this process leads both characters to an inward journey of discovery that draws out their guilty backstories and positions them in the context of recurring rituals that seek to create balance. As Scovell says: "Folk horror treats the past as a paranoid, skewed trauma; a trauma reflected in the everyday." (Scovell, 2017, p.14)

My novels explore the fault lines that exist between the sins of the past and the unfolding present. Both Tom and Mike must endure the trauma visited upon them in isolation. Instead of enduring it in order to find some form of connection like Marla and Rosie do, Tom and Mike must then accept the permanence of an isolated state.

In Tom's case he is destined to either become the Jack figure and stand alone, or to overthrow Jack and return to society. His psychopathy comes to the fore and he dons the Green in all senses of that act. Tom will carry this murderously uncompromising primal force back with him into the ordered world of a corporate job and marriage, exploding any notions of what is socially acceptable in the process. Tom's terrible actions (assaulting his wife and murdering his colleagues, Cosmo, and Holly) are what put the 'horror' into this particular folk horror text. His summoning has resulted in ritualistic fire and chaos, a battle for supremacy that leads him

back to who he truly is. Unfortunately, for the equilibrium of the wider world, the Jack persona that is Tom's authentic self is also a seemingly unstoppable compulsive liar, and homicidal maniac. His reaction to the summoning/happening is a subversion of the aforementioned 'Leap of Faith' from Laurie Hutzler's character mapping system (Hutzler, 2006). Rather than confront damaging, repetitive behaviours, Tom instead embraces them fully, allowing them to consolidate his sociopathic persona. To apply Tom's character story to Syd Field's paradigm of narrative structure (Field, 1994, p.9), in which the resolution of a story is not its ending – the final image becomes the ending – the resolution of *The Jack in the Green* is Tom becoming Jack, and its ending is his proposed return to society.

Mike's trajectory provides more of a note of hope. His biggest fear is loss of independence. He is young, carefree, and just wants to have a good time, all of which contradict the restrictive moral construct of the monogamous relationship he is in with Helen. As his tryst with Meggie is revealed, so too is the burden she was left to carry alone in his absence. By the final chapter, Mike learns that he must take some responsibility for his actions, and chooses to help Helen (and presumably their unborn child) live, while he stays on in limbo as a spiritual caretaker of the titular Hearthstone Cottage. He sees his friends surviving and thriving, with Meggie free to finally 'move on', from the window of the cottage where he must remain for eternity, preserving a balance between the two realities of the physical world, and the hereafter. Mike has navigated a Summoning/Happening in order to engage with the morality at the very core of his being. He, at last, makes a decision based on compassion for others rather than one based entirely on self-interest. Mike's 'Leap of Faith' moment conforms to Hutzler's model, therefore, as his decision breaks the cycle of repeated harmful behaviours and results in a balanced equilibrium for the 'greater good'. Again applying these narrative elements to Syd Field's paradigm of story structure, the resolution of *Hearthstone Cottage* is Mike's decision, and the ending of the novel is Mike becoming trapped inside the cottage forever. Both Tom and Mike are perhaps (to paraphrase Scovell) strangely progressive characters created through the equally strange and conservative mechanism of the 'Folk Horror Chain'.

Turning now to manifestations of the 'monstrous feminine' in these novels, Scovell includes in his book an analysis of *Stigma*, a folk horror television drama broadcast as part of the popular *A Ghost Story for Christmas* strand, which aired every December from 1971-1978 and which has had intermittent revivals since 2005. Written by Clive Exton and directed by *Ghost Story* regular Lawrence Gordon Clarke, *Stigma* dramatizes the effects that unearthing an ancient stone have upon a family who move into a house near a stone circle. Scovell describes

the programme as: “Folk horror within a domestic environment occurring with an emphasis on occult body-image” (Scovell, 2017, p.48).

I am relieved that I did not see this particular episode until after I had storylined *Hearthstone Cottage*, as the emphasis on the physicality of occult influence in the programme is similar to that of my novel. In *Stigma*, the mother in the household suffers unexplainable bleeding after the ancient stone is moved. A skeleton is discovered and it is revealed that the mother has been suffering the tortures visited upon a local with who was buried underneath the megalith. The patriarchy of the household is threatened by the monstrous feminine bleeding into the landscape, and the occupants of the house itself. In my novel, the incorporation of a standing stone into a cottage enables the spirit of a suicide to haunt the landscape and the tortured psyche of the man who drove her to such a desperate act. My megalith is brought into the house rather like the Christmas tree. Any attempt to domesticize the ancient is doomed to fail due to the pagan energies contained within the object and its interwoven legacy of legends.

The theme of martyrdom to the suffering of our forebears is something I was keen to explore in *Hearthstone Cottage*, with Helen’s miscarriage mirroring the accusations of infanticide that were made against Elsa, who the friends discover (via an old folklore book) was the last witch to be executed in Scotland. I deploy bloody imagery throughout the novel, for example, the spindle berries that drip blood-like juice, descriptions of the moon bleeding through gaps in the curtains, and Mike’s festering thumb wound. I was certainly channelling the very great impact that King’s *Carrie* (1992) had on me when I first read it as a teenager. But rather than the blood and the shame being visited upon a female lead character such as Carrie White, I was keen to subvert this genre expectation by inflicting it upon a male protagonist. Mike is positioned within the domesticity of the Cottage’s kitchen and living spaces, a zone that he finds it difficult enough to navigate even without the gory visitations that torment him. Throughout the novel he chooses to ignore these occult signifiers until it becomes apparent to him that his life and those of his friends, are at stake unless he engages with his past sins.

Those past sins manifest in the most grisly ways that I could imagine, and continue some of the motifs introduced in *The Jack in the Green*. In that novel, the Jack and Jill trees are revealed to house the skeletons of stillborn children, and in *Hearthstone Cottage*, the friends discover a baby’s skeleton wrapped in rotting swaddling cloth hidden inside the chimney. In the former novel, Cosmo beds down each night with the decaying corpse of a young woman

he rescued from the war, and in the latter, Meggie visits Mike in his nightmares, pregnant and corpselike. The monstrosity of birth and death, the terror of lost potential, become sources of horror for both Tom and Mike in these novels, sources that are deeply rooted in the transgressive acts that they have chosen to bury. Tom is forced to witness the murder of his parents at the derelict cottage of his youth, and Mike is visited by the re-animated skeleton that would have become his and Meggie's child at his holiday retreat. Both these sequences place the character at the very border of lived human experience, as described by Julia Kristeva in her essay on abjection:

> "A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being." (Kristeva, 1982, p.3)

The novel also portrays suicide-as-abjection via Meggie's 'enacted wrongdoing' (Kristeva, 1989, p.80-81) of taking her own life. Meggie is a depressed person, full of hatred and mourning a lost 'object' or 'thing' in Mike, and in their unborn child. She is, in essence, a 'lost mother' figure, with Mike providing a mirror as the 'lost self' upon whom she projects and reflects the meaning of her suffering. Meggie experiences: "…intolerance for object loss and the signifier's failure to ensure a compensating way out of the states of withdrawal in which the subject takes refuge to the point of inaction (pretending to be dead) or even suicide." (Kristeva, 1989, p. 10)

Meggie (the subject) drowns herself in the loch, and haunts not only the cottage, but also the wider physical landscape, and the liminal landscape of Mike's psyche. Mike is both signifier and mirror-subject in that he does not learn (in effect failing to ensure a way out for Meggie) and yet also mimics Meggie's depressive isolation via his addictive substance abuse. He may as well be pretending to be dead in the sequences where he fails (or chooses not) to engage. Meggie's suicide and subsequent haunting of Mike might fit the parameters of what Flahault refers to as '*suicide passionel*', namely: "the inverting of impotence into the omnipotence of the spectre." (Flahault, 2003, p.70)

With Elsa as a hybrid of metaphysical jailer, and witchcraft mentor, Meggie develops a magical power over Mike. The impotence she experiences following Mike's abandonment transforms into omnipotence when she becomes a vengeful spirit, a force of nature (and super-nature). Meggie's endgame as omnipotent spectre is twofold: To teach Mike the error of his ways, and make him her successor as spiritual guardian and inmate of the cottage's dark power.

