

Interview with Adam Nevill

Dawn Keetley (Lehigh University)

Adam Nevill, author of such folk horror fare as *Banquet for the Damned* (2004), *The Ritual* (2011), *House of Small Shadows* (2013), and *The Reddening* (2019), graciously agreed to an interview in August 2018. Below are his thoughts on writing horror—and folk horror specifically—as well as on *The Ritual* in the time of its writing (2008) and in the present moment.

DK: What were your influences—whether film, literature, TV and did you see yourself writing in a particular genre—drawing from several genres? Extending or deviating from particular genres?

AN: Always a tangle when attempting definition and classification, but I'm definitely writing horror fiction; a specific aesthetic aim is to transport the reader imaginatively through feelings of dread, horror, terror, wonder and awe, by use of the numinous, supernatural or supernormal.

But my small contribution to a long and varied tradition of horror has been informed by books from many different fields. I've read widely and so much has inspired me, and made me want to write; fiction within and outside of horror. For example, the dominant forms of popular novel in my time have undoubtedly been the crime novel and the thriller—the major differences between them I'll leave to others—and as I have read a fair bit in these fields, they have certainly influenced my books in terms of story arrangement: *Last Days* (that is chiefly inspired by popular true crime and is a ‘what happened’ investigation and a ‘why dunnit’), *No One Gets Out Alive* (again specifically inspired by true crime investigations into the psychopaths who become

sadistic killers of women), *Lost Girl* (very much a near-future thriller about, amongst other things, a missing child and the story of a parent-turned-vigilante, engaged in a semi-official criminal investigation), and *Under a Watchful Eye* is also close to a thriller in terms of its plot—an ordinary life invaded by a mysterious ‘other’ that pursues its unscrupulous self-interest and revenge for past slights.

And crime and thriller do seem the closest cousins to modern horror novels that have contemporary settings and that adhere to a world in which natural law is accepted—where the unnatural within these stories is presented as an exceptional occurrence and left partly enigmatic. I’d venture that horror of this stripe (and much of my own fiction takes this approach), has far closer ties to crime and thriller than a zombie apocalypse novel would do, which must surely be science fiction as much as it is horror? The horror in which vampires, and other other-worldly entities, are accepted as a part of the worlds of their stories, also seem more akin to fantasy to me.

So, science fiction and fantasy are not the closest bedfellows to my eye for much of modern horror, or most of mine, and yet it is with the latter that *all of* horror is closely associated or even contained. But the hair-splitting of what belongs where could carry on forever with endless contradictory examples being quoted. So, I think, in conclusion, I can say that I write horror fiction, which is encompassed within the literature of the fantastic. But I will always draw upon the conventions of other forms of fiction if they suit a horror story. For example, the fiction concerned with outsiders by Colin Wilson, Fante, Hamsun, Dostoyevsky, Maugham, and many others, exerted a big influence on my first two novels, particularly *Apartment 16* - and that book's aesthetic was inspired by painters as much as writers. *The Ritual* had a specific filmic

aesthetic, as does *Last Days* and *No One Gets Out Alive*, so films are as much an inspiration to me too as other books are, both in structure, point-of-view, set-design and set-piece construction.

DK: As you know, and have noted on your website, *The Ritual* has made at least one list of folk horror novels, and the film has also been described in the *Irish Times* as part of the folk horror revival.¹ When you were writing *The Ritual*, were you aware of the ‘folk horror’ subgenre? Did you then—or do you now—see your novel as part of the folk horror genre? How do you think it fits?

AN: What is now described as ‘folk horror’ I was definitely writing anyway, and from as early as 1997 when I began my first novel *Banquet for the Damned*. But I hadn’t heard that precise phrase or classification back then. But Arthur Machen and Algernon Blackwood and M. R. James were also writing it many, many years before me—some of my biggest literary influences in horror, with H. P. Lovecraft too.

