

Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with R.L Fanthorpe (February 2021)

Robert Lionel Fanthorpe entered into a publishing arrangement with Badger Books of England in the early 50's. Over the next decade and a half, he proceeded to write science fiction novels under many different pen names. The exact number of books is not known due to the fact that some of the pseudonyms were being used by other writers working for Badger at the same time. It is estimated to be 180+ books. Of these books, 89 are known to have been written in a three-year period. That works out to be one 158-page book every twelve days.

But those days writing for Badger were a long time ago, since then Fanthorpe has become a reverend with a love for Harley Davidson bikes, an explorer who loves unravelling the mysteries of the world, a major contributor to paranormal research, a television presenter, and he has continued to write books on subjects such as religion as well as the paranormal.

Eva Sable: Who did you enjoy most reading as you grew up? Do you regard those authors as influences?

My favourites were H.G.Wells, especially 'Tales of the Unexpected' and Jules Verne. I also enjoyed Edgar Allan Poe's 'Murders in the Rue Morgue' and 'The Pit and the Pendulum'.

John Grayshaw: If you haven't already answered it, I've heard that HG Wells was a particular influence?

Yes, very much so: he was probably my main influence. I greatly enjoyed 'The Invisible Man', 'The Time Machine' and 'The Island of Dr Moreau'. It was Wells' application of the scientific method to weird phenomena that influenced me most.

Eva Sable: If I were to ask you to suggest one book of yours that would give me the strongest or clearest sense of who you are as a writer, which would it be?

It would be The Derl Wothor Trilogy: Derl Wothor is an anagram of OTHER WORLD. It consists of The Black Lion, The Golden Tiger and Zotala the Priest. What I have tried to do in this trilogy is to use the leading characters to represent aspects of human nature. The Black Lion (Mark Sable) is ambition, the desire to succeed, to overcome difficulties, to compete successfully, to defeat the opposition, to win and to lead. The Golden Tiger (King of Valdar) represents hedonism, the love of pleasure. Zotala the Priest represents spirituality, philosophy and theology. When I try to examine my own personality, and who I am as a writer, I find all three of them inside me.

Richard Whyte: What's with all the 'stygian blackness' in the Badger books? Did you enjoy writing those passages as much as we enjoyed reading them?

It is very encouraging and helpful when a friend says that he enjoyed reading my books: many thanks. There are many occasions in the old Badger Books where the hero struggles through mental and physical darkness, but triumphs in the end. I think most authors subconsciously put their own life experiences into their books. In my childhood and teens, I didn't enjoy school life at all and left at fifteen without any qualifications of any kind. As time passed, however, I came out of that, succeeded in matriculating, gaining a Government Teaching Certificate with Advanced Mains Distinction, and

Distinction in Education, plus an Upper Second B.A. Degree from the Open University, and Membership of Mensa. I think that may be why many of my Badger Book heroes struggle out of darkness but succeed in the end.

Richard Whyte: Thanks so much for making 'Fortean TV' in the late '90s. However, I gather your interest in Forteana goes back considerably further than that; could you tell us what first attracted you to it?

I'm so pleased to learn that you enjoyed Fortean TV. I greatly enjoyed making it. I have always been interested in mysteries of the Fortean type. Since my earliest childhood, I have enjoyed trying to solve puzzles and problems. My old Grandmother lived with us when I was a child, and she was firmly convinced that ghosts existed, and she thought there were some in our old house in Norwich Road in Dereham in Norfolk. As I grew older and read about real life mysteries, I tried hard to think of rational explanations for them. When I couldn't find any, I became even more interested in that mystery.

John Grayshaw: Your method of writing is very well known and involves ducking under a blanket and dictating your stories. Could you tell us a bit more about the reasons behind that?

When I am writing, I like to feel that I am there, actually participating in the story, either observing the characters – or even being one of the characters. Getting under a blanket insulates me from the real, external world, and helps me to feel that I am in the story world that I am creating.

John Grayshaw: You have written an outstanding number of books? Where did those ideas keep coming from?

At 86, I still keep getting new ideas, and I greatly hope there'll be a lot more books to come. I particularly like the genre that might be described as alternative history. I imagine what might have happened if some event had been different. In my recent book on Joan of Arc, I have her rescued from the stake at the last minute by her secret lover, and they go off on adventures together. This idea was triggered by an Internet History picture of a 15th century tombstone bearing the inscription 'Lord Robert of Armoises and his wife Joan' and dating more than 40 years later than her supposed death at the stake. In another alternate history plot, Boadicea falls in love with a Roman soldier and they enjoy a long happy marriage after her supposed death in battle. Her royal crown is placed on the head of a dead Iceni woman warrior on the battlefield. There is an old army song about 'Mad Carew and the Green Eye of the Little Yellow God' in which Carew is killed by the vengeful worshippers of this little yellow idol. In my alternate version (currently in the course of being written) his girlfriend, the Colonel's daughter, learnt martial arts while her father was stationed in the East. She overtakes the assassin and kills him on the staircase before he can reach her beloved Carew. They marry and live happily for many years.

