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James Herbert



Rats! His mind screamed the words. Rats eating me alive! God, God help me.

It was simple, yet powerful words, like those, which kept people reading 'The Rats' by James Herbert in 1974. His work was peppered with descriptive action, given at the moment, just as those huge teeth sank in or the claws raked at the skin, it's why he was adored the world over

¹James Herbert was not only Britain's number one bestselling writer of chiller fiction, a position he held ever since publication of his first novel, but was also

one of our greatest popular novelists. Widely imitated and hugely influential, his twenty-three novels have sold more than fifty-four million copies worldwide, and have been translated into over thirty languages, including Russian and Chinese. In 2010, he was made the Grand Master of Horror by the World Horror Convention and was also awarded an OBE by the Queen for services to literature. His final novel was *Ash*. James Herbert died in March 2013.

Born in London, Herbert was the son of Herbert Herbert, a stall-holder at London's Brick Lane Market. He attended a Catholic school in Bethnal Green called Our Lady of the Assumption, then aged 11 won a scholarship to St Aloysius Grammar School in Highgate. He left school at 15 and studied at Hornsey College of Art, joining the art department of John Collings, a small advertising agency. He left the agency to join Charles Barker Advertising where he worked as art director and then group head.

²Herbert lived in Woodmancote, near Henfield in West Sussex. He had two brothers: Peter, a retired market trader and John, an insurance broker. Herbert would write his drafts in longhand on "jumbo pads". In 1979 Herbert had to pay damages when it was ruled that he had based part of his novel *The Spear* on the work of another writer, *The Spear of Destiny* by Trevor Ravenscroft. In 2010 Herbert was honoured with the World Horror Convention Grand Master Award, presented to him by Stephen King. Later the same year he was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in the 2010 Birthday Honours, presented by Prince Charles.

On 20 March 2013, Herbert died suddenly at his home in Sussex at the age of 69. No cause of death was given but a spokeswoman for the publisher said he had not been ill. He is survived by his wife, Eileen, and three daughters. His estate was valued at £8.3 million.

¹ panmacmillan.com

² Wikipedia

Work

His first two books, *The Rats* and *The Fog*, were disaster novels with man-eating giant black rats in the first and an accidentally released chemical weapon in the second. The first print run of *The Rats* (100,000 copies) sold out in three weeks. Herbert wrote three sequels to *The Rats*: *Lair*, which deals with a second outbreak of the mutants, this time in the countryside around Epping Forest rather than in the first book's London slums; in *Domain*, a nuclear war means that the rats have become the dominant species in a devastated city; the third sequel, the graphic novel *The City*, is an adventure set in the post-nuclear future.

With his third novel, the ghost story *The Survivor*, Herbert used supernatural horror rather than the science fiction horror of his first two books.

In *Shrine*, he explored his Roman Catholic heritage with the story of an apparent miracle which turns out to be something much more sinister. *Haunted*, the story of a skeptical paranormal investigator taunted by malicious ghosts, began life as a screenplay for the BBC, though this was not the screenplay used in the eventual film version. Its sequels were *The Ghosts of Sleath* and *Ash*.

Others of Herbert's books, such as *Moon*, *Sepulcher* and *Portent*, are structured as thrillers and include espionage and detective story elements along with the supernatural. *The Jonah* is in large part the story of a police investigation, albeit by a policeman whose life is overshadowed by a supernatural presence.

The Spear deals with a neo-Nazi cult in Britain and an international conspiracy which includes a right-wing US general and an arms dealer.

'48 is an alternative history novel set in 1948 in which the Second World War ended with the release of a devastating plague by the defeated Hitler and, like *The Spear*, features British characters who sympathise with the Nazis.