All of my novels and most of my short stories use high magic (ritual and visionary), folk magic and its interconnectedness with Christianity, and what is perceived as pagan beliefs, imagery and religion. All of these sources are inspiration for the actual ideas, themes and imagery of my stories. So ‘folk horror’, as I interpret it, is a theme inseparable from my aesthetic to date. And this aesthetic’s classification is helpful in guiding readers, and is a good one, as is ‘the weird’, in suggesting a greater sophistication and range of ideas within in the field than it is usually afforded within a classification of horror. So I’m happy to be thought of as a writer of folk horror. It’s also particularly poignant as a signifier for European and Asian horror, I think.

What I find interesting, is how the canon from the Romantics onwards has eulogized nature and the pastoral in literature, calling upon the Greek classics and Pan to endow the past

and rural settings with enchantment, particularly when populations shifted relatively quickly from rural to urban environments. And yet, horror writers tend to focus upon the primitive and the grotesque nature of folk traditions and rural idylls—they so often seek other things, just as captivating but much darker. I know I have. *House of Small Shadows* may be my most concentrated folk horror story to date, but I'm still digging.

DK: Why did you set *The Ritual* in Sweden and not the UK? Or, since I’m sure writers hate the “why didn’t you do x?” question, let’s just say, why did you set *The Ritual* in Sweden—especially since the inspiration for the novel was apparently a trip you took with some friends to North Wales in the early 1990s?

AN: It was easier because I visited Scandinavia repeatedly and explored it up until one year before I began the novel in 2008. I let the culture and landscape soak into my imagination for years across repeated visits and a long backpacking holiday.

Large countries that are sparsely populated and offer great expanses of rural land, even wilderness, are still capable of inspiring real enchantment in the traveler. The top portion of these countries is nearly deserted and actual virgin forest remains under the Arctic circle. The physical survival of an ancient deity, within its sacred grove, would, most plausibly, occur somewhere that remote. The reader needs all the help the writer can give them to accept the preposterous.

I also grew up in New Zealand, in a coastal idyll surrounded by miles of native forest, and that experience and my memories lingered; I was looking for the magic of my childhood in Europe and found it in Scandinavia. So, I was far closer to Norway and Sweden than Wales imaginatively. I was also living in central London, close to a choice of airports, and the contrast between where I was living and the Scandinavian landscape was colossal and poignant. What's

interesting to me now is that nearly all of my camping, which informed the actual camping and hiking details in the story, occurred in Wales, mostly Snowdonia, until I finished the book in 2010. I kind of ‘method-wrote’ the novel, using camping and hiking in Welsh mountains as research, but imagined the story occurring in Scandinavia.

DK: I think I saw you mention something on Facebook at some point about how *The Ritual* has been criticized by some for the last third or so—including the Black Metal part of the plot (which the film left out). What have been some of those critiques and what do you think of them? Why did you include black metal and Blood Frenzy? And what are you saying about Loki, Fenris, and Surtr through their connection to black metal?

AN: To nutshell it, for half of the book's readers, the second half was too great a jolt from the first. The first part had a conclusion of sorts, but I wanted to delve deeper into what was *up there*, as well as exploring other ideas connected to the first part of the story set within the archeological remains. Had I left the story at part one, I wager that a similar plethora of criticism would have been leveled at the omission of information about Luke's fate, or what was behind it all. It's a generalisation, but as a writer you cannot underestimate the conservatism of many readers: ambiguity remains an acquired taste. Naturally, I disagree with those who dislike the second half; they often claim it is a structural error, or it is an entirely different book. Most often, I suspect it is just not to their taste. I still can't find the abrupt disruption of continuity that many claim exists.

I think as time goes on, the second half is being appreciated more and valued as something different or unexpected. It is bizarre, even outrageous, in some ways, but I'll always take risks that won't be to every reader's taste.

