

DARK HOUSE PRESS

Charlie Harmon

Fall 2014

CONTENTS

About Dark House Press	2
Why Dark House Press?	3
Review: <i>After the People Lights Have Gone Off</i>	4
Interview: Richard Thomas, Editor-in-Chief	8

Dark House Press

Web address: thedarkhousepress.com

Founded: 2013

Publisher: Victor David Giron

Editor-In-Chief: Richard Thomas

Senior Editor: Jacob S. Knabb

What they want: "Neo-noir, fantasy, science-fiction, horror, literary, magical realism, transgressive, crime, surrealism, and the grotesque. Everything we like has an elevated perspective, a literary voice, so whatever the genre, avoid the expected, the formulaic, the same old stories and voices. Memoir and poetry will be a very hard sale but we're not saying 100% no yet—the same for YA/NA. We are currently looking for short story collections of at least 40,000 words (with 10-20% unpublished) and novels that are around 60,000 words, no more than 80,000. Word count will never be a reason we reject a collection or novel, it's always about the writing. These are just guidelines."

What they don't want: "Erotica, romance, most nonfiction, and classic fantasy, classic science fiction, and classic horror (same old monsters and cheap thrills)."

Recent publications: *The New Black*, edited by Richard Thomas; *After the People Lights Have Gone Off*, by Stephen Graham Jones; *Echo Lake*, by Letitia Trent

Forthcoming: *The Doors You Mark Are Your Own*, by Okla Elliot and Raul Clement (March 2015); *Exigencies: A Neo-Noir Anthology*, edited by Richard Thomas (April 2015)

Why Dark House Press?

A series of coincidences led to my choice of Dark House Press. I read a short story called "When Swords Had Names" by Stephen Graham Jones when I was doing a market sheet for *The Dark Magazine*, and it was so fantastic that I was shocked that I'd never heard of him before. Literally the next day I visited the Publishing Lab to find a book to review, and Lab Scientist Fallon Gallagher said, "Curbside Splendor's genre imprint just put out a collection, if you think that'd be interesting." The author: Stephen Graham Jones. Serendipity? When the press report was assigned and I learned a book review is part of it, I looked up Dark House Press—to see if I could save myself some work—and was happy to discover that the editor-in-chief is Richard Thomas, who had visited Mort Castle's Horror Writing workshop last year. Thomas seemed thoughtful, open, and friendly, and I really like his work as both a writer and an editor, so I thought interviewing him would be interesting and informative, not to mention the added bonus that he might recognize my name if I ever submit anything to the press. I also liked Jones' collection enough that I didn't mind the idea of reading another book from the publisher, if it came to that (and it did).

Review: *After the People Lights Have Gone Off*

By Stephen Graham Jones

[Dark House Press, 2014. 326 pages. Paperback. \$15.95.]

Stephen Graham Jones' nineteenth book, *After the People Lights Have Gone Off*, gathers fifteen short stories ranging from an old cardboard box that can bring the dead back to life, to a teenage grocery bagger whose hoodie begins to consume him. The stories are almost staggering in their breadth of invention and depth of character; almost never familiar, even the ones that take on more familiar tropes like vampires and werewolves and haunted houses. The twists—and there are a lot of twists—are suitably unpredictable, almost always born of character rather than plot. There are many themes at play—alienation, the interplay of art and reality, and even math—but the most prevalent themes are love and loss, and the unexpected lengths to which they can drive people under the right, or wrong, circumstances.

The collection opens strong with "Thirteen," the tale of the Big Chief, a haunted movie theater whose films can cross over into the real world. If a kid can hold his or her breath for a full two minutes, then, "...playing dead like you are, it makes like a road, or a door, and the movie seeps in. ... Ask Marcus Tider. If you can talk to the dead, that is." It's an interesting premise bolstered by evocative phrases like, "He smiled his winning smile, his trustworthy smile, his smile with the sharp, sharp corners..." Used to describe the movie-dad the narrator's girlfriend pulls out of a romantic comedy as she gets into his car, it's the closest look we get at him, but it makes it abundantly clear that he's not up to anything good, even before we're informed that it was the last anyone ever saw of her. "Thirteen" is also assisted by the weary, weathered voice of a first-person narrator still trying to come to grips with that loss and how he reacted well into his middle age. "The Big Chief had just been waiting for somebody to burn it to the ground," he tells

us, but the voice makes it clear that doing so hasn't brought him any peace, not because it didn't bring his girlfriend back, but because of what he saw in the flames while he watched it burn.