Others narrates the story of a physically deformed private detective. Herbert had previously tackled the theme of reincarnation in his fourth novel, *Fluke*, the story of a dog who somehow remembers his previous life as a human being. Rumbo, one of the characters from *Fluke* also turns up in *The Magic Cottage*. *Once...* includes another reference to the character of Rumbo (along with an in-joke of elven folk having names of reversed titles of Herbert's previous novels; 'Hanoj', 'Niamod', 'Noom' etc.).

Nobody True continues the theme of life after death, being narrated by a ghost whose investigation of his own death results in the destruction of his illusions about his life. Herbert described *Creed* as his *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. The character Joe Creed is a cynical, sleazy paparazzo who is drawn into a plot involving fed-up and underappreciated monsters.

The novel *The Secret of Crickleley Hall*, originally scheduled for release in April 2006, was eventually released in October. A long novel about a haunted country house in England, it examined the relationship between religious zealotry and child abuse. One of the characters in this novel is named after a real person, who won the honour by having the winning bid in the 2004 BBC Radio 2 *Children in Need* Auction.

Various biographical and critical pieces by and about Herbert have been collected in *James Herbert: By Horror Haunted*, edited by Stephen Jones, and also in *James Herbert – Devil in the Dark*, written by Craig Cabell.

Herbert released a new novel virtually every year from 1974 to 1988, wrote six novels during the 1990s and released three new works in the 2000s. "I am very insecure about being a writer", he stated in the book *Faces of Fear*. "I don't understand why I am so successful. And the longer I stay that way, the better it's going to be, because that's what keeps me on the edge, striving if you like."

Herbert's final novel has an eerie political edge. *Ash* imagines Princess Diana and her secret son as well as Lord Lucan, Colonel Gaddafi and Robert Maxwell living together in a Scottish castle.

Reception

"Herbert was by no means literary, but his work had a raw urgency," said Stephen King. "His best novels, *The Rats* and *The Fog*, had the effect of Mike Tyson in his championship days: no finesse, all crude power. Those books were best sellers because many readers (including me) were too horrified to put them down."

"There are few things I would like to do less than lie under a cloudy night sky while someone read aloud the more vivid passages of 'Moon,'" Andrew Postman wrote in *The New York Times Book Review*. "In the thriller genre, do recommendations come any higher?"

HOMAGE TO HORROR - ADAM NEVILL DISCUSSES JAMES HERBERT³

There was a time when one writer more than any other seemed to capture the darker side of the imaginations of a generation of young male readers, and on a vast scale too. A writer that dealt with the taboo, pushed boundaries, felt dangerous to read, was scorned by the consensus of literary respectability, but whose name was a byword for action, thrills, and sensational storytelling. In previous decades occult horror writer Dennis Wheatley, and military action writer Sven Hassel, who wrote of the explicit adventures of an SS penal regiment, occupied this mantle and became the biggest selling authors of their respective eras. Their novels were hidden in school desks and their names carried a unique charge of static electricity and excitement.

James Herbert was probably the next British writer who became as popular in the same way, with a similar reputation, because his books conducted the same edgy electrical force into another generation of readers. But his readership stayed with him and grew and renewed itself over four decades, something that Hassel and Wheatley were denied. James Herbert didn't go out of print, ever. The literary notoriety of *The Rats* and *The Fog*, the subversive and anti-establishment tones, the gruesome scenes, not only endured, but have been further embellished by thrillers and supernatural mysteries by a writer who was adept at causing a visceral discomfort in readers, that was never contrived and seemed to be what that writer needed to express.

James Herbert also seemed to be the major precursor to a new approach to horror fiction in the golden age of the mass market blockbuster novel. Like Stephen King in America, no one was writing horror quite like this before. The characters were often ordinary people in ordinary circumstances

³ panmacmillan.com

pitted against extraordinary forces, that could be natural or unnatural depending upon the story, be it science fiction thriller or supernatural horror. A kind of blue collar horror that encompassed the monstrous in the everyday, and was written in the idioms of regular language, a more accessible discourse unchained from an educated middle class voice. In fact, quiz any literate adult in Britain about horror novels, and the two author names you will hear straight away, and nearly every time too, to this day, are those of Stephen King and James Herbert. The two most enduringly popular horror authors in the Anglosphere.