Why use black metal? For lots of reasons. Black metal is a unique Scandinavian contribution to popular culture and one that was, for a time, disturbing and controversial. It was a revolutionary outsider and misfit youth movement that evolved with much colour and was very creative. It had its tragedies and schisms and evolved in ways not dissimilar to cults and new religions; I find it a fascinating subculture and I enjoy some of the music too: I've been steeped in metal since my early teens. It was also a good fit for the terrain, the actual geography of the story.

The Ritual is also a story in which I explored, imaginatively, a whole raft of ideas that still interest me. One that is rarely considered in relation to the second half, is that the novel was intended to be filmic, aesthetically. To all intents and purposes, each half is a kind of self-contained horror film; the second a sequel to the first half and the first film; two different kinds of horror film on the same subject in the same world. So, the setting switches from exterior to interior, but it's within the same world. The irony of this is that the second part wasn't used in the film. But the entirety of *The Ritual* was always a film in my imagination, as it was written, and I hoped that it would become one in the imaginations of its readers; I never expected it to appear on a screen.

Black metal is the most strikingly visual and theatrical of all forms of popular music too; it's very aesthetic is to inspire horror. Done well, it would be sublime in a horror film.

Another theme in all of my novels, which will be readily identified by those who have read them all, is that they all prominently feature extremists. My fascination with those who pursue odd belief systems and fundamentalist ideas, and who are irrationally and even inhumanly uncompromising in the pursuit of seemingly absurd ideals, have appeared in all of my books. In the two preceding novels (*Apartment 16* and *Banquet for the Damned*), I respectively focused on

an occult philosopher and an expressionist artist who each performed ritual magic—who pursued their eccentric ideas at the expense of near everything else in their lives. Blood Frenzy were similarly driven and motivated, narcissistic, and doomed to self-destruction in their desire to resurrect the old pagan ways; their rite of passage also had to involve a dramatic rejection of society with behaviour from which one cannot turn back.

In the books that followed, folklorist, puppeteer and taxidermist, M. H. Mason, is cut from the same cloth (*House of Small Shadows*), as is M. L. Hazzard the astral projector and cult leader (*Under a Watchful Eye*), as is Sister Katherine, the empress of the Temple of the Last Days (*Last Days*). Fergal in *No One Gets Out Alive* will do anything in the service of his deity, Old Black Mag. The counter-culture creed, a death cult, becomes the dominant religion of organised crime in *Lost Girl*—‘King Death’, where extinction itself is worshipped and revered as civilisation collapses. So, within a body of work, my interest in the outsider—the eccentric who has retreated from mainstream society and into the esoteric—is consistent. It may also be a load-bearing beam in the field of horror generally. In the annals of true crime, and also in history, these individuals and communities are ever-present alternatives within mainstream societies in which many feel excluded, humiliated, outraged, desperate and vengeful; so they often become the stuff of horror.

DK: What defines the conflict of *The Ritual*, it seems to me, is the clash of modern civilised men (Luke, Hutch, Dom, and Phil) with, first, the alienating forest and, second, the old Norse rituals of this community, with their ‘old gods’ and the very real deity that they appease with their rituals. Did you want to portray Luke, Hutch, Dom, and Phil as pretty representative of any modern person—their fates what any of our fates would be if we

confronted these two forces (nature, pagans/old god)—or were you interesting in portraying the failings and inadequacies of *these particular men*?

AN: I think the conflict is nuanced, but has been trampled underfoot by an interest in the pagan material, which was, much as anything, a dramatic and aesthetic device. But you're right in suggesting the male characters were designed to be representative.

The initial conflict is inter-generational and arises from an observation by Martin Amis that encompassed something I'd been considering for a long time in various ways. Amis posed a separation of modern men into historical and post-historical groups. Men born in the West from the 1940s onwards, like me and my father's generation, have for the most part avoided warfare, even military service, great depressions and pandemics, and are thus rendered post-historical, in that we have lived outside of the epochal and visceral events of recent history—no Great War, no Second World War for us. Even amidst the 2008 crash, did the lights go out and did any of us queue for food? Maybe not in the UK but I bet they did in China and other places still engaged in the upheaval of history. So, my characters are post-historical men thrust into a ‘historical’ dilemma, a dilemma exceptional to all in their time but mountain climbers and extreme explorers, who often undertake such pursuits for leisure. There are small numbers of the postwar generations who have seen combat in localised conflicts around the world, but they are also not representative of their peers' experience.