The book closes strong with "Solve for X," which seems to start as Splatterpunk (stories with graphic violence, gore, and a mandate to go beyond what the mainstream would consider good taste) with a woman bound to a chair in a windowless room and a man watching from the shadows. Eventually he emerges, carrying a roll of duct tape and a utility knife, ready to play a game. It's bloody and squirmy and gross, yes, and Jones puts the reader in the woman's skin for every bit of sensation, from the large amount of cutting to the catheter he's installed, to the chill of the duct tape. "He keeps the tape in the refrigerator, she thinks," is the opening line. At first glance, it seems like torture porn, but then there's a twist that feels perfectly natural, even necessary to the story being told. "She can see his project now. The dim outline of it. There are right answers to his questions. And those answers, they're answers that she couldn't know." Though we're never told her name, Jones gives a clear sense of the woman's character through thoughts of her daughter, her observations of the man, and even her unasked questions about what he's doing. It's very apparent when the torture begins to change her because of that character establishment. Perhaps more importantly, the twist is so interesting and unexpected that it makes all the involuntary squirms worthwhile.

The collection isn't perfect, of course. In "The Spindly Man," a book group discussing Stephen King's "The Man in the Black Suit," is visited by a man in a black suit who knows things about each of them that he couldn't possibly know. Jones ups the ante by making the narrator a man recovering from a tragedy: he ran a stop sign and got t-boned by a truck with his son in the car. The book group is the last vestige of order in a life slowly spiraling out of his control, and so the story turns into a war of wills between him and the Spindly Man. It's a setup

with a lot of promise, and it works right up until the end. The book group ends, the Spindly Man leaves, and the narrator is straightening up when he sees orange, glowing eyes in the window's reflection. He thinks the Spindly Man has snuck back in, but then he realizes that it's him. *He's* been the devil all along. There's more to it than that, including some literary cross-pollination with the King story, and it's well told, but that's the heart of it. The collection's editor, Richard Thomas, is a proponent of "neo-noir," which can include surreal elements, and I think a few of Jones' stories, including "The Spindly Man," are more focused on tone and a completed character arc than a concrete resolution to their plots. It didn't always work for me, but even when it didn't, it seemed more a matter of stylistic preference than a failure of the writing.

The failures are actually a testament to the power of Jones's prose, to his ability to craft three-dimensional characters and generate infectiously dark moods, that the few predictable and/or inexplicable stories are still very readable, even enjoyable. Rather than being irritating, not quite following an ending makes you want to go back and read the story again, to see what you missed.

It's only natural to create associations between writers as you read, especially in collections, which often offer a representative sample of a writer's overall style and favorite themes. Jones is difficult to compare, though, and I think that's a big part of what makes the book so compelling. Stephen King might be a good comparison, in that they've both published multiple collections (despite the fact that short story collections seem to be dying off in the twenty-first century) and both lean toward horror as their primary genre of choice, but Jones's stories crackle where King's consider—punk rock vs. folk rock, for lack of a better comparison. Jones reminds me of other writers in some ways—Joe Abercrombie's attention to point of view and narrative voice and how they relate to character, or Joe R. Lansdale's willingness to break

with established genre and even storytelling conventions if a story calls for it—but the most apt comparison, I think, is Harlan Ellison. The similarity isn't stylistic or superficial. Ellison wrote, over a seventy year career, a whole host of short stories which, when firing on all cylinders, you can't imagine being written by anyone else. It's hard to imagine the stories in this book being written by anyone else, not without fundamentally altering what makes them work. Jones is writing for himself, first and foremost, and it shows on every page.

After the People Lights Have Gone Off is an incredibly engaging and imaginative collection—even its weakest stories are stronger than most. Stephen Graham Jones writes genre fiction with a literary bent, but it's more than that. Even when he's exploring well-worn tropes, his characters are so well-realized, his perspective so off-center, his voice so uniquely his, that it's like nothing you've ever read before. He's the best writer you've probably never heard of, and you should make an effort to change that.

