Mining Words: Graham Joyce (1954-2014), Writer & Reader

'This much is true of writing: you can spend all day leaning on your pick to no purpose; or you can swing it at the wall and see what comes out...'

Graham Joyce taught at Nottingham Trent for eighteen years. He was a much loved, inspirational teacher, several of whose students went on to publish novels. NTU staff and students felt lucky to work with such an original, important writer. While with us, in addition to his many fantasy writing awards, Graham gained a PhD by publication and was appointed a Reader in Creative Writing.

When Graham died in September 2014, social network sites were flooded with messages from former students saying what a great deal they learned from him and how much they were inspired by him. The exhibition in the display cabinet, a selection of Graham's books, celebrates a colleague who was both a world-class writer and a great teacher.

John Goodridge/David Belbin

'I want the fantasy and supernatural genres to be more than merely consolatory... I want the stories to raise questions in the mind of the reader.'

SOME OPENINGS...

Half hidden behind a thicket of hawthorn and holly bushes was a second cave. It astonished him to see it there. As a kid Andy had scrambled over every boulder, probed every fissure and crevice, and swung from the exposed roots of every tree clinging to the face of Corley Rocks. Yet here was a new cave, quite unlike the one in which he'd been holed up for the afternoon, After feeling the mild tremor, Andy needed to get home. But something in this new cave called to him...

(from 'Black Dust')

The radio drifted out of frequency just as something was happening, so I slapped Billy hard on the ear. Communi-cations Theory suggests that a radio signal will not distort during a period in which nothing worthwhile is said. Right then something critical and historical was happening, so the frequency drifted, the radio fuzzed and spat, and brother Billy was perfectly poised for a slap.

(from 'As Seen on Radio')

This is the story of a city so old and so beautiful and so terrifying that no-one knows its true name. That is, it has many names, but they refuse to harden or fix or set. Every few decades the City fathers have the task of thinking up a new name, one which will last no longer than the others. And each time the name is changed, the city sheds a skin. The skins litter history, and the cities of the old names hover like ghosts, in a time and space of their own...

(from 'Leningrad Nights')

Nights of Terror and of Beauty…

I first read *Leningrad Nights* sitting in my office just a few doors down from Graham's on the old English corridor at NTU. 'Have a look at this,' he said, dropping it on my desk. And I did. Hypnotised by the opening paragraph I didn't stop reading until I had turned he last page.

I remember clearly the dark lyricism with which Graham creates a city so blighted that its ancient poetry is lost beneath the rubble of history, its fragments frozen in cold and shock. I remember the recurring words "What must you do? You must survive." On that first reading I heard Graham's political voice and recalled a conversation we had had about Coventry in which he defended that broken city and talked to me about its destruction in World War 2.

I think my first impression still holds true but the rich texture of the book ultimately derives from Graham's faith in the imagination and its unique power to transform physical pain into myth, to see horror and imagine beauty. Just read his description of the ice-road:

> The ice-road was almost mythical. A perilous fog-bound sheet of glass, forming, breaking, re-forming to allow the sporadic relief convoy to squeeze between the blockade, a finger of relief prised between the windpipe and the frigid Nazi death grip... Some doubted its existence; most believed, and in their minds the ice-road was supernatural in its manifestations, a plumed serpent dipping from between the stars of the galaxy, or an iridescent leviathan sinking beneath the ice and rising again. The need to believe in the supernatural was strong, a survival reflex deep in the group mind.

What an evocation of the human struggle between terror and a beauty born of hope!

A few weeks later when I dropped by his office, he refused to allow me to enthuse about *Leningrad Nights*. Instead he told me about the research he had done for *Smoking Poppy*, and gave me a copy of *The Facts of Life* inside of which he had written under my name, as I discovered later, 'more dark stuff'. Dark material and dark themes, perhaps, but always suffused with Graham's characteristic and creative humanity.