The female triptych of pagan/Wiccan Goddess lore became a key element in the female characterisation of *Hearthstone Cottage*. Meggie's story cycles through three distinct states of being: Maiden, Mother, and Crone (or witch). In *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves describes, "the Goddess' three aspects of maiden, nymph, and hag," and suggests that each mirrors the "three phases of the moon." (Graves, 1999, pp.245)

Meggie draws attention to the moonlight in my novel, advising Mike and his friends that it is bad luck to gaze upon the full moon through glass, just as they are doing so via a conservatory window. She is both portent and proof of her 'old wives' tale'. She later appears to Mike in Glen Affric's inverted, drowned world of flooded village-become-loch as the Maiden, flanked by the spectral child (representing failed Motherhood), and Elsa (the Crone). Mike is the only one to witness this, emphasising that it is his male gaze that categorises the three states of female identity into this triptych. Mike sees, but does not attempt to understand. Mike's mode of behaviour echoes Tom's in *The Jack in the Green*, in which Holly represents the Maiden, Julia the Mother, and the landscape itself the Crone. The Douglass landscape is the elder matriarch in this triptych. Having witnessed so much, she contains multitudes but is reduced to a haggard, crone-like state by Tom and his employer. He and the Consortium are an invading capitalist force that seeks to squeeze the last drops of fertility out of her for the financial benefit of its biofuels division. Mike's male lens in *Hearthstone Cottage* is similarly reductive. Elsa is only given a name when Meggie speaks it during the closing chapters of the novel, humanising her beyond the stereotypical 'hag-witch' imagery applied to her by a male gaze fearful of mortality. In *The Monstrous Feminine*, Barbara Creed considers the woman-as-witch archetype in horror narratives and highlights: "…the stereotypical features associated with the witch as hag or post-menopausal woman – black dress, hump, wrinkled face, toothless grin." (Creed, 2015, p.33)

Creed describes how, as part of their ritual practices, witches were believed to castrate male victims and store their organs in a bird's nest or a box. These would be kept as 'pets' as a mockery of male virility, according to the witches' accusers, who were predominantly men,

of course. Just as Mike fears the loss of his freedom, attributing the fear to Helen, and to visions of Elsa, historical witch hunters (like those who murdered Elsa) feared women.

I included a perverse reversal of this grisly, occult emasculation in *Hearthstone Cottage* when Mike assists Meggie, placing an injured bird in a box. The intent is not to harm but to heal. Later, Mike is accused of harming the bird by Meggie. From the reader's perspective, however, it is more ambiguously 'nature taking its course', albeit with horrific overtones. It was my intention that animal life represents a form of freedom, and a state of innocence, in the novel. Each animal is totemic of this idea; the deer struck by the friends' 4x4, the bird that smashes into the window, and Oscar and the trio of puppies are all part of the conceptual continuity. Even the fish, which oozes noxious black fluid and maggots when Mike cuts into it, becomes tainted by its interaction with him. Mike's guilt, the wrongdoing that he has visited upon the female body, corrupts the animal world. He cuts his thumb during the sequence with the fish, a wound that becomes rancid as his mental state also deteriorates. Meggie tends to the wound, and this act foreshadows the revelation of their shared trauma. As Barbara Creed writes:

> "The wound is a sign of abjection in that it violates the skin which forms a border between the inside and outside of the body […] a bodily wound also suggests the moment of birth in which the infant is torn away from the maternal insides. Wounds signify the abject because they point to a woman's reproductive function and her alliance with the world of nature." (Creed, 2015, p.82)

Meggie herself is wounded, emotionally by Mike, and in the hallucinatory, haunted world she has created in and around the cottage we witness her burning in a fire. I intended Meggie's apparent immolation in the fire to echo witches being burned at the stake. Mike desperately tries to save Meggie from the fire, but is unable to perceive the true meaning behind the blaze. This is his weakness throughout, until Meggie shows him the truth and he realises he must make his 'Leap of Faith' based upon what he has seen. The female plight has been there all along for him to engage with, but he simply hasn't noticed it yet, let alone acknowledged it as part of his reality. Even when Helen miscarries, his decision-making is flawed. Until he is able to place himself at heart of the female experience, and to empathise with it, he is doomed to repeat the same mistakes. Mike needs to find the humanity in difference:

> "Woman is not, by her very nature, an abject being. Her representation in popular discourse as monstrous is a function of the ideological project of […]horror[…] – a project designed to perpetuate the belief that woman's monstrous nature is inextricably bound up with her difference as man's sexual other." *(Creed, 2015, p.83)*

If Marla and Holly (in my first two novels) were very much victims of the male-driven horrors that were visited upon them, physically and psychologically, I believe that Rosie and Meggie (in my third and fourth) represent an emerging awareness of this mode as a horror trope and my subversion of it. By embracing and celebrating aspects of the monstrous feminine and the female triptych, I believe the latter two novels in the sequence demonstrate greater character development and growth than my earlier works. In stark contrast to Holly's attempted education of Tom in *The Jack in the Green*, Meggie schools Mike about her lived experience in *Hearthstone Cottage* until he finally understands the consequence of his own actions. I did not attempt to sugar coat the outcome for Rosie or Meggie, however. They are still very much part of a largely patriarchal world that seeks to subdue them rather than allow them to thrive on their own terms. Meggie still has to die in order to show Mike the way, which I believe to be the strongest possible critique of him and his controlling masculinity. Rosie chooses to procreate with the Skintaker, but only when all other choices have been denied. Reviewers have expressed positive reactions to these characterisations, in particular Rosie in *The Skintaker* (see review summary, p.47) and these responses informed my confidence to write a first-person female protagonist for the first time in my sixth novel *Greyfriars Reformatory* (2020).

It was my intent in both *The Jack in the Green* and *Hearthstone Cottage* to create male protagonists who must learn from the females in their lives in order to reach a state of equilibrium. Tom McCrae rejects the opportunity, overriding any such discovery with his destructive male *id*. He does initially show some potential for a 'return to the old ways' of folk horror when he throws his cell phone away while he is in the forest with Holly. Later, Tom appears to be assimilating into her community's pagan customs when he dons the Green but, as with his rejection of the mobile phone amidst nature, these actions prove to be merely performative. He enjoys sexual freedom with Holly, but converts it into dark guilt, the ensuing negative energy culminating in him harming her instead of protecting her. Clear parallels can be drawn between Tom's actions towards Holly, who represents nature in the novel, and Richter's actions (as discussed in the previous section of this thesis) in *The Skintaker* against the people of the rainforest and their habitat.

Mike Carter does learn the lesson, but transitions only after a blindly destructive period of denial and blame into one of acceptance – and potential atonement. His trajectory is therefore a reversal of Tom McCrae's. Readers and reviewers have responded to Mike's character in a variety of ways. Some have written that they felt sorry for him, and others have expressed that they found him frustrating, even unlikeable. All of these responses are good outcomes. It was my intent to create an authentic twenty-something at odds with himself and the world. The controlling idea, and 'what if?' scenario of both these novels was: 'What if a man lived the experience of a woman he had abused?'

Both characters go into to the dark in order to find the light, and both discover that the price to be paid is to remain there, in the darkness.

6. Conclusion

I have defined the thematic coherence in my analysis of four folkloresque horror novels, published between 2011-2019. My novels "reassemble and redeploy disparate motifs and imageries, forming new contemporary creations that nevertheless harken back to 'olden times', to fairy tales, legends, and myths long familiar to audiences." (Tolbert, p.38, in Dylan Foster & Tolbert, 2016). The critical review has demonstrated how my works embrace existing genre elements while introducing originality in characterisation and setting via research and the authenticity of my own lived experience to deliver something new, with each work making a significant contribution to knowledge in my genre in its own right.

I highlighted in the introduction that I experienced discomfort at close readings of my work, preferring to allow the narratives to speak for themselves. During the process of researching this critical review, and broader definition of my practice as folkloresque, I have found subtle and direct correlations between my personal life and the themes and character motivations within my work. Which rather brings us full circle to notions of authenticity and lived experience, and of venturing into the darkness (i.e. Kristeva's 'black sun' of melancholia, loss, and depression) in order to discover its opposite. As Kristeva summarises: "…refinement in sorrow or mourning are the imprint of a humankind that is surely not triumphant but subtle, ready to fight, and creative." (Kristeva, 1989, p.22)

Returning to notions of lived experience and authenticity, you will recall my personal recollection of events surrounding my birth, also outlined in the introduction. In conclusion, I will fast forward from the events of February 1st, 1971, to those of February 1st, 2007, which was not only the Year of the Pig, but also a pig of a year during which I lost my Father and then my cat. My Mother passed away from terminal brain cancer in 2005. Bad things also come in threes.

My father died in January 2007 after suffering from vascular dementia. In December of the previous year, I made the long journey to Staffordshire to see him at a care home and to say my farewells. I remember how frail he looked, and that there was not much left of him

physically or mentally. He was somewhere else, gazing into space, perhaps lost in his dwindling memories in a living room full of empty chairs. At first, I didn't really know what to say, or even if he'd hear me. Then I knew exactly what to say. I told him that I wasn't afraid of him anymore, and also that I forgave him for attempting to kill me by assaulting my mother. (I think at least one of those statements is true.) When I gave him a gentle squeeze of the hand, he seemed to snap into the reality of the moment. He stared right at me and then started shouting indecipherably, and angrily. I called for the duty nurse, made my excuses, and left. During the cab ride back to the train station, I thought it apt that the last thing I heard from my father was incoherent shouting.