John Grayshaw: Did you do any research for your science fiction novels? Did you outline the plots of stories ahead of time? Or was it always just stream of consciousness?

I did research when there was a particular, known planet setting. I tried to get atmospheric conditions and temperatures correct. However, when it was just a totally imaginary planet in a distant galaxy, I just let my imagination run! I often have an outline plot in mind, such as the survival of Boadicea and Joan of Arc, but it is very much an outline. The action as it unfolds is all stream of consciousness.

John Grayshaw: Did you ever have writer's block? Or just have an off day and not get much writing done? What strategies did you have to push past that sort of thing?

I must be extremely fortunate as far as writer's block goes – I can't recall it happening more than once or twice over the last half-century. When I am wondering what comes next, I try to imagine myself into one of the characters and look at the setting from his point of view. In 'The Black Lion' I would imagine myself as Mark Sable surrounded by enemies, draw my sword and counter-attack as he would have done.

John Grayshaw: What did you use to keep your energy up while writing? Were you a big coffee drinker or something?

My adored wife, Patricia, makes sure there is always an adequate supply of tea when I'm working. She is my inspiration. She is actually making a cup of tea for me now as I write this answer.

John Grayshaw: How seriously were you taking the writing of the Badger novels? Was it treated like a job or were you having fun with it?

As a journalist working for 'The Norfolk Chronicle' in their Cromer Office way back in the 1950s, I regarded writing as a job. You investigated local events and wrote them up. Writing was the way you earned your living – but I enjoyed it at the same time. I think that's true of my work for Badger Books as well. I was augmenting my living and enjoying it at the same time. Looking back, as I think about this question, I realise that I was almost always doing two jobs: first came whatever I was doing for a living, writing Badger Books came parallel with it. I was a driver+author, a teacher+author, a management consultant+author and so on.

John Grayshaw: What kind of feedback did you get from the Badger editors? Did you ever have to do additional drafts? Did they ever write you and say like "I see what you did there" like with "Negative Minus" where you had Suessydo and Epolenep reenacting Homeric tales.

I got almost no feedback from them. As long as I got the manuscript they were waiting for to them when they wanted it, there were no complaints, and no comments.

John Grayshaw: Fans are very familiar with your obvious homages like I already mentioned "Negative Minus." There is "Beyond the Void" based on the Tempest. And there is "Forbidden Planet" where the goings on of an Intergalactic Convention bears a striking resemblance to chess. But what are some of your subtler homages that fans might have missed or might just be less familiar with?

The titles and contents that you mention in this question are highly relevant to this kind of plotting. I would sometimes use a few of the Greco-Roman myths, or the Norse Pantheon, as sources of plots and characters. As an English specialist during my early teaching career, before I became a Headmaster, I was particularly keen on Shakespeare. I also taught as a Religious Studies specialist at one time, so I found that theological entities and Shakespearean plots and characters were very helpful when I needed a new idea for a Badger Book. As with the alternative history type stories that I mentioned earlier, I enjoyed putting happy endings into what had started as tragedies. I endeavoured to rescue heroines from Hades, and to make sure that Othello killed Iago while being happily reunited in life-long love with Desdemona.

John Grayshaw: Is it true that good always triumphs over evil in your science fiction? Why is this an important theme to you? And what are some other important themes in your science fiction?

I firmly believe that we should all do all we can in real life in the real world to make sure that good does triumph over evil. As an author, I always make good triumph over evil in my stories. Other themes that are important to me are to unite true lovers in long and happy marriages – like the one that Patricia and I enjoy so much in the real world. Another theme that is important to me is that heroes and heroines triumph in the end, after fighting their way through difficult and dangerous problems. I also like the theme of solving mysteries, finding important things that have been lost, or recovering them from the villains.

John Grayshaw: What are some of the passages in your science fiction that were your favorites while you were writing them? Something that made you laugh out loud or that you were just proud of?

As mentioned earlier, the Derl Wothor Trilogy are my all time favourites. I hope that I have traces of The Black Lion, the Golden Tiger and Zotala the Priest in my own personality. Two of my other favourites are Val Stearman and La Noire. He is a brawny journalist, who always enjoys a good fight when it's necessary. His wife, La Noire, is a mysterious, timeless enchantress, whom he originally rescued from evil enemies. They go on all sorts of adventures together and come into conflict with all kinds of paranormal evil beings, whom they defeat. Here's an extract from: --

From Supernatural Stories 19 - 1958

NIGHT OF THE GHOUL

BY BRON FANE

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Canon Edwards began backing away as fast as he could go, his face distorted in an expression of abject terror. His slithering feet missed the path, made contact with an iron cradle hoop, and he fell heavily to the ground. Dazed and shaken, he lay where he had fallen, peering anxiously into the darkness, and wondering whether his overtaxed mind had been playing tricks upon him.

The eyes were still there. Eyes that reflected the most savage depths of nether hell. Eyes that burned with an unholy, evil light — like sulphur candles at the black mass. Eyes that seemed to bore into his very soul. Canon Edwards began backing away as fast as he could go, his face distorted in an expression of abject terror. His slithering feet missed the path, made contact with an iron cradle hoop, and he fell heavily to the ground. Dazed and shaken, he lay where he had fallen, peering anxiously into the darkness, and wondering whether his overtaxed mind had been playing tricks upon him.