Interview: Richard Thomas, Editor-in-Chief

Richard Thomas is the editor-in-chief of Dark House Press, not to mention a prolific writer in his own right. After getting a marketing degree and spending nearly twenty years as a graphic designer, he realized he wasn't happy with what he was doing and got into an MFA program at Murray State University. Since then, he's published over a hundred short stories, two novels, two collections (he recently signed a two-book deal with Random House Alibi), writes a weekly column on Lit Reactor called Storyville, and has done a series of book reviews and interviews for the Nervous Breakdown, all while continuing to work as a graphic designer. I interviewed Mr. Thomas via e-mail, and not only did I find his responses as interesting as I'd hoped, but he also spoke with a fair amount of candor about things like money, the behind-the-scenes workings of Curbside Splendor/Dark House Press, and even his favorite Stephen King books.

Charlie Harmon: What makes a novel/short story a Dark House Press story? (Credit where credit is due: I stole that question from you in one of your Storyville columns.) Whom do you consider your audience? What are they looking for? Are you focused more on expanding the press's reach or keeping your established audience happy?

Richard Thomas: It's all focused around neo-noir fiction, which simply means "new-black." We want contemporary dark fiction, stories that don't rely on formula or expectations, avoiding the same old monsters, tropes, characters, and settings. It's a mix of the best of literary and the best of genre fiction—smart, lyrical writing that creates tension and a desire to turn the page. I hope we can both keep our audience happy AND expand our reach. It's our first year, so there

have been mistakes, growing pains, but I hope we can keep going. So many exciting titles in 2015 and 2016.

CH: You mention in an interview on *Cease, Cows* that the position as editor-in-chief of Dark House came about as a result of pitching what became *The New Black* [DHP's premiere collection] to Victor Giron. What's your working relationship look like? How hands-on is he as publisher? What are your responsibilities as editor-in-chief?

RT: It's a core group of people at Curbside/DHP, with Victor overseeing everything. I work closely with Victor, as well as Jacob Knabb, Ben Tanzer, and Naomi Huffman. I couldn't do ANY of this without their support. And Nik Korpon, Alyssa Wong, and Carrie Gaffney have helped me with acquisitions and editing at DHP. We all have jobs to do, and we all help each other out. So far, so good.

CH: As editor-in-chief, have you had to make decisions, for the good of the company, that conflict with your personal aesthetic or stylistic preferences? Have you ever rejected a story, but wished you had the time to help that writer tighten it up?

RT: I've definitely rejected brilliant novels and stories that didn't fit our aesthetic. Sometimes I'd bounce those titles off other editors, like Nik or Alyssa. Ultimately it's my call. It's tough. Very hard to reject your friends, some repeatedly. But I have a vision, and the voices I want have a certain "something" that I'm looking for. If it's too old school, too expected, the language too familiar—then I pass. The anthologies are hard to work on, but I really love putting them out. Picking novels and collections, those are even harder. You really have to love them. We got probably 400 submissions for *Exigencies*, and took twenty-three stories. At least 100 novels and

collections were submitted as well. I'm also starting to wonder if we can take on any more debut authors, or short story collections *At All*, since those sales aren't typically as good as an established novelist. Only time will tell. I have had to keep business concerns in mind, sometimes trumping art, but I'm trying really hard to find that sweet spot between them.

CH: You implied in an interview with *Radical News* that you tend to keep your day job and your creative life separate, focusing on work and your family on the weekdays and then scrambling on the weekends to catch up with writing and editing. Is that the way for the rest of the staff? Does everyone work from home whenever they can find the time? Does the company function like a Rube Goldberg machine, where everyone has a clearly delineated function, or is it more holistic, with people picking up slack as it becomes necessary?

RT: That sounds about right, especially the Rube Goldberg aspect. But it's also holistic at times. I tend to take on a lot at DHP, and then I delegate as needed. Sometimes I'm between day gigs and I'll write. I'm hoping to make that transition to only writing, editing, teaching and publishing, but I'm not quite there yet.

CH: Where did neo-noir come from? I've read *Staring into the Abyss* and *The New Black* (both of which are fantastic collections, by the way) and there are a lot of stylistic and thematic similarities (thoughtful, even distant narrative voices, a focus on strong imagery and internality over action and dialogue, strong themes of family and loss and alienation, among others). How much of that is neo-noir influencing your tastes and interests, and how much of that is you influencing what it means to be neo-noir?