They were pivotal in popularising the modern, popular, multi-plot story-driven structure of mass market novels in horror. They may have made horror novels bigger, the plots more complex, more heavily researched, the themes and ideas more contemporary with less reliance upon traditional tropes; they widened its social scope and the ideas the field could embrace, and probably broke the genre free from its historical reliance upon the short story collection. What also strikes me as similar between the two writers, is just how much they care about their craft.

Having heard James Herbert speak about his life, as well as other major figures in British post war horror fiction – the alumnus of Ramsey Campbell, Brian Lumley, Graham Masterton, Clive Barker – something else struck me about this field. Not only do each of these writers have a unique voice, purpose and approach, as well as having created impressive bodies of work, whether horror is in favour with publishers or not, but these authors also all appear to come from ordinary backgrounds (as do most horror authors I have met who have emerged since the nineties). Before the sixties, this seemed unusual in the field. Or at least anything based beyond thoroughly educated middle class characters, circumstances and settings could feel rare. Following this thought, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, H. P. Lovecraft (and I suspect Oliver Onions), all knew terrible privations at one time or another in their lives, and I wonder if that is why they tended to write some of the most affecting and memorable horror fiction. Which also makes me wonder if modern horror writers can be called the angry young men and women in post-sixties Britain, with James Herbert chief among them at the beginning of his career?

And what's to be applauded in an age of generic, fleet following fiction genres, that publishing and the book trade so often eagerly underwrites, is that James Herbert achieved so much on his own terms and in his own way. Respect.



James Herbert OBE 1943 - 2013

List of works

Novels

The Rats (1974)
The Fog (1975)
The Survivor (1976)
Fluke (1977)
The Spear (1978)
Lair (1979)
The Dark (1980)
The Jonah (1981)
Shrine (1983)
Domain (1984)
Moon (1985)
The Magic Cottage (1986)
Sepulchre (1987)
Haunted (1988)
Creed (1990)
Portent (1992)
The Ghosts of Sleath (1994)
'48 (1996)
Others (1999)
Once (2001)
Nobody True (2003)
The Secret of Crickley Hall
(2006)
Ash (2012)

Graphic novels

The City (1993)