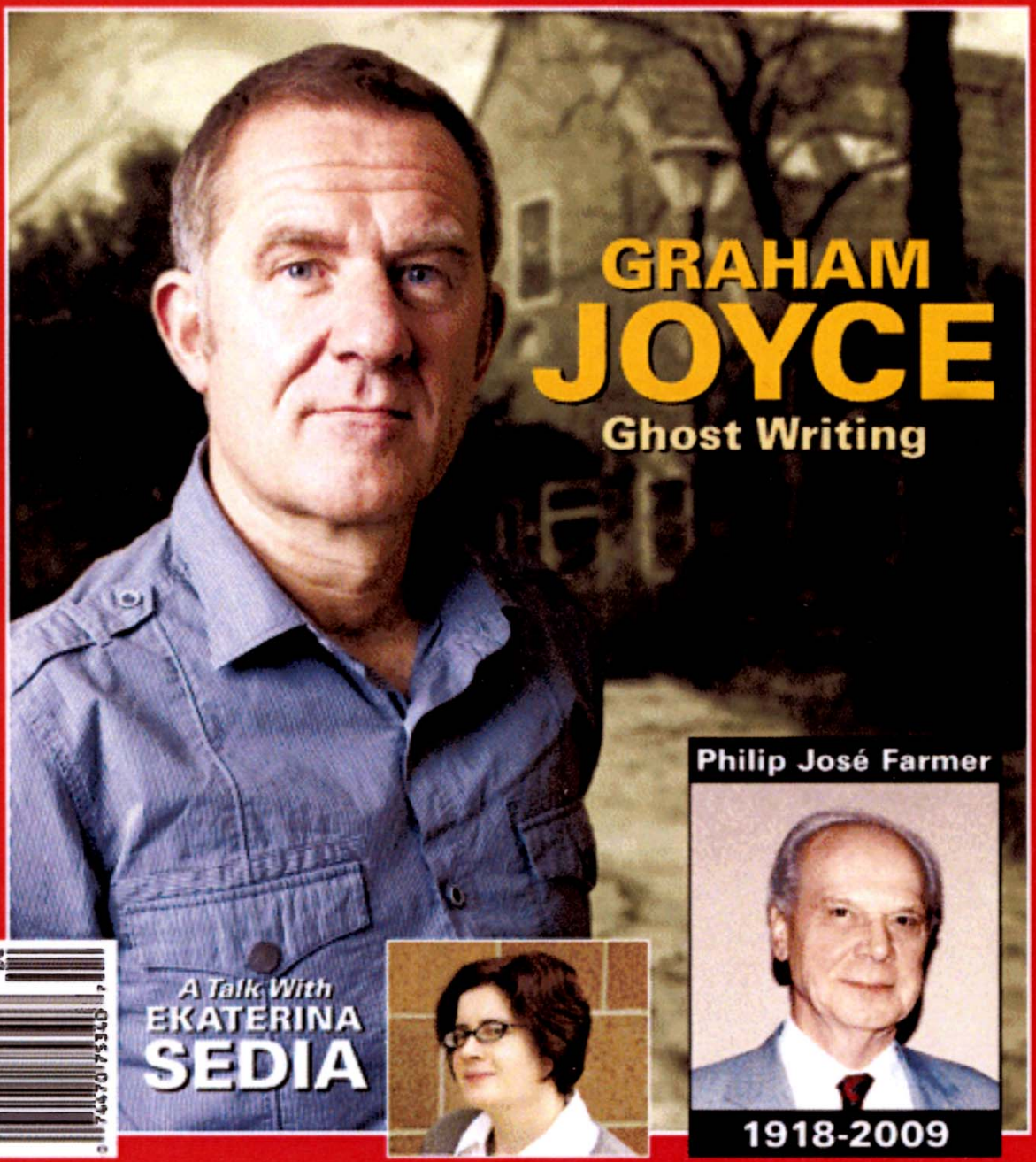
Lynne Hapgood, formerly Head of English, NTU

APRIL 2009

OUR COMMEMORATIVE 41ST ANNIVERSARY ISSUE!

LOCUS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY FIELD • ISSUE 579 • VOL. 62 NO. 4 • $6.95



GRAHAM JOYCE
Ghost Writing

Philip José Farmer

1918-2009

A Talk With EKATERINA SEDIA

BLOG POSTING ON 'LABOURING CLASS POETS ONLINE'
http://lcpoets.wordpress.com/introtobibliography/

This posting is about a working-class writer who won't be listed on our Database of Labouring-class Poets any time soon, even though he was a coalminer's son and an immensely successful and popular writer (and even had an interesting link to our project). He would of course be out of our period (1700-1900). But more importantly my friend and colleague Graham Joyce, who died on 9 September 2014, aged 59, loudly disdained what he saw as the pretentiousness and self-absorption of poets, and indeed art writers of all sorts. (His antipathy towards poets though, like the music-loathing of the Chief Blue Meanie in *Yellow Submarine*, evidently masked suppressed longings, because according to the long memory of our mutual friend the poet Mahendra Solanki, Graham began his writing career as a poet, long ago.) Graham's attitude to mainstream fiction was similarly iconoclastic, as may be seen in his funny, moving memoir of his career as the goalkeeper for the England Writers' football team, *Simple Goalkeeping Made Spectacular* (2009). He describes one of his team-mates as someone who could never win the Booker, the major UK literary prize for fiction, 'because he's not depressed or depressing enough'. Graham's own field was the marginalised, democratic, popular form of fantasy fiction—or if you prefer, dark fantasy, horror, slipstream or science fiction—but he didn't care all that much about genre labels really, and when his agent asked which one his latest novel was to be sold as, was wont to reply 'whichever one is selling best at the moment'.