A few days later I received a call from a relative, apologising that my father's funeral would have to be held on my birthday because, 'no other dates were available'. All the way through the funeral, and the seemingly endless train journey back to London, I remembered the myth of the Holly King and the Oak King, and how one rises up to replace the other. I believe I have tried to express the authenticity of my lived experience during those (and other) dark days in much of my work and I hope that I have succeeded, to some extent.

There are more stories to tell, so after a brief glance at the light,[8] I will head back into the darkness and see what awaits. We still have things to do.

[8] My Mother's last words to my wife & I were, "We're lucky to have each other." I read from the Oak/Holly myth at both my sons' naming day celebrations on their first birthdays surrounded by family and friends in much happier times!

7. Publication, Critical Reception, and Impact

In 2010, as I was in the final stages of drafting my debut novel *The Lamplighters*, I began the process of pitching to agents and publishers. Top of my list was Don D'Auria, Executive Editor of the highly successful Leisure Books horror line at Dorchester Publishing in the United States. Don has worked with World Horror Master Award recipient Ramsey Campbell, and other genre luminaries including Jack Ketchum and Richard Laymon, and I was keen to work with him. Don requested the full manuscript of *The Lamplighters* after seeing the first three chapters and a synopsis. Unfortunately, soon after, Dorchester announced that it was ceasing operations, and so my book found itself homeless. Don became executive editor of a new horror line at Samhain Publishing, and invited me to resubmit the manuscript to him there. I signed a contract with Samhain in April 2011, the first of five with Don as my editor. When Samhain announced it was closing down in 2016, Don invited me to pitch any new novels to him at Flame Tree Publishing, where he was launching a new horror/sci-fi-fantasy line. I signed a first-look deal with Flame Tree, which has since partnered with Simon and Schuster for worldwide distribution, and have so far published *Hearthstone Cottage* and *Greyfriars Reformatory*, again with Don as my editor.

The Lamplighters was first published by Samhain Publishing (USA) in paperback and e-book (November 2011) and became one of only five novels nominated as a Finalist in the Bram Stoker Awards' 'Best First Novel' category from the many debuts published in 2011 (May 2012). The British Fantasy Society included the book on its list of Award recommendations for 2011. The novel was also one of six finalists in the Book Pipeline Contest 2015 (USA) from almost 1,000 entries and I received mentorship from the Script Pipeline company based in Hollywood USA, during which I developed a proposed movie version of the book. In 2020, my adapted screenplay of *The Lamplighters* was a semi-finalist in the ScreenCraft Horror Screenplay contest (USA).

In 2015, Takeshobo Publishing (Tokyo, Japan), which publishes Stephen King novels and *Star Wars* books, issued a Japanese translation in paperback and e-book. In 2016, Audio Realms (USA) produced an audio book of the novel narrated by American voice actor Susan Saddler.

The novel received many favourable reviews. Leading genre website *Dread Central* said, "Stoker Award nominee for Best First Novel, *The Lamplighters* is a disturbing book. I mean REALLY disturbing. Unsettling and ultimately a shock to the system, but I loved it! Check this book out and hope that Lee is only beginning a promising horror fiction career." (*DreadCentral.com*, 2012) The British Fantasy Society's Dave Brzeski highlighted the impact of the novel's villain: "The Skin Mechanic is destined to become one of the great monsters of modern horror." (BFS, 2012) *Publisher's Weekly* focussed on the book's Celtic mythology origins: "Lee's horror/mystery hybrid reimagines the Irish myth of Tír na nÓg, the land of eternal youth. Readers will want to uncover the island's dark secrets." (*Publishers Weekly*, 2011), while *SF Reader* celebrated the book's originality: "In a world with a lot of tired horror plots and sometimes over the top stereotypes, *Lamplighters* takes us down a new path. Lee deserves a lot of credit for creating an environment where the reader becomes invested in the storyline… This novel would be a fine addition to any horror lover's bookshelf." (Michael D. Griffiths, *SF Reader*, 2013).

I presented live readings from the novel at Dead By Dawn Horror Festival (Edinburgh, Scotland, 2012) and at *Samhain Stories* a live Halloween event I curated in association with Abney Park Cemetery (27th October 2012, Stoke Newington, London). The novel was republished in 2019 in paperback and ebook by Crossroad Press, and in a limited edition 10th anniversary hardcover edition by Reel Fearz in 2021.

The Jack in the Green was first published by Samhain Publishing (USA) in paperback and e-book (October 2013) to critical acclaim by reviewers. *The Horror Bookshelf* gave the novel a five-star review, saying, "I have enjoyed all of Frazer Lee's work, but *The Jack in the Green* is by far my favorite! Lee strikes the perfect balance between psychological horror…and vicious violence and gore." (2015). *Horror Novel Reviews* described the book as, "An intriguing tale filled with genuine horror and a plot that explores some very dark territory…With a fine razor edge twist." (2013). *Fresh Fiction*'s Amber Keller responded positively to protagonist Tom McCrae: "Come read about the ritual of *The Jack in the Green*…if you dare. The main character, Tom, is both likeable and relatable with flaws and strengths. There are enough moments of gore mixed with action to appease the horror fans. I really enjoyed the ending; it hit hard and fast. Supernatural horror readers should check *The Jack in the Green* out." (2014).

The British Fantasy Society invited me as Special Guest at their Open Night on October 4th 2013, where I presented a live reading from the book at the aptly named *The Green Man* pub, in the even more aptly named *The Orchard Room* (London W1). The novel was republished in paperback and e-book by Crossroad Press (2019), and a limited hardcover edition followed from Reel Fearz in 2021.

The Skintaker was first published by Samhain Publishing (USA) in April 2015. This prequel to *The Lamplighters* garnered overwhelmingly positive reviews, including one from renowned horror screenwriter Eric Red (*The Hitcher*, *Near Dark*), who described the book as, "A grandly entertaining period horror adventure in the classical Kipling and Conrad tradition, supercharged with contemporary graphic horror and gore. Likeable, believable 1900s young woman Rosie Shields is a fresh change-of-pace in female driven horror on her journey into the remote Amazon rain forests to confront a gruesome pagan nightmare beyond comprehension and her own unimaginable destiny. Author Frazer Lee writes his entertaining, colorful tale at a propulsive clip, delivering cliffhanger action and blood-drenched splatter aplenty. Populated with a fun ensemble of engaging characters, set against a dangerous jungle world thrillingly invoked in picturesque detail, and loaded with grisly scenes that will test the most cast-iron of stomachs, *The Skintaker* has never a dull moment. I thoroughly enjoyed it." (2015).

Horror Novel Reviews wrote that the novel is, "A phenomenon in horror fiction that is truly chilling. Frazer offers the reader so much more than a book, he guarantees an experience. The ending is fantastic! No matter how often you read, you'll never see the conclusion coming, you won't be able to predict how everything will end. I declare Frazer Lee the 'master of surprises'." (2015) *Horror Maiden Book Reviews* blogged, "I loved this book! Filled with fabulous descriptions and fully formed characters I devoured *The Skintaker* in one sitting…I didn't want the adventure to end. This was my first novel by Frazer Lee but it definitely won't be my last. If you're looking for a great read, grab this 5 star book and hold on for the ride." (2015).

Audio Realms produced an audiobook, again performed by American voice actor Susan Saddler (USA, 2015), and the novel was republished in ebook (2019 and paperback by Crossroad Press (2022).

Hearthstone Cottage was published in hardcover, paperback and e-book by Flame Tree Press/Simon and Schuster in October 2019 and became the Amazon #1 Celtic Horror Bestseller (UK, January 2021).

I presented a live Halloween reading and book launch event at Brunel University London (October 2019), where I also invited Creative Writing students to read from their work, and raised money for my favourite charity Hillside Animal Sanctuary.

Booklist praised the novel's atmosphere: "Lee creates an atmosphere of unease and foreboding that culminates in explosive violence and terror. Rife with frightening imagery, ghosts, and visceral horror, this tale will please the most ardent of horror fans." (October 15th edition, 2019) and *The Haunted Reading Room* described it as, "a nonstop riveting read…the suspense never slackens," and advised readers: "Prepare to lose sleep." (2019).

In 2021, I adapted the novel into a screenplay, the film/TV rights to which are represented by my agent Betty Anne Crawford (New York, USA).

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9. Appendix: Plot Synopses

The Lamplighters

Marla Neuborn has found the best job in the world - as a 'Lamplighter' working on Meditrine Island, an exclusive idyllic paradise owned and operated by a consortium of billionaires. But the island harbours a terrible secret, guarded by an evangelically brutal killer known as 'The Skin Mechanic'. For him cosmetic surgery is the 'New Paganism' and he will stop at nothing to worship his gods of youth and virility.

