

A CONVERSATION WITH PETER STRAUB

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I MET PETER STRAUB ONE WINDSWEPT OCTOBER DAY in Copenhagen, Denmark. Despite his Nordic ancestry, this was Straub's first visit to Scandinavia, and on the occasion, he had brought along his charming wife Susan and a handful of books. (Four novels for a five-day journey: now *that's* a writer's luggage!) The occasion: a Danish publishing house is unleashing *Ghost Story*, *lost boy lost girl*, and *In the Night Room* on the Danish reading public, and so they invited Straub to the country for interviews and a reading.

As a representative of Danish horror fandom, I was granted an interview with this giant, this *icon* of horror, a man who has convinced me to keep the light burning during numerous sweat-drenched nights and of whose work I have been an admirer for half my life.

Listening to Peter Straub is fascinating. He opens his mouth, and out tumble words and ideas, phrasings and observations that most intellectuals would be thrilled to come up with upon days of laborious writing. Of course, many of Straub's ideas are the result of years of careful thinking, and beyond doubt Straub is a careful, fiercely intelligent writer. And in what follows, he shares with us some of his insightful observations on horror fiction.

Peter Straub is one of those writers who give horror a good name. His stories are clever and multi-layered, and yet he understands that the reader cannot be expected to do all the labour. The stories have to work, too; they have to be interesting, suspenseful. They have to pay you back. To Straub, fear is not a four-letter-word, and neither is it an idle part of an aesthetic mode. Rather, fear and its less-than-pleasant relatives are vital components of a full comprehension of the human condition. And that is exactly what Straub's horror offers: a key to experience and to recognition. As he argues, horror is about genuine, actual experience, about opening your eyes to the dark contingencies of the universe. And that right there is pay-back, don't you agree?

Cemetery Dance: Do you read *Cemetery Dance*?

Peter Straub: Sure, I subscribe to *Cemetery Dance*, and I know Rich Chizmar, its editor. I've probably subscribed since the beginning.

CD: Why are people attracted to horror?

PS: Well, there are a million answers. One would be that people desire extremity of circumstance in perfect safety, so that they can feel all sorts of dangerous and despairing and frightening moments without in the least being in danger. That's okay, and it's undoubtedly true, but it's very closely aligned to a point of view of genre writing that I instinctively dislike, which is that its point is to allow one to escape from the circumstances and situations and feelings of daily life. That's a very easy position to hold, and many writers that I know take that position. But it seems so reductive to me. In my case, I think it's far more about engagement. About actual experience, instead of simulated, false experience. I think it's about discovery. This sounds very pretentious, I think, but it's about discovering one's ability to feel in certain ways, and deepening and widening one's emotional experience by that means.

It took me a while to arrive at this position, and a purist example of it is probably in *The Throat*, where I really knew that I was dealing with grief. There is the grief of the death of a remarkable woman, and the grief over the encroaching Alzheimer's disease of a distinguished older man. And one is supposed to feel these things very deeply, one is also supposed to feel that man's grief over the loss of his daughter, and I thought I did that well. Also all the stuff that's purely autobiographical to me, that comes from grief for one's self, or a version of oneself that had been violently killed early on in life [*presumably Straub is referring to being hit and almost killed by a car when he was seven years old*].

Historically, people have enjoyed the Gothic for a long, long time, and it does give one a kind of surreptitious thrill, it's titillating, but at its best there is an undercurrent of unease. And unease is never not worth experiencing, I think. Unease is a genuinely perceptive, accurate response to the underlying structures of the universe. I don't think we're safe, I don't think the world cares about us...

CD: Is that a scientific point of view, or is it a personal...

PS: I think it's just a realistic, moral point of view—that we don't understand everything, and if one feels perfectly confident and at home in the world, one is to some extent fooling oneself.

CD: You write about the supernatural. Why does it persist this engagement with or the fascination of the supernatural—

why does it continue to attract people in the form of supernatural fiction?

PS: I've been asked that question since I started publishing these kinds of books, in other words since about 1975, and once an interviewer from a Scottish newspaper who was hostile to me said, "Why do you expect people to believe in these matters that are actually medieval, in this belief structure that the Enlightenment did away with?" And he didn't like my answer, and in fact he made fun of it in the piece he wrote. What occurred to me, and what I still think is a good answer, is that I probably don't believe in anything supernatural, although I kind of do, but my *imagination* really believes in it. And imagination is a powerful force that ought to be always reckoned with, ought to be always encouraged, since it creates a version of reality which should be taken seriously, if only for the insight it gives one into oneself. But it also reflects something at large, something at work in the actual world. And when we're talking about the supernatural, I think we're talking about our apprehension that there is more than we can see, that the visible world is not the whole story, that the world analyzed and described by physics, even the most advanced form physics, isn't the complete answer. We know within us, somewhere at a very deep level, that there is simply more, and the supernatural comes out of that apprehension, I think.