RT: For me, neo-noir came out of films I enjoyed, everything from “Blade Runner” to “Memento” to “Mulholland Drive,” as well as the authors I was reading post-Palahniuk in 2008, such as Will Christopher Baer, Craig Clevenger, and Stephen Graham Jones. I love the mix of dark, strange, and painful paired with loving, hopeful and trusting. The mix of language and setting, atmosphere, and symbolism. I don’t know if I’ve influenced anybody, but it’s always nice to hear people say they love the mix of literary and horror in my fiction, or whatever genre I’m writing. I’m no Cormac McCarthy, but I hope to bring something original to the page, every time I sit down.

CH: There's quite a bit of crossover between the writers appearing in *The New Black* and the writers you frequently mention in Storyville as people you admire—Matt Bell, Roxane Gay, Kyle Minor, and Craig Davidson in "Ten Awesome Authors You've Never Heard Of," for instance—and all of the stories in *The New Black* were published elsewhere first. Can you walk us through the process of selecting and contracting stories for the book? Were there any writers/stories you really wanted but were unable to get?

RT: There are definitely authors that I’ve read in the past, and continue to read. Helps if they’re still writing, of course. Nothing new from Baer or Clevenger in years, but [Stephen Graham Jones] is a machine, and a true inspiration. This [table of contents] was simply me looking at all of the books that I’d read over the past couple of years, the ones I reviewed at *the Nervous Breakdown*, as well as any other authors that heavily influenced my writing. Some stories just leaped out at me, I knew I wanted them, like Stephen’s. I never could get to Baer, sadly, even through his agent. He’s disappeared himself. Couldn’t get to Dennis Lehane, either. And William

Gay passed away, and I couldn't get permission from his family for "The Paperhanger" or it'd be in *TNB* for sure. But really, those are the only three that I was upset about.

CH: I notice that *The New Black* begins with Stephen Graham Jones and ends with Brian Evenson, two of the biggest names in the collection, and certainly two very strong stories. Can you give us any insight into how you decide upon the order in which the stories appear in the book?

RT: I do have a system. I often start and finish with two of my favorites, you are correct there. I also try to put in a few "tent poles," other stories I loved as a means to "hold up the collection." But really, for *TNB*, there were no weak stories. It's like, do you want this cold beer or that cold beer, pepperoni or sausage—it's all good. I do try to mix up men and women, long and short, even topics, if there are two stories about cameras, for instance (as in *Exigencies*) I keep them apart. Tried to separate the horror from the fantastic from the Southern gothic, mix it all up. When I have it set, I read through and try to imagine the reactions, and then figure out if the rollercoaster is a good ride, up and down, ending with a bang. It's a science, but not an exact one, in my opinion.

CH: Speaking of Stephen Graham Jones, it's impossible to engage with your interviews or writing on writing for very long without seeing him brought up—did you seek him out in order to do the collection? How did you select the stories? Can you walk us through *that* process?

RT: Stephen really is a master, somebody I've known for several years now, and consider my friend. He's been a bit of an unofficial mentor to me, too. I knew I wanted to approach him about a novel or collection at DHP, I knew that from day one. Couldn't get a novel, timing and all, but

he said he had a collection I was welcome to. He sent me what he had, we removed one or two, a couple got snatched up by other anthologies or presses, and we lost them (I'm talking about original stories here, as there are two in this collection). In the end, I trusted that he would put together the right mix. I learned a lot editing this collection. It's really pretty amazing, a special kind of storytelling and horror that I really think fits perfectly at DHP. I'm still trying to get a novel from him. Hopefully that will happen soon, too!

CH: To round it out—can you walk us through the process for screening unsolicited novel manuscripts? Was *Echo Lake* or *The Doors You Mark Are Your Own* an unsolicited manuscript? Who reads your slush?

RT: Actually, both of those particular titles were already at DHP when I came in. I can't take the credit on those, but I did approve them both, and I support them both. *Doors* is so smart, way over my head, but so layered and intense. And *Echo Lake* was under consideration, and I said, yes, when I read it, God yes. Letitia [Trent], you can hear her poet voice come through, an amazing book. I read all of our slush. The books that aren't a good fit, those are easy, I can read a page, a chapter, and reject it. It's the ones that are good, that you're trying to figure out if they're great—those are tricky. You want something special. You have to read those all the way through. We're getting more and more agented submissions, and I do give them a closer look, because they've already been "pre-screened" in some ways. If I get close, I'll bounce a novel off of Nik, or Alyssa, ask one, or both, to read the first fifty pages. If they love it, I'll ask them to read more. I think I've only had them both read a few novels in their entirety. And I think we signed both of those. I try to strike a balance, mixing up novels, so we don't do horror, horror,

horror, but more like crime, horror, magical realism. I also want to make sure I like the author, that we can get along, because it's a very intimate relationship. No room for divas or jerks.