The billionaires only spend a few short weeks on the island each year, yet they must maintain their status as residents to qualify for hefty tax exemptions. Regular usage of water, gas and electricity utilities is the key to proving residency. A Lamplighter's job is simple. These 'workers' must cook, clean, garden and watch television in order to keep utility usage at an optimum. This is how the consortium maintains resident status, with the added bonus of keeping its houses in order. The Lamplighters get to enjoy the billionaire lifestyle, and a hefty fee. Such a coveted job is never advertised - the consortium is powerful and wealthy enough simply to seek out ideal candidates.

One such candidate is Marla Neuborn. As a 'problem' foster child, she was passed from one family to another. A tragic past mistake has left her jobless, with a criminal record. Then Marla receives an invitation that will change her life forever. The consortium has selected her to become a Lamplighter. There are conditions of course - Marla will not know the exact location of the island, with no contact with the outside world for the duration of her stay. No mobile phone, no Internet access. Marla signs up. She will earn more than enough to chase her dream of becoming a writer, and maybe pick up a story or two along the way... And what a story.

She quickly learns the 'billionaire lifestyle' is not all it is made out to be. Chief of Security Fowler rules the 'paradise' of Meditrine Island with an iron fist. His private police force patrols the shores night and day. CCTV cameras watch the Lamplighters relentlessly. Marla sets about her work amidst this uneasy blend of luxury and surveillance, striking up a flirtation with rookie security guard Adam. Marla also befriends Jessie, an idealistic 'wild child' who is swiftly becoming the bane of Fowler's life.

Marla finds that the other Lamplighters are very resentful of Fowler and his cronies. She is introduced to their nocturnal rebellion against him - parties, drugs, and elaborate practical jokes. But things turn sour one night when a motorboat tries to land on the island. Jessie has managed to get a message to some friends by hacking into the island's computer system, inviting them to visit. As the Lamplighters look on in horror, Fowler's men blow Jessie's friends out of the water. Marla turns to Adam for help. Carefully, they begin to scratch beneath the surface of the consortium and its history. With Jessie's assistance they gain access to employment records and files on the island's residents. They discover that all the employees are orphans with criminal records - people who will 'not be missed'.

Disturbingly, there are no records of any wages being paid out to Lamplighters - ever. Even more disturbing is the revelation that other workers' files are present, but the workers themselves have disappeared. Marla and Adam help Jessie break into the biggest mansion on the island. She and Marla use the building's formidable security defences against Fowler and

his cronies, locking them out. But locked in with the revellers is an uninvited guest - 'The Skin Mechanic'. As the brutal killer picks them off one by one, Marla desperately tries to find a way out of the trap they have set for themselves.

Breaking through to the roof, an amazing sight greets Marla. Dozens of yachts approach the island, their lights gleaming on the water. Jessie's message must have reached more than just a few of her friends. As she runs to them at the quayside, Marla realises her mistake. The boats belong to the consortium - this is their homecoming. Taking refuge in a service tunnel, Marla descends into Hell itself. A charnel underworld of death and resurrection exists beneath the island's veneer of sterile affluence. Laboratories process the fruits of The Skin Mechanic's vile labours. Through his alchemy, the flesh of the Lamplighters keeps the consortium members young and virile. Flesh that Marla once knew as Jessie, Adam... and the others.

Marla fights for her life, but to no avail. A violent ritual awaits her at the hands of The Skin Mechanic. And as the billionaires partake of her youth and beauty, the individual known as Marla Neuborn will cease to exist. The dying whisper of her voice will join a new call. A call to new flesh. A call to The Lamplighters.

The Jack in the Green

Christmas Eve. Tom McCrae, aged six, waits until his parents go to sleep before sneaking out of his bedroom and downstairs to squeeze his Christmas presents beneath the tree. He finds his entire family slaughtered, their entrails used to decorate the tree like baubles and tinsel. Something is watching him from the black of the fireplace...

Tom, now thirty-six, wakes from his recurring nightmare. The trauma of that night left him orphaned with his childhood in tatters. After some healing time in an orphanage he was adopted and raised by a family in America, where he still resides. Tom works as a corporate risk assessor for The Consortium Inc. at its California H.Q. He works long nights to avoid his home life and especially during the Christmas period, which he abhors due to his childhood trauma.

Tom married his co-worker Julia couple of years ago and, despite not being sure about parenthood, he bowed under pressure and they tried to start a family. Unfortunately, there were complications and ever since the miscarriage, Tom and Julia’s relationship has all but fallen apart. She remains absent from work, self-medicating on powerful drugs that keep her from facing reality. Tom trudges home each night like a ghost, hoping Julia will already be asleep or too drugged up to talk to him. The last time they made love was one month ago, with Julia barely present, making Tom feel ever more distant from her.

The chance to escape arrives when Tom is called into the CEO’s office at work and given a special assignment. He must travel to the village of Douglass, on the West coast of Scotland, to scope out a land deal at a remote village. The Consortium is buying up vast swathes of forest for use in biofuels development. The UK Government has decided to sell off much of its forests due to the economic downturn. The locals will no doubt be hostile. Tom is to find those who can be bought out, rally support and survey the area. His Scottish surname will help him curry favor with the locals. He will be away from home for at least a month. “You’re our secret weapon, clear the area for us. I have every faith in you. I’m sure you’ll do an excellent job,” the CEO tells him.

Any excitement at the prospect of escaping to the wilds of Scotland is tempered by the shock suicide of Monroe, a salesperson who has just returned from preliminary meetings in Douglass. Tom cradles the dying man as he utters the portentous words; “He’s in the

trees...he's...waiting," with his dying breaths. Add to that the animosity Tom receives from Julia's sister Ellie about his departure during his wife's breakdown, and Tom leaves under a cloud.

His trip worsens when he discovers his partner for the ride is Dieter, the most annoying man in the office, if not the most annoying man on Planet Earth. And when the unlikely pair arrives at Glasgow Airport, they find themselves caught in the middle of an environmental protest against a proposed extra runway. The escalating violence of the protest leads to police force and, in the middle of the fracas, Tom comes to blows with a young protester. Tom is questioned by the police and released without charge. But the protester, self-styled eco-activist 'Jupiter Crash' (real name Brian), is on a trajectory that will also take him to Douglass. When he hears of the Government plans to sell off the forests he heads up to Scotland with his busload of protesters to block the plans, "In a 'non-violent' way of course..."

Dieter steadily drives Tom crazy on their journey. Arriving at Douglass, Tom is relieved to begin work, but can't help feeling strangely at home in the village. One of the locals calls him "Jack". Tom's nightmares intensify about the killer from his childhood lurking in the fireplace. Secrets, too, lurk in the shadows beneath the Douglass firs. Tom has a chilling encounter during his survey of the pine forest, and now all his boyhood fears come back to plague his waking hours.

Cosmo is a vagrant who communes with the trees and lives in the forest in a derelict house. He keeps a secret in the cellar - a refugee Kosovo girl he managed to rescue and smuggle into the country. He did terrible, terrible things in the war as a soldier. He watches Tom and Dieter as they decide upon the electricity substation on the forest's outskirts as the ideal base of operations for The Consortium's new biofuels plant. Cosmo will be able to make amends now, by giving something back to the world, to 'his' forest.

Drowning in work and his nightmares, Tom finds solace in local lassie Holly. She introduces Tom to the mythology of the forest and the legend of The Jack Tree and The Jill Tree. The trees are powerful fertility symbols, joined at the roots, and a living altar to the local deity 'The Jack in the Green'. Every Samhain (Halloween) the villagers perform pagan rites as a tribute to The Jack, their protector; a scarecrow parade and offerings of flesh, blood and booze made to the trees. "Jack and Jill went up the hill, to fetch a pail of water, Jack fell down and broke his crown...and Jill came tumbling after," Holly sings as she and Tom make love.

Afterwards, Holly tells Tom how the women of Douglass buried their miscarried and stillborn children beneath the Jill Tree. They believed that their flesh and blood would transfer through the roots and into the Jack Tree, making the women fertile again through his power. From that moment on, Tom's nightmares begin to crystallize. He dreams of the Jill Tree, bleeding, and of his and Julia's own loss.

Meanwhile, Jupiter (aka Brian) and his band of protesters arrive, intent on disrupting Tom's negotiations. A bar brawl breaks out, with Dieter at the centre of the fray. Tom's hard work to get the locals on side is ruined and Tom orders Dieter to fly home, alone.

Samhain arrives, and with it Scarecrow Day; a local highlight that marks the shift from autumn to winter with a dizzying display of macabre creativity from the locals. As he partakes in the revels, Tom is shocked to find one of the scarecrows is wearing Dieter's bloodied clothes. No one will own up to the act and, taking it as a warning, Tom is now afraid for his life.

Tom contacts Head Office. He is to continue with the deal – they are pushing ahead; a logging team is en-route to Douglass. An inquest into Monroe's death has been opened, and Tom may have to answer some questions when he returns, as he was the last person to see the man alive.