CD: So supernatural stories kind of play on that...

PS: Yeah, there's a little part of us that's waiting to believe in that, and maybe not literally, but if you are truly affected by some frightening book, and you walk outside, you see the world in a different way. The same is true of a very, very good film, or of a great painting: You walk outside and you say, "Oh my God, now I see what he was talking about, I see where Vermeer got that sky." It's the same thing from dealing with some portrayal of an impersonal evil; you could look into a shadow in an alley and say, "Well, it could be there." And all it means is that your imagination has been awakened to another set of possibilities.

CD: Is it good to have your imagination awakened to dark and evil and scary possibilities?

PS: Absolutely. Sure.

CD: Because it prepares you...

PS: It prepares you for a more comprehensive view of the world.

CD: So you don't have a problem with the view that horror fiction is attractive because it induces a thrill? You think that's part of the attraction of the genre?

PS: Yeah, I think that's perfectly okay, and I don't see why anybody would have a problem with it. What I do have a problem with is people that say it's immoral and that encourages bad behaviour. Stephen King withdrew a very early book of his called *Rage*, which was about a boy who arms himself and goes into

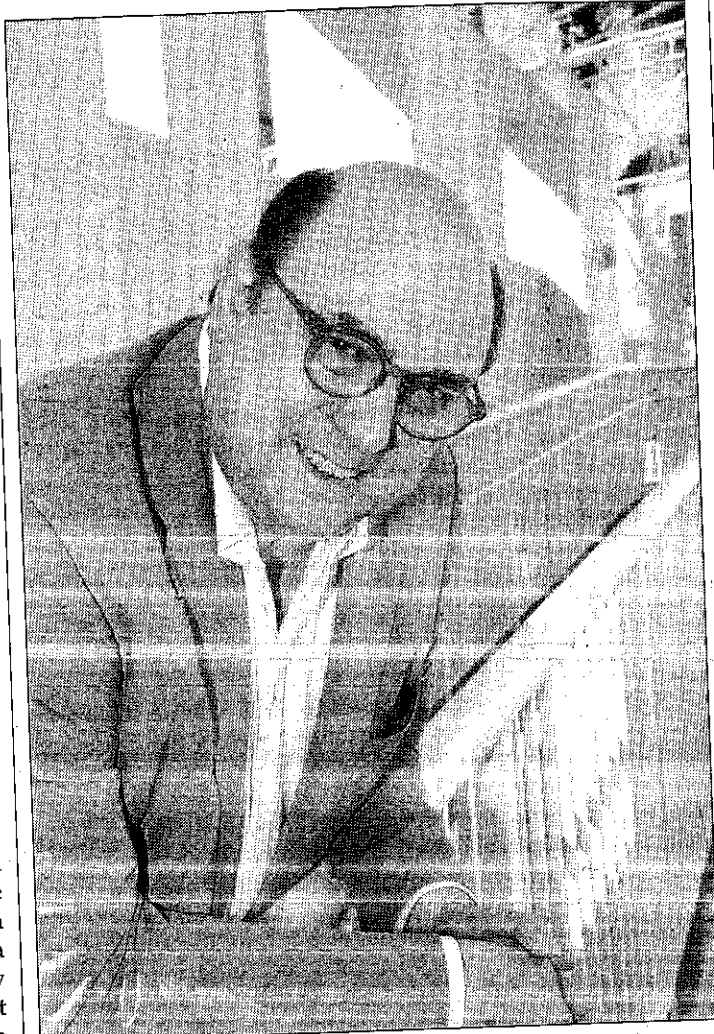


Photo by Beth Gwinn

his high school classroom and shoots people. It was a very good book, and he wrote it in his twenties—it's amazingly well-written for that—and there was one boy who did that. I've never felt that anybody who encourages a single person to go out and do something horrible really has much blame for it. The fault is in the poor person who is so deluded that he thought he must act in that way. And perhaps Steve was a little rash in withdrawing the book, but he wanted to give the appearance of responsibility. And probably in some very minor degree he did feel responsible because the kid quoted it to him.

However, American assassins are forever holding up a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*. You know? Over and over and over. And they're just saying, they're holding the gun and Salinger's book, and when the cops say, "Why did you do it," they point at the book and say, "Read *that* and you'll understand." I don't think J. D. Salinger ever felt a moment's guilt over the death of John Lennon, for example. 'Cause he's not responsible.

CD: Did you ever have an idea which you felt was too horrible, too disturbing... maybe not for your potential readers, but for yourself?

PS: No, I never have.