The characters in *The Ritual* are pitted against nature in a battle for survival without the appropriate skills, equipment, experience, and physical or mental reserves associated with former generations of men (though these qualities were not necessarily universally present in earlier generations of men, as any good account of the last two world wars demonstrates). But there is no real expectation, post WW2, that we first-world men will have to endure such travails. The

characters are also being hunted. So, how would I and members of my generation get on, truthfully, in those circumstances and in that environment once we were lost? How would my dad's generation have fared? That is the simple question I asked of the story. So, it is a conflict between the experiences of differing generations of men, of attitude and expectation. I am a man and I wrote about men of my generation, characters as representative of men as I could imagine; the same quandary could be asked of female characters of different generations too. It is an important question to ask of ourselves, because I'm not as confident in the survival of civilisation as we know it, and our current lifestyles, due to the imminent consequences of runaway climate change. A theme better explored by me in *Lost Girl*. That's not so much about men, as our humanity, as we slide back into history.

The pagan element represents historical situations, and the indifference of the natural world is the dramatic obstruction that tests my modern male characters to the extreme through successive crises—trying to read maps, counting calories, attempting first aid, then making life and death decisions. The pagan element could just have easily been a natural disaster or war or a bear. So, your second interpretation/question is relevant to *The Ritual*. But, as I am a writer of supernatural horror, it stands to reason that I would eschew a human hillbilly element, or wild animal, or exclusively use a hostile natural environment, and would, instead, dig deep into cosmic and pagan horrors to make a story. Personally, my choices interest me more, because only with the supernormal can I also attempt to create the effects of wonder and awe, and the possibility of other laws beyond reason and natural law.

The next layer of conflict exists within the actual group, between members, in a microcosm. The story is about friendships between men—men changed, since they first formed their friendships, by their respective choices, fates, situations and circumstances, by life itself.

The incessant compare-and-contrast process amongst men that is encouraged by our culture is also of interest to me, particularly when the economy is a rigged game: no one starts from the same line, and competitiveness can turn to resentment. I kind of set up an experiment between four characters and then watched how they treated each other—the rivalries, pacts, reappraisals and breakdowns that an uncomfortable situation created, followed by the true nature of their characters when real disaster struck. The pagan element is near irrelevant at this level.

What effects do age and external forces have on the oldest and strongest friendships?

I guess the last layer of conflict is how we would react when confronted with the impossible—that which contradicts all that a secular, civilised, settled existence has prepared one for. A situation that goes beyond good or evil—one that is supernormal, cosmic, in which we are largely insignificant.

So, to me, there was a lot going on in that story, though it is probably mostly known for the monster and the ‘great outdoors’ elements . . . the easiest parts to write.

DK: What attracted you to Norse mythology and the Vikings? What did you find most useful about this history?

AN: Because so little is really known about European pre-Christian religions, and because there is an enduring compulsion in people to seek an original identity, an ancient lineage between themselves and the distant past, this whole process seems to involve huge amounts of wishful thinking and fantasy and self-deception: Blood Frenzy kind of represent an extreme endgame to this idea that the truest ideas and ideals and purest beliefs lay in ancient times. In a story, I would struggle to picture a wooden hall of kings, or sacred grotto in which nymphs danced to Pan's pipes, or a time of pastoral bliss centered around a Goddess—all fairly modern inventions

imposed upon a period of which we know little. I imagine that life was grim, hard, and at the mercy of the elements, while belief in the unworldly was total and consuming, with ideas flitting about like viruses between wandering groups and tribes. In my story, what was plausible then, is still surviving in a tiny pocket of virgin forest now.