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Andrew felt as if he was in the grip of some terrible nightmare. He was powerless to move, and the eyes were coming nearer. Suddenly he found his voice again.

“Help!” he screamed in desperation. “Help! Save me!” It was fortunate for Canon Edwards that he had a powerful and penetrating voice!

“What the blazes was that?” asked Val Stearman and trod heavily on the brakes of his big new sports car. The glamorous raven-haired girl beside him sat listening intently.

“Help!” screamed the vicar as the shadowy thing bore down upon him, eyes blazing, hideous jaws agape.

“Over that wall!” cried La Noire quickly, and leapt out of the car in a lithe, graceful bound. Val followed her out and dashed to the low stone wall surrounding the churchyard.

“It’s a cemetery!” he gasped as he vaulted lightly over and drew a powerful torch from the pocket of his mac. “Merciful heavens — look!” he exclaimed.

The strong white beam picked out a huge form moving rapidly among the tombs. A dark, twisted monstrosity, not entirely unlike a man, was darting away from the light. Val got the impression of a gorilla-like head, armed with huge fangs and eyes like twin pools of liquid fire. The body seemed to be covered in a tangled mat of thick, dark hair, and the limbs looked enormous.

La Noire clutched his arm tightly.

“Whatever was it?” he asked in a shaken voice. His wife’s lovely face had turned dreadfully pale in the torchlight.

“It was one of them,” she whispered, in a frightened voice. “One of the Dark Creatures that belong to the underworld.”

“Dark Creatures?” echoed Val. “What do you mean, exactly?” La Noire took a deep breath.

“It was a ghoul,” she answered in a voice that shook with emotion. “A ghoul that preys upon the dead.” Val looked shaken.

“But the cry for help —” he began. Ahead of them in the darkness someone moaned softly. The big journalist hurried forward, then stopped abruptly as he saw the inert form of the clergyman. Handing the torch to La Noire he stooped swiftly and examined him.

“He’s alive,” he answered, “but he seems to be suffering from shock. I think I’ll risk moving him.” As easily as if the twelve-stone priest had been a child, Val picked him up in his arms and began walking back to the car, with La Noire illuminating the path. As he was straddling the wall, Andrew Edwards opened dilated eyes and gazed at him uncomprehendingly.

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John Grayshaw: When you look at one of your science fiction novels? Do you usually remember writing it, or because of the speed at which you worked, do they all sort of blend together?

I do recall one or two of them in detail, but most have coalesced in my memory.

John Grayshaw: How did you feel about Debbie Cross’ “Down the Badger Hole?” Do you feel like your science fiction writing is just in the distant past? Or are you honored that folks are still enjoying your work?

I felt honoured and very happy that Debbie was so interested in the old Badger Books. I greatly enjoy dipping into ‘Down the Badger Hole’ and chuckling about the extracts. My Science Fiction – and my other writing – is still very much in the present. My recent titles for Wordcatcher Publishing include ‘The Joan of Arc Mysteries’, ‘Garan of the Veneti’, ‘Parables from the Pond’, ‘Boadicea Warrior Queen’, ‘The

Mystery of Widdicombe' and 'Sinister, Silver Silence.' And I'm currently working on more titles for them. Patricia and I now co-author everything, and greatly enjoy working together.

John Grayshaw: Do you enjoy going to science fiction conventions? Have any fun stories from going to them? Or have you gotten any interesting reader feedback from your works in general?

We have very happy memories of the big convention in Brighton, when all four of us dressed up as characters from 'The Black Lion'. We had the great pleasure of meeting the late Douglas Adams, author of 'The Restaurant at the end of the Universe', and Christopher Reeve who played Superman. We were also great friends with Terry Pratchett, of Discworld fame.

John Grayshaw: Has the sci-fi genre lived up to the expectations that you had when you first started writing in the genre?

Yes, very much so – and I hope to keep on writing it for years to come.

John Grayshaw: What are some of your hobbies (Other than writing)?

Patricia and I enjoy playing snooker, on an almost daily basis. She is a folk-dancing enthusiast and keen collector of coins and stamps. We both greatly enjoy watching action/adventure films on TV. When there is no lockdown to prevent it, we also greatly enjoy going out for meals with our much-loved family.

John Grayshaw: What are you working on now?

We are updating all the old Badger Books for Wordcatcher Publishing, as well as some new titles in the alternative history genre, such as the Mad Carew idea which I mentioned earlier.

John Grayshaw: What is your legacy? Are you happy with the impact of the work you did with Badger Books?

Maybe I'm over-optimistic, but I greatly hope to go on writing for several years yet. I would like to be remembered for the Derl Wothor Trilogy as much as anything, and for the Val Stearman and La Noire adventures. I am particularly interested currently in the alternative history genre, and hope to work soon on an alternative ending – a decidedly happy ending – for King Arthur.