Jupiter and his crew come to blows in the forest when it transpires one of their number is an undercover journalist. Abandoned by the others, Jupiter is trapped in the woods by Cosmo who takes him to his cellar hideout… where the vagrant has been reliving the horrors of war and visiting them upon the dead bodies of Dieter and Elena – a young girl Cosmo has 'liberated' from Kosovo.

Winter rolls in and brings with it a shock for Tom. Julia has fallen pregnant. Her sister Ellie forbids him from contacting her, citing an obscene photo sent from Tom's phone. He checks his cell and discovers a picture of him and Holly making love in the woods. He is more paranoid than ever that the villagers will somehow use Holly as a weapon against him and The Consortium – a scandal that could damage the deal.

The stage is set for the villagers' final ceremony of the year; 'The Jack in the Green' festival, and they invite Tom to be their 'Jack' complete with leafy costume and help them make offerings to the trees. Needing to keep them on side, he is powerless to refuse.

The loggers go in, ignoring the peaceful protest from the villagers. Costumed locals watch the men march into the mist and the trees. The sound of chainsaws roars through the ancient woodland. As a splinter group of protesters sets a fire in the forest, the roar of the chainsaws turns to chilling screams. Something in the forest tears the chainsaw men to pieces, their innards strewn across the branches of the firs like red tinsel.

Tom flees from the carnage and finds Cosmo, axe in hand. Cosmo attacks Tom and Holly joins the fray, but Cosmo beats her unconscious. Fleeing into the woods, Tom arrives at the house where Cosmo has been hiding out and finds it to be a mirror of the house from his nightmares. He discovers the cellar, along with Dieter's ravaged corpse and the decomposing body of Cosmo's 'girl', Elena. Jupiter is still alive, and Tom helps him to escape. But Cosmo returns and a fight to the death ensues.

During the fray, Tom discovers his real name scratched into the fireplace: 'Jack McCrae'. As he fights, and defeats, Cosmo, Tom's violent acts open up the floodgates of memory and he remembers – he lived in the village as a child, in the very same house in the woods where Cosmo has been living.

When Tom was stillborn, his distraught mother buried him under the Jill Tree as a fertility offering to The Jack. But Tom lived. Somehow, the festering flesh and blood of all the dead and buried children gave him sustenance. He feasted on death's offal and clawed his way from beneath the roots, reborn and changed forever. A feral child, he lived in the forest with 'The Jack in the Green' as his protector. When he was just six, he returned home for Christmas and slaughtered his entire family. Taken in and reconditioned by the orphanage, then by his surrogate parents, Tom blocked these painful memories in all but his nightmares, until now.

Holly, concussed, arrives at the house. Through her, Tom revisits his dreadful crimes. He kills her, then decorates the house with her remains, just as he did with his parents that Christmas Eve long ago. He leaves Cosmo, barely alive, amidst the carnage – he will be blamed for Tom's atrocities along with his own.

The CEO's voice echoes in Tom's head. "You're our secret weapon, clear the area for us. I have every faith in you. I'm sure you'll do an excellent job." Tom makes one final offering to

the Jack in the Green, before heading home to his wife and unborn child to celebrate Christmas – the only way he knows how.

The Skintaker

Amazon Rainforest, 1926.

Two brothers from the Myahueneca tribe, Nimbo and Pacon, are hunting for wild honey. They disturb a bees' nest and run from the ferocious, stinging insects into a cool, dank cave system. But they are not alone. The Skintaker, a terrifying man-thing with obsidian eyes and robes of human flesh, attacks them – killing Pacon. Nimbo escapes, but is mortified to leave his brother behind.

Rosie Shields, aged nineteen, was orphaned as child after her parents died in a tragic house fire and still has terrible nightmares about the blaze. She suffers from a painful and embarrassing skin condition, acne rosacea, which gives her complexion a ruddy, almost burned appearance. Rosie tries to hide away from the outside world but is thrust into it when she is uprooted from her Ohio home.

Her guardians, Aunt Francesca and Uncle Gregory, are missionaries who have accepted a post in the wilds of the Amazon rainforest. Rosie has no choice but to go with them. She owes them her life, something she is reminded of daily. If her Uncle had not rescued her from her parents' burning farmhouse she would be dead. He still bears the scars from Rosie's rescue - gnarled, burnt hands which he conceals beneath sable gloves that he wears at all times.

During the final leg of their journey by paddle steamer, Rosie meets the charismatic British eccentric Professor Cecil and a fearsome hunter named Richter. Professor Cecil is en route to the Amazon to document its wildlife using the latest audiovisual recording equipment. Richter has bigger game on his mind. That night Rosie is attacked in her cabin by Seamus, a over-amorous deckhand. Richter rescues her and his men subject the disgraced deckhand to a severe beating.

Rosie is astonished by the vibrant world of the Amazon, with its port overflowing with traders, prostitutes and rowdy sailors. Professor Cecil suggests they team up for the long trek through the rainforest together. Rosie and her Aunt and Uncle travel along with Cecil and his local guides and luggage bearers. At a rope bridge across a ravine, Cecil almost plummets to his death but quick-thinking Rosie manages to save him. The locals declare her 'a gift from the Gods'.

Rosie is then awestruck to find ancient ruins of a temple in the forest near to their new home. The temple is swathed in carvings depicting totem animals and a strange, obsidian eyed deity. Professor Cecil recounts the local legend of The Skintaker on the way to the mission house, complete with tumbledown chapel and graveyard containing the remains of prior missionaries – all of whom died of influenza. Uncle Gregory welcomes Cecil as their guest at the mission house.

The Professor rewards Rosie with a field trip to make audiovisual recordings of some of the local wildlife. They film and record howler monkeys and paradise birds. When they project the film later at the mission house, Rosie glimpses a scary, dark figure in the trees. But the film spool gets caught up in the projector and burns.

The day comes to meet the Myahueneca tribe, which Gregory hopes to convert to his Anglican faith. At the tribal village, Rosie's skin markings have quite an effect on the tribe. Her red

cheeks and forehead mirror their tribal make up, and they hail her as a 'White Angel'. Initiated into the tribe amidst ritualistic hunting dances, Rosie is given strong hallucinogenic herbs by the Myahueneca's resident witch doctor.

Rose embarks on a 'vision quest' in which she sees something of tribal life through her guide – Nimbo. But her visions become a horrific nightmare with the arrival of the dark figure from the cine-film – the Skintaker. She descends into the hell of his lair, subterranean caves filled with wall carvings hinting at the origins of the black-eyed man-thing that pursues her.

She awakes in the meeting hut at the village and finds Nimbo by her side. He has been watching over her in the waking world and knows she has 'the spirit sight' and has seen The Skintaker. The village is then thrown into panic and a struggle for survival as the rainforest all around catches fire. Blaze Farmers, who burn vegetation to farm the land, have set the fires on purpose. Rosie fights the forest fire alongside the villagers and feels she has found a place with them, a feeling that is at odds with the urbane upbringing of her Aunt and Uncle.

Richter, the hunter, discovers Seamus has his uses when tracking a wild boar. Richter teams up with the Blaze Farmers to set his master plan into action. He will rid the Blaze Farmers of their enemies the Myahueneca, open up trade routes for his paymasters, and trap his real prey in the process. Richter watches as the Skintaker attacks Professor Cecil and drags him off to his lair.

Aunt Francesca falls ill with the same virulent fever that killed the other missionaries. Half-crazed from her symptoms, she sets fire to the chapel and is badly burned in the process. Francesca makes a dying confession that she burned Rosie's parents' farm to the ground out of hatred for her sister – and to inherit their wealth. Gregory went along with the plan, shocked by the sin of Rosie's parents having a child out of wedlock, but though that by saving Rosie he might save his soul in the process. Rosie reels from these revelations.

Richter and the Blaze Farmers close in, destroying the mission house compound. Gregory makes one final, redemptive stand rescuing Rosie from their clutches. She and Nimbo flee into the burning forest. Nimbo climbs a tree to escape the blaze, but Rosie is overcome by the smoke and flames. Her spirit sight places her once again at the scene of the fire from her childhood and she prepares for death. Horribly burned, she is plucked from the flames by the Skintaker.

Nimbo attempts to rescue Rosie, entering the caves where his brother died. The Skintaker kills him and, ironically, his flesh will be used in a rite to repair Rosie's burned and broken body. During the ritual – part alchemical surgery and part sex magic – Rosie and the Skintaker make love. She sees his memories, etched in the cave walls as carvings and learns that he was a tribal boy once, sacrificed in an ancient rite to become the new Skintaker.

The Skintaker was a demigod, worshipped by a vain Amazonian King and Queen who benefited from his magic by restoring their physical forms, staying eternally young and beautiful. But they desired his secrets for their own and used their own daughter as bait. The Skintaker fell in love with her and she gave birth to a son. But the King and Queen tortured and killed his lover, their own daughter, and his son in an attempt to glean the Skintaker's secrets. Driven to despair by their betrayal, the Skintaker escaped and destroyed the King and Queen, and their entire kingdom. He descended into the caves beneath the temple erected in his honor, no longer a deity to be worshipped but a demon to be feared.