Genre certainly cared about him though: he won the World Fantasy Award, the British Fantasy Award (an amazing five times) and the O. Henry Prize for short fiction, along with high praise from Stephen King, Jonathan Lethem and other notables. If I wanted to extract a common element in all Graham's novels and short stories I would say that they put the spectral, the fantastic, the science fictional into—well, into the styles and settings that readers might perhaps expect from a coalminer's son: realism, common life, family relationships, everyday conversations, concerns and interactions. His characters talk like ordinary people: in fact his most successful short story, the one that was published in the *Paris Review*, was simply called 'An Ordinary Soldier of the Queen'. But extraordinary things always seem to happen to his characters. If we encourage our kids to put their fallen milk teeth under the pillow for the tooth fairy to take in exchange for silver coins, we don't *really* expect her to show up in the middle of the night, as she does in Graham's best-known novel, *The Tooth Fairy* (1996). In *Some Kind of Fairy Tale* (2012), an ordinary young woman disappears for 20 years, captured by some offbeat fairies who live in a Narnian time-scheme. But does anyone believe her? In *The Silent Land* (2010), an ordinary couple on a ski-ing holiday get caught in an avalanche, after which the world seems to have changed in increasingly odd ways. Are they in fact alive or dead? As in William Golding's *Pincher Martin* or J. G. Ballard's *The Unlimited Dream Company*, we are not sure and nor are they, though you can be certain they will try their best to keep their 'normal' lives ticking along for as long as they possibly can.

Normalcy under unexpected pressure from the unfathomable, then, was perhaps Graham's great theme, and his gift for describing and analysing it served him well when cancer came along last year—a particularly virulent and difficult strain which overwhelmed him in the end. His last publications were about its presence in his life: a programme about the language in which cancer is discussed, broadcast on BBC Radio 4 shortly before he died ('Talking about Cancer', http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04dm87k), and a beautiful and moving final posting on his personal blog, in which he learns wisdom from a 300-million-year-old dragonfly, and compares the NHS surgeons who were by then trying every way they could to save his life, with the men who had recently blown a passenger plane out of the Ukrainian sky, snuffing out 300

innocent lives in a moment (see 'A Perfect Day and the Shocking Clarity of Cancer', http://www.grahamjoyce.co.uk/).

That sense of right and wrong, of the selfless versus the selfish, was a powerful instinct in Graham's writing. He hated the way that Thatcherism in the 1980s had destroyed not only the coalmining and manufacturing communities in which he had grown up, but also the spirit of social and voluntary activities that went with them, for example (from the goalkeeping book) the tradition of schoolteachers giving up their free time to coach boys' football teams:

> I know that there are many hundreds of teachers who still do give up their time in this way, but it's nothing like the organised, regular, full-on commitment that was offered back then. All that has gone the way of the colliery bands, cricket teams, apprenticeships in industry, first-aid teams, church groups, young trade-union groups, and the hundred other ways in which a boy might see how mature men deport themselves. (p. 101)

Memory and loss never tip over into the sentimental, but fire Graham's writings with a powerful and deeply personal political impulse.

And his link with Labouring-Class Poets Online? Graham Joyce honoured our research resource with its first parody. He had a fine, levelling, earthy sense of humour (as evident in the footballing memoir as the sense of nostalgia). His 2008 novel *Memoirs of a Master Forger*, first published under the suspiciously poetical and plainly forged name of William Heaney, is about demons, and begins with the information that 'There are one thousand five hundred and sixty-seven known demons'. That is precisely the number of poets we had at that point gathered for the Database of Labouring-Class Poets, which I had been telling Graham about some months earlier. So when, further down the page, he begins mock-pedantically discussing some of the finer points of demonic categorisation, I should not have been surprised to find him referring to 'Goodridge's original study and his much stricter categories' for demon typologies, with a scholarly footnote referencing this—it hardly needs saying—non-existent work on the subject. Graham was shrewd at reading the dysfunctions beneath our 'normal' exteriors, and his parodic slippage from 'poets' to 'demons' might suggest that the obsessive gathering of poets' biographies is a neurotic displacement activity. (What if the collector's own 'inner demons' are not so easily counted and pinned down?) Or perhaps Graham wanted to say something about what it is to be 'demonised', perhaps by being defined as a working-class writer.