DK: Did you intend any kind of social critique in your characters? Loki gives a kind of speech to Luke late in the novel about how the old ways of life, the old religions, have been ‘pushed to the little places . . . By Christians, and immigrants and social democrats’. And, later, Luke says to Loki (quite understandably, in the circumstances!), ‘I’m beginning to think that the end of the nuclear family was not a good thing. Because people like you might not have happened’. Seems like there might be something of a social critique there.

AN: Well, it's a good question. As extreme and conscienceless as Blood Frenzy are, and although they nurture an ideal of pure evil as a form of liberation and freedom from all of society's restraints and boundaries, I'm not interested in creating purely evil characters. You have to try and write these characters, who will commit the most abominable acts in your stories, from the inside out, and try to understand their motivation: they will always have a rationale, or at least disturbing compulsions that they dress up in ideology. Those have to be taken into account to write truthfully.

Were these adolescents disfigured in childhood by abuse or trauma, were they brutalized? Do they feel excluded and unable to succeed, or advance on the hand they were dealt in society? Did they form extreme ideals and reactions from a strict religious upbringing? Were their parents religious zealots? Are they seeking a father/big brother figure they missed in childhood? Are they narcissists overwhelmed by grandiose ideas about their Godlike status? Have they become

disturbed by relentless trauma? Are they guilty of scapegoating elements of society they feel wronged by, disadvantaged, or threatened by? Have they fallen under the sway of older charismatic narcissists? So, in the interest of this story, I wanted to create as truthful a set of characters as I could, who may have suffered any number of these traumas.

There have to be solid reasons why they have dedicated themselves to an antisocial and extreme fringe movement (that was as much about the aesthetics of rebellion as politics). They were confirmed Satanists for a time to offend and desecrate the mainstream religion and moral values of their own country, but then they evolved into a nationalist Aryan folk movement, finding new enemies to oppose and destroy in order to present a more authentic way of living within their culture, *as they saw it*. Again, a bit of authenticity makes a character so much more memorable—a manikin Nazi is forgettable. These are fictional right-wing terrorists but they must have plausible ideals.

Their beliefs are also taboo, but only taboo if written with some authenticity. Taboos are an important part of horror. Looking back at that novel now from 2018, and having touched upon populist right wing politics in an offshoot of black metal, I think I may have caught something of the zeitgeist that has since flourished into mainstream politics in Europe and the United States. When I wrote *The Ritual*, Blood Frenzy was, to my mind, a tiny underground faction of near hyper-real extremists, but I wouldn't be surprised if their beliefs enjoy widespread support today. What Loki says (that the ‘old ways’ have been ‘pushed to the little places . . . By Christians, and immigrants and social democrats’) is designed to shock but it makes sense to him too. It's also almost the final assault on everything that Luke believes or has taken for granted in life—though it's not, as there is worse to come for Luke, in the attic and in the trees.

At least one third of Blood Frenzy, Loki, passionately and fervently believes in what he is doing. But much of what he implies, you could hear in a pub, living room or on a street corner today. In 2008, his beliefs would have been socially unacceptable in most situations. Are they now? The other two are zealots, but in Loki's sway and probably too disturbed and unstable to debate the finer points of their idealism in any meaningful way. They're in it for the chaos.

Luke's comment (that 'the end of the nuclear family was not a good thing') is made as much to taunt Loki as much as it is a suspicion that only deep dysfunction or fracture in Loki's early life could have created such a young monster—but Luke is reaching. It's also the kind of accusation that would get Loki's goat: Luke mocks and reduces his rebellion to something banal, as Loki and company are Scandinavian and relatively better off than anyone in the world. It was not intended to set Luke up as a champion of family values—though after what he has seen, a conventional family life would be a blessing to him. Luke is deeply lonely, estranged from friends and family alike, and he covets his friends' situations which are all more traditional than his own. Scandinavia also, at least in theory, is a representation of the model society from family to governance, in equality and economic fairness—so how did it create such monsters? Why would they hate their society so much? There must be something personal at the root of Loki's hostility that has been dressed up in political and mythological justifications. Luke mentions family to belittle Loki's grandiose soap-boxing about true Gods and authentic traditions, to touch a nerve. At this point, Luke wants to be killed. He's done.