Weakened by the rite, the Skintaker smells fresh meat that will sustain him, but it is a trap. Seamus is not being used as a hunter by Richter but as bait. Rosie, meanwhile, discovers

Professor Cecil horribly mutilated in the caves. In a mirror image of her rescue of him at the rope bridge, she is forced to end his life.

The Skintaker battles with the hunters, eviscerating Seamus in the process, but Richter's plan has worked and he traps his prize. Rosie escapes into the caves and Richter pursues her. He knows she has been repaired by the Skintaker and wants to take her to his masters. Brave Rosie causes a cave in, cutting herself off from the outside world.

Richter imprisons The Skintaker aboard a paddle steamer. Their destination is a paradise called Meditrine Island, owned by Richter's employers – The Consortium.

Rosie dwells in the caves, vowing to consign the story of the carvings to memory. She strokes her belly and feels the first spark of life there.

New flesh from the Skintaker.

Hearthstone Cottage

The Scottish Highlands; a vast, barren and beautiful landscape. Snow on the distant Kintaill Mountains. The glassy waters of Loch Affric. A 4x4 travels along a twisting dirt road. In the 4x4 – two couples celebrating their recent graduation, all in their early 20s. MIKE with his girlfriend HELEN and ALEX with his partner KAYLEIGH. MIKE and ALEX were business and law students respectively at Edinburgh, HELEN studied law and KAYLEIGH studied classics. Both couples are attractive, clearly easy in each other's company. Alex drives, with Kayleigh beside him in the passenger seat. Mike sits in the back of the 4x4, watching the road ahead unfold. Through the trees, Alex catches a glimpse of their destination – his parents' country retreat, HEARTHSTONE COTTAGE. Kayleigh gets very excited and they all peer out to catch a glimpse. As they turn a tight bend, a stag stands in their way. Alex brakes heavily to avoid the animal but it stands still and is hit full force.

Moments later, the friends stand over the stag and watch helplessly as its life ebbs away. The stag's eyes lock with Mike's gaze and they somehow briefly connect during the last dying beats of its life. Mike finds part of its antler lying by the roadside. The couples return to the car, subdued. As the last daylight fades, the dented 4x4 finally arrives at the cottage. The two couples get out and take in the majestic landscape. Smoke spirals upwards from the chimneys, one at each end of the cottage. An older car is parked outside. The front door opens and Alex's attractive younger sister MEGGIE (20) steps out to greet them. Meggie's dog OSCAR, an old Border Collie, is equally excited to have guests. Mike and Alex examine the damage to the car, then unload luggage into the cottage. A black crow caws its welcome loudly from the rooftop.

A welcoming fire roars in the grate beneath the fireplace. The impressive stone mantelpiece, hearthstone and supports are fashioned from local, weathered rock. Kayleigh is particularly impressed by the large hearthstone, which looks ancient and textured, like a fragment of Stonehenge. The friends sit around a table in the conservatory and, over a hearty stew, marvel at the stunning view of the loch's calm waters. Meggie was a student at Glasgow School of Art, but dropped out and is now taking a break (after travelling to Thailand) at the cottage to work on her painting skills. Mike watches Meggie's reflection in the window rather intently as she busies herself in the kitchen, then jumps out of his skin at the cold, wet touch of Oscar's nose.

A few drinks later and Helen draws the others' attention to the full moon, visible through the windows. Meggie opens the door to let Oscar out and beckons them all outside, saying, "Don't

you know it's bad luck to look at the full moon through glass?" Helen is curious about wooden charms hanging above the back door, each with a runic inscription. Kayleigh recognises the design as a Haelu charm. Meggie is impressed, confirming the Anglo Saxon meaning as 'health, wealth, luck and blessings' – it's an old family tradition to hang the charms up around the house. Alex catches Mike's eye and rolls his eyes jokingly, as if to say 'know-it-all'. Mike reaches out, as if mesmerised by the inscription on the charm. He touches it and recoils, crying out in pain. He says the charm burned his hand. Helen takes a look and Mike chuckles, unable to contain himself – he's just joking with them.

Later. Alex and Kayleigh make love by the moonlight through their window. Meggie paints in her studio, an old crofter's cottage adjacent to the main house. Mike can't sleep, a branch scratches at the glass of his room widow and beyond he watches the full moon dance with the clouds. Helen sleeps silently beside him. Then, a sound from outside in the hallway – a child's laughter? Footsteps and shadows through the crack beneath the door. Mike gets up, pulls on some clothes and steals downstairs to investigate. He finds the fire still burning in the grate and, to his amazement and horror, the stag lying next to it. The animal is dead and bleeding on the hearthstone. Looking into the fire, Mike sees the piece of antler he left at the roadside. The animal's eye holds him in an unflinching gaze. The broken antler lies just out of reach. He leans forward to rescue it from the fire. As he does so, the fire flares up suddenly and Mike falls away, cutting his thumb on the broken antler. He wakes, in bed, with a jump and looks with horror at his hands – soaked with blood. He looks in panic to Helen, who still sleeps soundly, then back to his hands. No blood, no cut on his thumb; nothing.

Breakfast. Mike and Alex will spend the day fishing while the girls visit the village of Drinton, six miles away. They'll have to take their chances in Meggie's old car, thanks to the damage to the 4x4. Kayleigh says she couldn't stop dreaming about that poor stag last night. Mike is a little perturbed by this, but says nothing. Suddenly, Kayleigh cries out in fright, Helen jumps and spills her coffee as a crow smashes into the conservatory window. Oscar the dog barks loudly and claws at the back door, desperate to get out. Mike holds Oscar back by the collar as Meggie runs outside. She gently cups the flapping bird in her hands. The dog turns vicious and bites at Mike, forcing him to let go of the collar. Barking madly, Oscar runs full pelt past Meggie and off out of sight.

Meggie takes the bird to her studio, followed by Mike and Helen. The room is filled with old crofter's tools, furniture and a collection of boxes filled with assorted ornaments. A watercolour depicting an ancient stone circle sits on an easel, unfinished. Meggie asks Helen to empty out a box filled with tubes of paint. She carefully binds the bird's wing with coloured ribbon as Mike tears strips of newspaper and places them in the box as a makeshift nest. "Oscar didn't hurt you did he?" Meggie asks Mike, who replies the bark was worse than the bite. As Meggie tells Mike and Helen that Oscar is always running off after rabbits, we get the slightest glimpse of a disturbing headline about a local tragedy as Mike tears the strips of newspaper.

Later, Meggie's car passes the spot of the accident with the stag. Meanwhile, the boys are out on the loch in an old rowing boat, fly-fishing. Alex's line goes suddenly taught and he starts to play the fish towards the boat – he's hooked a fine trout. Mike and Alex are in silent concentration. Mike's eyes follow the darting fish. His look follows it deep into the water. Mike leans over the side of the boat. He recoils in shock as he sees a body lying face up just below the surface of the water. Pale as death, the body is Meggie's. As his jaw drops, Meggie's eyes open suddenly scaring him half to death. Her eyes are exactly the same as the stag's from his nightmare. Alex asks Mike what's wrong. Mike fearfully peers back into the water. Nothing. Alex tells Mark to grab the net as he finally plays the exhausted fish to the boat.

As early evening draws in, the boys return with the day's catch. The girls wait for them on the jetty, enjoying some wine and conversation. Kayleigh pours a glass for Helen, who politely refuses. As the boys step out of the boat, Helen gives Mike a big hug and a kiss. He asks how her day was and she tells him how strangely still the village was – she's finding it difficult to adjust after being in the city for so long.

Back at the cottage Meggie plays at the piano, Alex sits with Kayleigh, who is engrossed in an old tattered book on Scottish Folklore, as Mike and Helen set about preparing the fish at the sink for supper. The largest trout is the last to be gutted. As Mike inserts the knife beside the rear lower fin and pushes it forwards, something goes horribly wrong. Foul black flesh and stinking, writhing maggots spill out of the fish all over the chopping board. Mike gags at the stench and nicks his thumb with the knife, cutting his thumb in the same spot as in his nightmare with the antler. He looks at the fish again. No black flesh, no maggots, nothing. He sucks blood from the wound on his thumb – is he losing his mind?

In the outbuilding, Meggie inspects the bird. Mike, smoking a cigarette outside, gazes at her through the window from a safe distance. Then he hears the strange sound of a child's laughter again – sees a small shape flitting through the shadows beside the studio. Following, he sees the studio door swing slightly as if someone has just gone inside. He rushes inside and finds only Meggie there, making her jump in the process. She asks him if he's okay. He avoids the question, instead asking how she's been. It's obvious they share a 'past'. Mike offers out his hands for Meggie to place hers into. Looking at Mike's open palms, she sees his cut thumb and says, "It was a deep cut, there'll always be a scar."