Non-fiction

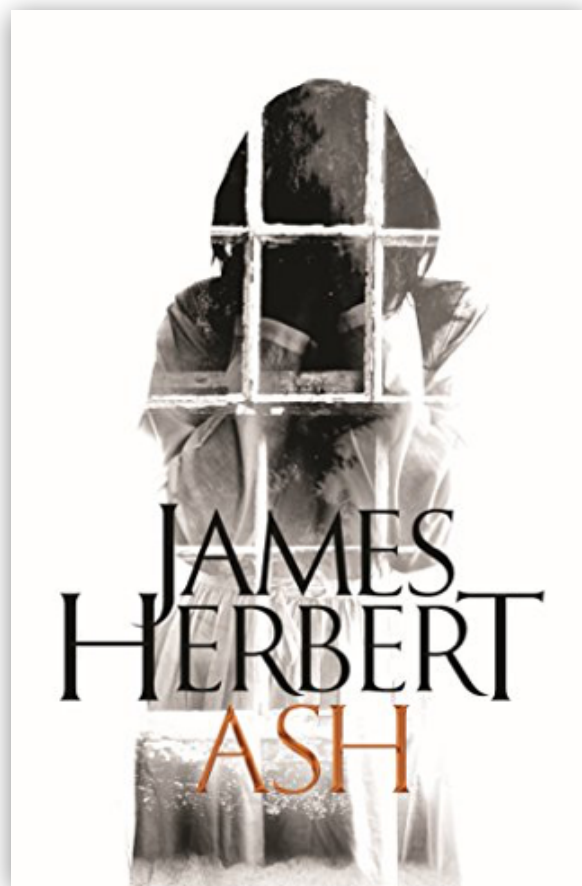
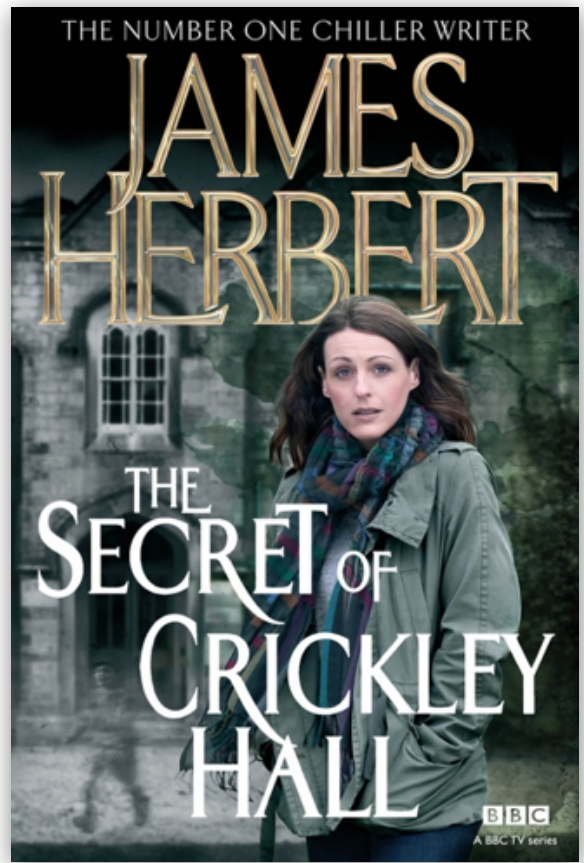
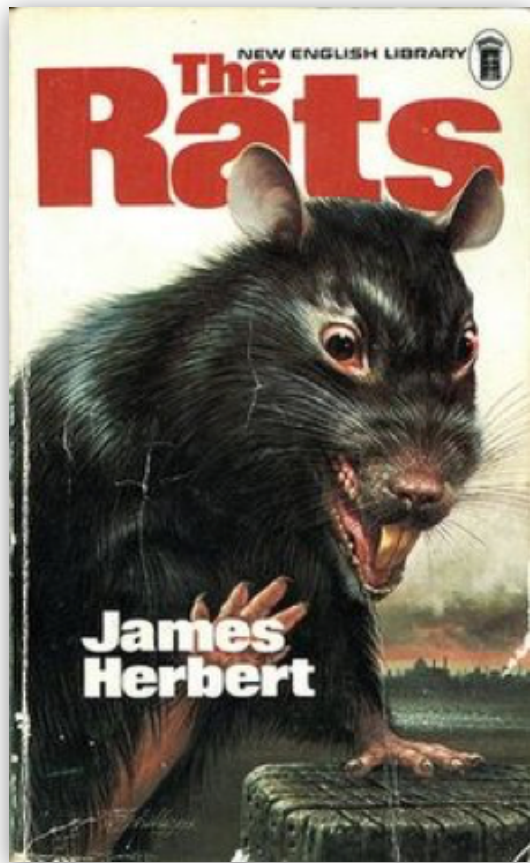
By Horror Haunted (1992)
James Herbert's Dark Places (1993)

Short stories

"*Maurice and Mog*"
"Breakfast"
"Halloween's Child"
"They Don't Like Us"
"Extinct"
"Cora's Needs"

Adaptations

The Survivor (1981 film)
Deadly Eyes (1982 film adapted from *The Rats*)
The Rats (1985 computer game for the Commodore 64
and Sinclair Spectrum)
Fluke (1995 film)
Haunted (1995 film)
The Magic Cottage (1998 BBC Radio 4 Dramatisation)
The Secret of Crickley Hall (2012 three-part BBC One
television serial)





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