There is a postscript. I thought I had the perfect opportunity to turn the joke back on Graham some months later, when by chance I was allotted as his research mentor at the university. Not that he really needed a mentor, except perhaps to countersign Hollywood contracts from time to time. But we obediently went through the ritual of the 'mentoring meeting'. Putting on as serious a face as I could, I told him that I had some important advice for him. In his next novel he really ought to develop this 'Professor Goodridge' character further. I saw him as—you know, maybe an Indiana Jones type of figure. I could see him searching out new demons to catalogue in his next book, in some romantic and dangerous location...that kind of thing. Quick as a flash an admonitory finger was up and pointing at me as he leaned forward, equally mock-serious: 'You just be bloody careful what you wish for, mate!'

I know I am far from being alone in saying that I'll miss Graham very much. It is a consolation that he has generously left us so many of his great books to read and re-read.

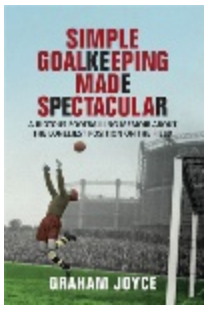
Professor John Goodridge
Nottingham Trent University

‘Graham Joyce was the embodiment of a blazing energy, dry humour and provocative wit, all of which made him highly stimulating to work with and invested all his writing—alongside a profound communication of what it is to be human.’

Georgina Lock, Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing

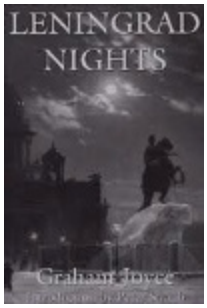
What are you reading?

Times Higher Education, 13 November 2014



Peter J. Smith, reader in Renaissance literature, Nottingham Trent University, is reading Graham Joyce's **Simple Goalkeeping Made Spectacular** (Mainstream Publishing, 2009). "Cajoled out of retirement in his early fifties to keep goal for England, Joyce finds himself at the (Writers') World Cup facing Italy. By turns he is autobiographer, pundit and gobshite. The prose is as deft and athletic as the English team is outclassed and knackered. His intemperate raillery is brilliantly facetious: since the 1990s, 'keepers started to appear in shitty psychedelic sweaters that looked like they'd been designed by a depressed LSD casualty funded by an arts council grant'. Withering, hilarious stuff."

Times Higher Education, 27 November 2014



Peter J. Smith, reader in Renaissance literature, Nottingham Trent University, has just read Graham Joyce's **Leningrad Nights** (PS Publishing, 1999). "This muscular novella recounts the bleak determination to survive the Nazi siege of Leningrad in the Second World War. Leo, its teenage protagonist, rescues a prostitute and her unborn baby from starvation with the aid of several alter-egos. It is a painful, compassionate story that fuses a plain prose style and a symbolic profundity in the manner of William Golding. Joyce was a friend and colleague of mine who died in September. His recent passing makes this story all the more weirdly momentous."

NOW READ ON...

A GOOD STARTING POINT (See also '**What are you reading?**, opposite)

25 Years in the Word Mines: The Best Short Fiction of Graham Joyce (2014). This is a great place to start. It gives you a taste of some of Graham's best writing, including two grippingly brilliant tales of WW2, 'The Coventry Boy' (who as Graham says in his Afterword 'is of course a Coventry girl') and the novella 'Leningrad Nights', which concerns an equally extraordinary boy in equally extraordinary circumstances. Twenty more of his best stories are here, sometimes acting as 'tasters' for the novels. (The book is beautifully illustrated with details of drawings of her father late in his life, by Graham's very talented daughter Ella.) Then there are…

THE NOVELS…

Dreamside (1991)
Dark Sister (1992)
The House of Lost Dreams (1993)
Requiem (1995)
The Tooth Fairy (1996)
The Stormwatcher (1998)
Dark Sister (1999)
Indigo (1999)
Smoking Poppy (2001)
The Facts of Life (2002)
The Limits of Enchantment (2006)
Memoirs of a Master Forger (2008)
The Silent Land (2011)
Some Kind of Fairy Tale (2012)
The Year of the Ladybird (2013) aka *The Ghost in the Electric Blue Suit* (2014)

YOUNG ADULT FICTION…

Spiderbite (1997)
TWOC (2005)
Do the Creepy Thing (2006)
Three Ways to Snog an Alien (2008)
The Devil's Ladder (2009)

Graham's website/blog: www.grahamjoyce.net/

Exhibition written and compiled by John Goodridge, March 2015.
Thanks to the colleagues, former colleagues and students who generously contributed.
Images of Graham: the cover of 'Locus' magazine (2009); drawing by Ella Joyce.