Meggie turns back to the crow, lying in the shoe box still breathing. "This little one might live after all," she says. Helen looks for Mike and sees Meggie come out of the studio. She asks if Meggie has seen Mike. "He's in there," says Meggie with a smile before walking away. Helen doesn't know what to make of Meggie's smile and looks a little jealous. Mike appears in the doorway. "We should talk," says Helen, suddenly serious.

They sit on the jetty in the moonlight and Helen tells Mike she's pregnant. Mike is very surprised. Helen tells Mike he'll have to quit smoking, and heads inside. Mike says he'll follow – after a 'last' cigarette – they'll decide if they want to tell the others later. She heads back to the cottage leaving Mike smoking broodily on the jetty.

In the cottage after supper, the inhabitants relax by the fire. Mike clutches a large glass of whiskey. Kayleigh shows the others a scrying mirror she purchased from the village and places it above the fireplace. "Don't know where that old dog has got to this time," says Meggie, looking over to his empty dog bowl. Kayleigh offers to go and look for him, but Meggie says there's no need – it's too dark and he'll come back when he's hungry, he always does. Kayleigh describes a map of Glen Affric she finds in the old folklore book. She recounts tales of superstition and witchcraft and reads out loud about The Spindle Stones, an ancient stone circle, where the Witch of the Stones made sacrifices of village children. Kayleigh hands an Ordnance Survey map to Alex and asks if they can go see the stone circle. He shares a knowing smile with Meggie, who tells Kayleigh she's, "surrounded by it." Most of the dwelling places are so old that many of the owners incorporated stones from the circle into their construction.

Kayleigh pours more drinks – asks why Helen isn't drinking. Kayleigh and Meggie pressure her to have a drink, she's on holiday after all. Helen accidentally lets slip that she's pregnant. The girls both hug her and shriek with excitement. Meggie looks especially happy, but Kayleigh can't quite hide her jealousy. They all drink a toast to Mike and Helen. As he raises his glass, Alex clumsily knocks the Ordnance Survey map onto the hearthstone and it catches

fire. Seeing the map fall onto the stones, Mike blinks away a memory of his nightmare about the stag, appearing to put on happy face for Helens' sake.

In the middle of the night Mike wakes up, hearing once again the strange child's laughter and footsteps running in the hallway. He follows the sounds downstairs – nothing save for the faint crackle of embers in the fireplace. The smooth blackness of the scrying mirror draws him to look into it. Reflected in it, he sees some workmen, dressed in clothes from decades ago and dragging the huge hearthstone inside the cottage, which looks half-built. He turns back to look at the room – nothing there. Spooked, he checks the scrying mirror again and this time sees a young woman lying on the floor in the room behind him – legs parted as if giving birth. Hearing the child's laughter again, he turns sharply. Nothing.

Turning back to the scrying mirror and peering into its black depths, he finds himself looking at the waters of the loch. A chill breeze seems to blow from the mirror. Then he sees Meggie's face - pale and drowned and screaming in silent anguish. His eyes blast open and he awakes from his nightmare, struggling for breath. His breathing slows as he realises he was only dreaming. He looks to the foot of the bed and sees Meggie standing there naked, holding a baby wrapped in a white shawl. She walks round to Helen, who is sleeping, and places the baby next to her. Helen wraps an arm around the child. Mike bolts awake in bed, for real this time. He looks at Helen, sound asleep, then fearfully around the empty room.

"Oscar... Oscar!" Meggie calls the dog's name hopefully. She is out walking with the others through the magnificent countryside. Mike and Alex decide to head for higher ground – they can cover more terrain that way and hopefully find Oscar. The boys head off, leaving Meggie, Helen and Kayleigh to continue along a track. As they climb a ridge onto a flat, green promontory Mike sees a shape lying in the grass. He and Alex investigate and find Oscar dead – mutilated. He was an old dog, a predator probably got the better of him. Alex says they should tell Meggie, "She loved that dog." Mike says it's better if she doesn't know – they'll bury him. We rise up and see that the dog's corpse lies at the centre of what used to be a stone circle. The Spindle Stones. Although most of the stones are gone now, fused into the structure of the local cottages. Mike and Alex finish concealing Oscar's corpse in a shallow ditch they've dug with their bare hands. They rest on a rock and share a drink from a hipflask, passing it back and forth with muddy hands as they get their breath back. Mike begins to have a crisis of faith about becoming a dad. Alex tells him it'll be okay; they should get back to the others. Mike says no, it won't be okay. He's not sure he'll make a good father. Alex tries to reassure him, everyone at university was jealous of Mike and Helen; the perfect model couple. It sounds like an accusation to Mike.

Mike and Alex rejoin the girls, Kayleigh gets her foot momentarily trapped in some tree roots. Helen helps her and notices the type of trees that are around them. She strokes the branches. Meggie tells her to be careful; the needles of a yew tree can be toxic. Helen asks how such a beautiful thing can be poisonous, then notices all the fallen branches. "Are the trees diseased then?" asks Kayleigh. No, says Meggie, the yew tree is a powerful symbol in local folklore. It represented death and resurrection to ancient people – the branches drop off and 'die' so that new life may spring up. She points out a young yew sapling and beams at Helen who absent-mindedly rubs her belly, making a connection. Mike notices that Kayleigh looks jealous.

Next day, the friends head into the village using Meggie's beat up old car, to put up 'missing dog' posters around the houses, pub and shops. Mike is tasked with placing a couple of posters on the church notice board and has a frightening encounter in the graveyard – all the headstones appearing to close in on him, each one bearing his name. He begins to worry that the shock of Helen's pregnancy is causing him to lose his grip on reality. His answer is a welcome pint at

the local pub, where Mike and Alex enjoy a game of pool, until they are interrupted by two sly and rather sinister old locals – Jamie and Edward. The two old men invite Alex and Mike on a grouse shoot the following morning. Alex then has to make two trips back to the cottage, as Meggie's little car can't accommodate all of them, and their shopping, at once. While Mike waits behind, he buys a bottle of illicit 'home distilled' whisky from the strange local shopkeeper.

During the shoot on the following morning, Mike accidentally sets off his rifle, scaring a flock of birds and angering the two old men. A thick fog descends over the Highlands, and the shooting party becomes separated. Mike, searching for Alex and the others, stumbles further into the heathland. As the fog rolls in, he is pursued by terrifying, dark figures. Their heads appear topped with antlers. Mike feels sure that Jamie and Edward are pranking him but, hearing gunshots in the fog, he decides to flee. He crashes into the Spindle Stone circle, but something is very weirdly wrong. The stones are at full height, as though new, and standing at their centre he sees the Witch of the Stones. She has a huge, flat stone altar at the centre of the circle upon which she sacrifices poor Oscar. The dog, bizarrely, has a trio of puppies in his belly, and the evil witch sacrifices them too. Seeing Mike, she tells him that more souls are needed…

Mike flees the terrifying scene, hoping it is another hallucination conjured by his stressed-out mind. Only when he's in open heathland again does he stop for breath. But then he wishes he hadn't, as he feels a shotgun barrel at his back. Mike senses that his friend Alex is about to shoot him – but why? What has he done? Then, the shotgun and the shadowy hunter are both gone, leaving Mike to stagger back to the cottage, exhausted and alone.

Ridiculed by Alex and the others for losing his way in the fog, Mike slopes off after dinner for a smoke. Troubled by the terrors he has seen – or thinks he has seen? – he wanders into Meggie's studio and hears a tapping from the shelf. The injured crow is moving inside its box. As Mike tries to calm it, its body ruptures horribly, exploding with maggots. Meggie returns, and Mike hurriedly places the bird box back on the shelf, not knowing what else to do. Mike shares a dizzying, almost intimate moment with Meggie, for whom he feels a strong attraction. But she sees blood on his hands, and then notices more on the shelf and bird box. She opens the box and finds the poor crow, crushed to death. Blaming Mike, she rages at him. Helen walks in, looking for Mike, and is immediately suspicious about why Mike is arguing with Alex's younger sister.

Mike hits the bottle of booze he bought from the village shop. Child's laughter in the hallway rips Mike from his sleep. He sees flickering light through the crack under the door. Coughing, he rubs his eyes and realises the room is full of smoke. Helen is not in bed – he's alone. He gets up and stumbles into the hallway. The cottage is on fire, flames spreading everywhere. Covering his mouth and nose, he crashes into Alex and Kayleigh's room. Inside, the flames are raging and he has to retreat, catching a glimpse of their empty, unused bed. Fighting through the smoke and heat, he makes his way downstairs. He recoils as the fireplace suddenly erupts in a ball of flame. Crawling across the floor, Mike makes it to the door and tumbles outside, coughing his lungs up. He turns and sees Meggie, trapped in the burning conservatory. Grabbing a shovel, he tries to smash the glass with it. But the glass won't break and the raging flames engulf Meggie. Mike beats his fists against the glass, screaming Meggie's name over and over as she disappears from view, overcome by the inferno.