CH: I used to run a small bookstore, and whenever I went to American Booksellers Association conferences, a lot of the smaller presses would give the impression that the current state of the publishing industry is so lopsided and unhealthy that they were one semi-disastrous release away from going under. Can you weigh in on that idea, or just the health of independent publishing in general? Where do you see Dark House Press in ten years?

RT: That's not inaccurate, but it's not the entire story, either. Somewhere in-between I think. We're doing well, critically, but our sales could be better. We haven't even been open a year, yet, as far as actual books on the shelves, but I'd love to have sold out our first three print runs by now. It's tough being new. There is a lot of money invested up front for printing, design, etc.—which is why many presses are [print-on-demand](we aren't). I think it's a great time for writing and publishing, but I also see a lot of people closing up shop. In ten years? I hope we're just around—it's so risky. That's the first goal. We'll either be dead or flourishing, that's my thought. And if we're flourishing, I know we'll still be publishing a mix of anthologies, collections and novels, and a wide variety of neo-noir. We have great design, and amazing authors, it's just a matter of finding “our people” out there in the world.

CH: After looking over your Storyville columns on *LitReactor* and the abundance of interviews you've done, asking something you've never heard before seems more and more unlikely. And so, in honor of my spirit guide, James T. Kirk, I'm going to cheat: is there a question you're surprised no one has ever asked you?

RT: Great question. People never ask about the money. Which, I guess I understand, it can be taken as rude, but it's got to be on everyone's mind. I started out giving away my stories (not that I didn't aim for pro-paying markets) and these days I rarely publish anywhere unless I get paid—five cents a word being the going rate for stories. Which, for a 4,000-word story, is \$200. Nice little bonus if it's a hobby, not great as a career unless you publish a story every other day. I think my best year was fifteen stories. I was out in Los Angeles with Richard Lange and Antonia Crane for *The New Black* release party and he told me about a \$70,000 check for the film rights for his book, *Angel Baby*, and then another check when the movie started filming for \$700,000. He called it his “fuck you money.” Which I thought was funny, but very accurate. He's essentially bought himself some time, to go out and do it all again. You can make a living writing short stories, but you probably have to edit, teach, and write novels too. You can get a small advance (say \$2,000-5,000) at a lot of small presses, but the six-figure advances for novels are very hard to get. But, you have to hone your skills, and I think short stories are a great way to do that. And you have to write the novel before you can find an agent, before you can sell it to a press, before you can sell those film rights. I see more and more friends getting onto television, too, with “The Walking Dead,” “True Detective,” and “The Leftovers.” It's all very exciting.

CH: I'm surprised that in all your mentions of Stephen King as a major influence, no one ever asked: what's your favorite Stephen King book?

RT: If I had to pick one book, it's probably *The Stand*. A collection? Possibly *Night Shift*. My favorite books of his are probably *The Stand*, *It*, *The Shining*, *Pet Sematary*, *The Long Walk*, *Dead Zone* and *The Dark Tower* series.

CH: Finally, speaking as the editor of a small press that will begin accepting unsolicited submissions again sometime in the relatively near future, do you have any advice for emerging authors?

RT: Be who you are, and write the stories that you want to tell. Be passionate about it, and leave it all on the page—blood, sweat, tears, all of it. When I finished *Disintegration* I cried. I broke down and cried. Why? Because I'd been that guy for two years. I went through it all, the loss and violence and hope, and I survived. It was intense. But that's the only way I can do it. Read—read the authors you love, no matter the genre. Study all of the masters in whatever genre you're in, too—if it's horror, you better know King, Straub, Ketchum, and Barker, just to name a few. And realize it takes time to find your voice, to break through. I've had stories that were rejected forty times still land in elite magazines. I'm shopping one now that has been rejected eighty times, but when you're only submitting to markets with a 1% acceptance rate, what do you expect? Don't give up. Surround yourself with a network of friends and peers that will be honest, but also kind. And then go for it.