Luke is an outsider too, perhaps even a misfit, and he ponders his own dilemma relentlessly; he both recognises part of himself in Blood Frenzy and is repelled by that: the deep humiliation of being at the bottom and the instinct to abandon compassion and order and to tear down the oppressive low ceiling.

They are all outsiders at the end and alone too, at the dawn, in prehistory, but in the home of a close-knit family that has endured for centuries—and look at the state of them.

I think what I always suggest is that there are many variables that can create dangerous instability in a person—a broken home and being an unloved child one of them (*No One Gets Out Alive*) and poverty being an even greater force for destabilization and rage in the individual. Trauma and dissatisfaction will always find an idealism to suit. When it gets organised, we're no longer post-historical. The terrible wheel turns again.

DK: So I know that you wrote *The Ritual* before Brexit –and also that you had little (nothing?) to do with the film. And you also said in your message to me on Facebook, ‘I never think of my books as political, save *Lost Girl*, but everything is political so there’s never much point in saying I don’t do politics’. All that said, I was intrigued by the fact that the film raised Brexit in what seemed a kind of gratuitous way. The four friends are taking a selfie right before things go really bad and Hutch says, as they look at the camera, ‘Say Brexit’. What did you think of this moment—and do you think (in hindsight) that your novel or the film has anything to say about the ‘Brexit moment’—or about any part of the current political climate?

AN: I like the Brexit comment. It was irreverent and topical at the time the film was made. It was in keeping with the discourse and banter of that group of friends. I think Joe Barton did an excellent job of creating authentic male characters of a particular age. The four lads were hiking in Sweden, part of the EU; a union their country was soon to no longer be a part of. They would have to reflect upon it in some way.

In the book, which I began in 2008, at least two of the characters see Europe as a wonderland of adventure, culture, exoticism and natural beauty which they feel blessed to have easy access to—I certainly do. Had I written the book since the referendum I would have mentioned Brexit too. The story has moved with the times onscreen.

What I find uncanny, is how the second half of the story now reflects part of the spirit of popular nationalism in Europe and Britain, ten years after it was written: from fringe to mainstream in a decade. Unwittingly, it has also moved into its time.

Adam L.G. Nevill was born in Birmingham, England, in 1969 and grew up in England and New Zealand. He is the author of the horror novels 'Banquet for the Damned', 'Apartment 16', 'The Ritual', 'Last Days', 'House of Small Shadows', 'No One Gets Out Alive', 'Lost Girl', 'Under a Watchful Eye' and 'The Reddening'. He has two collections of short stories: 'Some Will Not Sleep' (winner of the British Fantasy Award for Best Collection, 2017) and 'Hasty for the Dark'.

His novels, 'The Ritual', 'Last Days' and 'No One Gets Out Alive' were the winners of The August Derleth Award for Best Horror Novel. 'The Ritual' and 'Last Days' were also awarded Best in Category: Horror, by R.U.S.A. Several of his novels are currently in development for film and television, and in 2016 Imaginarium adapted 'The Ritual' into a feature film.

Adam also offers three free books to readers of horror: 'Cries from the Crypt', downloadable from his website, and 'Before You Sleep' and 'Before You Wake', available from major online retailers.

Adam lives in Devon, England. More information about the author and his books is available at: www.adamlgnevill.com

¹ George Cotronis, ‘Five Great Horror Novels’, *LitReactor*, 11 March 2016
<<https://litreactor.com/columns/five-great-folk-horror-novels>>; Tara Brady, ‘The Ritual: The Folk Horror Revival Continues, So Stay out of the Woods’, *Irish Times*, 10 October 2017
<<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/the-ritual-the-folk-horror-revival-continues-so-stay-out-of-the-woods-1.3249825>>.