Then he wakes up. Still shouting Meggie's name, Mike finds himself standing outside the cottage in his boxer shorts. Helen opens the bedroom window above and leans out, asking what the hell he's doing. Alex joins in from the other window, drunkenly teasing Mike about

drinking too much whiskey and sleepwalking. Meggie's curtain twitches – she is watching him too. Mike is at a loss for words, humiliated. His dream seemed so real. Helen slams the window angrily.

Mike goes back inside stares at his reflection in the scrying mirror. Embers glow in the hearth. He picks up a near-finished glass of whiskey and tops it up – right up to the brim. Later and while the others sleep, Mike has finished most of the bottle and is pretty smashed. The last embers crackle mockingly in the fireplace. He rises and throws his whiskey onto the embers, which hiss back at him angrily. Mike catches sight of his reflection in the scrying mirror. He is chilled to the bone when he sees his features horribly distorted by the curves in the obsidian glass.

His glassy eyes and drowned features look like Meggie's from his nightmare on the loch. Mike feels as though he's being pulled under the very surface of the mirror. He pulls his hands across his troubled face, looks again in the mirror. In the reflection he sees the shadowy form of a small child dart across the open doorway behind him. He swivels around and jumps with terror to find Oscar's mutilated corpse lying right next to him, livid with maggots.

Gasping for air, Mike wakes up on the sofa. He groans and rubs his aching head. Alex tells him Helen tried to wake him, but when she saw smashed glass in the fireplace – and that he had thrown up on the living room floor – she stormed out. Mike learns that Helen borrowed Meggie's car and has apparently headed into the village.

When Helen doesn't return, and food supplies are running low, Mike raids the fridge and cupboards for any scraps to eat. But he only discovers rats and more horrible, writhing maggots. Mike decides to hike into the village to see if he can find Helen and make up with her. But he finds the village is deserted, the shop's shelves gathering dust and the local pub derelict. But how can that be? Mike was only shopping and drinking there a matter of hours ago. A torrential sleet storm rolls in over the village and Mike gets caught in it. Worse still, shadowy figures of villagers emerge from the dark houses and pursue him. Terrified of the sinister mob, Mike flees, forgetting to cross the heathland rather than taking the long road back to the cottage.

The weather clears a little and when he reaches the loch he makes a shocking discovery. Meggie's car lays on its side, crashed and broken. A bloodstain on the driver's door shows him that Helen may have left the vehicle, but may be seriously injured. He sets off for the cottage, hoping she has headed back there. The old hunters, Edward and Jamie, pass by in their Land Rover, and Mike flags them down to give him a ride.

Back at the cottage, Mike walks in on Alex and Kay having sex over the hearth. Edward and Jamie add an altogether sinister presence to this awkward situation. After hurried apologies, Mike tells Alex and Kay about Meggie's crashed car. They ride out with the two old men in search of Helen. Seeing a woman by the loch, Mike leaps out and runs to her. But it is Meggie, out looking for Oscar again. She joins the search for Helen, and they find her at the Spindle Stone circle site. She is bleeding heavily and digging madly in the earth. Helen has had a miscarriage, and has also unearthed Oscar's corpse. Mike and Alex have to admit that they buried the dog, and Meggie is absolutely distraught at their betrayal. But Helen's miscarriage means Mike and the others have to unite in order to focus on helping her.

Jamie and Edward offer to drive Helen to a hospital, but she says she wants to sleep. Kay checks her over, and Meggie prepares a herbal remedy. Alex says he had no idea his sister was a witch-doctor. The old men will return in the morning to check all is okay with Helen. Mike feels at odds with the old men's sudden helpfulness. That night the chimney is blocked, smoke fills the living room – like an echo of Mike's nightmare about the fire. Uses the antler bone to

dig around the blockage, Mike finds old children's bones hidden in the chimney. Helen freaks out, and her nose starts to bleed. Kay consoles her.

Mike sleeps on the sofa. Child's laughter wakes him. He follows the sound upstairs and sees Helen walking naked into their room. He follows her and they begin to make love. "We can try again," Helen purrs. Then she becomes Meggie, and then… Kay. Mike wakes up to hear Kay screaming. He is holding her down on her bed. Alex comes in from the bathroom and punches him to the floor. The last straw for the happy holidaymakers.

Early next morning, Helen leaves with Alex and Kay in Edward and Jamie's Land Rover. Mike awakes from his boozy sleep and rushes outside to try and speak to them but they take off at speed. A huge storm is brewing over the mountains. Mike searches for Meggie in her studio, glimpses the newspaper headline about a car accident – has Helen made the news? Meggie has finished her painting of the stone circle. The old crone is there, with the sacrificial altar, standing over an ominous little cloth-wrapped bundle…

The woman has Meggie's red hair… All along, Mike has been seeing the three ages of woman – the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone. Mike rushes out and sees Meggie take her take the boat out onto the lake. She ties the weights from the animal scales to her legs with rope. She takes one last look at the still waters, the beautiful mountains. A stag drinks from the loch side. She draws one last breath and slips over the side. Meggie travels down through the clear water until she reaches the floor of the loch, fingers of light snaking into the deep black. Eyes open, she holds her breath as long as possible; survival instinct. Then her lungs fill with water and, flailing, she drowns – her body held fast by tendrils of reed and rope. Mike dives in to save her…

The storm hits, and turns Mike's world upside down – literally. The loch, inverted, reveals where the village used to be, before it was flooded as part of Mike's businessman father's dam project. The black shapes on the loch floor are the ruins of the old village buildings. Mike suddenly finds himself staring into the scrying mirror. He can see Meggie lying dead in the deep. He gags, overcome by nausea. Meggie's voice is making him seasick, but she continues with her tale. She reveals that she has been here in the cottage ever since she died. Her time at the cottage has taught her much. "The veil between worlds is thin at Hearthstone Cottage," she says. The cottage can see into your soul, know who you really are. It is populated by dreams for some and nightmares for others. There are other sprits here – some not so kind – and Mike will meet them all. Mike smashes the scrying mirror. Meggie laughs – imagine how many years bad luck that will be for him. As the mirror re-makes itself, the truth of the hearthstone is revealed. The hearthstone is the stone altar from the centre of the Spindle Stone circle. Laid face down, its runic descriptions are hidden beneath the cottage floor, but it still resonates with centuries of dark power.

Meggie shows him how he has created this limbo-land from his own male Id, his guilt, and paranoia. Women always pay the price. The witch did – using her magic to protect the village, but put to death for her sacrifices. So did Meggie when Mike 'fucked her then forgot her', not knowing or caring if she was with child. She went for an abortion but couldn't go through with it. But then she miscarried on the journey back to the cottage. She offered the soul of her unborn child – theirs – to the witch in return for vengeance.

By ending her tragic life in the loch, Meggie became trapped in limbo inside the cottage - tethered to its power, a sacrifice for the ancient stone circle. Just as the Witch of the Stones offered sacrifices to the circle, she must offer a sacrifice to the hearthstone in the cottage. Mike falls to his knees, trembling and convulsing. Loch water spews from his mouth onto the

hearthstone, which hisses hotly. "You are now tasting the same water that I tasted," Meggie says, “The same water that stopped the beating heart of our little child.” Mike gags again, more water. "Bitter, isn’t it?" she concludes.

A look of horror on Mike’s face as he remembers seeing the stag in front of the 4x4. The scene is exactly the same as in the opening moments. Alex brakes hard. But - unlike before - he swerves to avoid it. The car crashes off the road and rolls into the loch. The car distorts, trapping the occupants. Water floods inside as the passengers each struggle to survive. Helen’s nose bleeds. Alex sees the Ordnance Survey map fall from the dashboard. Kayleigh panics as her foot gets tangled and trapped under the driver’s seat. Mike’s thumb bleeds from a wound where he has attempted to release his seat belt – he’s unconscious.

In the cottage-reality, Mike has a clear choice. To save himself, or the life of his unborn child – growing in Helen’s belly. Mike makes the decision. He will save the child. He sees now that he wronged Meggie, and now he must do right by Helen. In the drowning car – Alex beats his fists on the window with all his might, but the windscreen glass won’t break. In the back, Helen kicks at the window with her feet – hairline cracks appear. She kicks again, hard, and the window gives way. Helen, Kayleigh and Alex clamber out of the car as it continues to sink. They try to help Mike, but he is drowned in the back seat. Alex and Kayleigh link arms with Helen, as they swim up towards the surface. Mike’s body sinks with the car, down into the murk.

Mike is back at the hearth, looking into the intact black mirror. In the distance, Helen and the others are being treated at the roadside by paramedics. Edward and Jamie, with their Land Rover, help the startled deer. Oscar barks playfully – very much alive. Meggie walks back into the loch, a little child by her side. From inside the cottage, Mike watches her disappear beneath the black water.

He puts his hand on the window and calls out, soundlessly – trapped inside the cottage forever.