

## ALPENHOUSE APPARITIONS' POWERS OF BOOK DESIGN

*An established American fine press dares to attempt resurrecting the classic ghost story with contemporary authors. Sutton Hoo Press publisher Chad Oness and partner Boyd White talk to Amphora about their new imprint, Alpenhouse Apparitions.*

DESPITE BEING AN award-winning designer, letterpress printer and publisher of contemporary poetry, Sutton Hoo Press proprietor Chad Oness had a potentially career-ruining secret: along with Boyd White, a friend from their student days at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Oness had a fondness for classic Victorian ghost stories. There's always been a whiff of The Other among fine press publishers when it came to so-called genre publishing, particularly in the seamy corners of ghost stories or (worse) horror. Despite this prejudice, last year Oness and White established

### THE DECORATIONS



A Christmas story by Ramsey Campbell  
with engravings by Ladislav Hanka  
2005 Alpenhouse Apparitions

Alpenhouse Apparitions, "dedicated to printing the best supernatural and other genre fiction in hand-made letterpress editions." The imprint's first book set the bar high: *The Decorations* features a new story by Ramsey Campbell and 11 full-page wood engravings by Ladislav Hanka.

Oness and his wife Elizabeth live with their son in Winona, Minnesota, where she is a professor of English at the state university. Oness's interest in the dark arts began while a student at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and he learned the craft as an apprentice at the famed Winhover Press of K.K. Merkur. Over the past 15 years Sutton Hoo Press has established itself as a significant publisher of contemporary poetry issued in deluxe letterpress limited editions. Over the years Sutton Hoo's list of authors published has grown to include Gary Young, Charles Wright, Philip Levine, Maurya Simon and Peter Everwine.

While Oness brings the publishing and design talent to Alpenhouse, it is White who drives the press's editorial di-

rection. Based in Baltimore, White is the senior coordinator for curriculum for Summer Academic Programs at the Johns Hopkins University's Center for Talented Youth. Growing up he read contemporary writers of horror and "weird" fiction, but it was only in the past decade that he became a fan (and avid collector) of classic ghost stories and vintage supernatural fiction. When the two old college friends were looking for an opportunity to collaborate on a publishing project, Oness asked if White thought collectors and readers of the genre would be interested in fine press editions of contemporary ghost stories...



*What convinced you there would be a role or market for Alpenhouse Apparitions? Do you see the books going primarily to Sutton Hoo's established collectors (who may well not be established fans of ghost stories) or to fans of contemporary ghost/weird fiction (who may not be aficionados of the book arts)?*

CHAD: This is an excellent question, and one which answers itself beautifully. In the end, I am hoping for a crossover clientele. At this point in my bookmaking career, there are several collectors who seek out books that are produced by or at Sutton Hoo Press. Many of those collectors added *The Decorations* to their collections. Many of them wrote to me, mentioning that they liked the title very much, and they noted the "literary" qualities of the piece as well as the design and execution of the book itself. I'm hoping that readers within the genre, who might not be as familiar with the powers of book design, might become so with our series, and find the value of the reading experience importantly enhanced—as well as glory in the object of the book with its attendant print illustrations. Of course, we are not only interested in making fine books, but in the mission of editing literature. We hope our standards for the writing will be finally looked upon as important.

BOYD: As Chad suggests, he and I aren't yet convinced that there is a market for Alpenhouse Apparitions, but we are hoping that there will be. When Chad first approached me about this project three years ago, his primary goal was for us to work on a collaborative project together, one that would stimulate his interests as a designer and publisher of fine press books. We tossed around a number of ideas, and because Chad knew of my love for supernatural fiction, he asked if I thought collectors and readers of the genre would be interested in fine press editions of contemporary ghost stories. I told him that I thought this would be the case, and now that we have published Ramsey

Campbell's *The Decorations* and are working on a second title, we are both hopeful that my hunch will turn out to be right.

What we are doing with Alpenhouse is truly unique. There are a number of specialty presses that focus on publishing contemporary horror fiction in signed limited editions that are essentially trade books with tipped-in limitation sheets. Cemetery Dance and Subterranean Press come to mind immediately. In addition, there are a number of specialty publishers who focus on reissuing or rediscovering vintage supernatural material. Of course, Ash-Tree Press is the leader among a group that also includes Tartarus Press, Sarob Press and Midnight House. None of these specialty publishers, however, does anything like Chad and I are attempting to do, which is to design an entire fine press book around a single supernatural short story written specifically for our imprint. If you look at some of the classics of vintage supernatural fiction from the Victorian and Edwardian periods, you will notice that trade publishers like Downey, Methuen, and Pearson published some very beautiful books with elaborately embossed or stamped boards and gilt page edges; some often featured wonderful interior illustrations.

This kind of attention to detail and design is what Chad and I are aiming for with our Alpenhouse titles. What we're doing is an homage to books from the periods I've just mentioned. Consider the overall look of Campbell's *The Decorations*—the marbled boards, the engravings by Ladislav Hanka, the gilt stamping on the spine, the Johannot paper, the illustrated title page, the tri-fold. I reasoned that if collectors of vintage supernatural fiction are willing to spend thousands of dollars on rare short story collections, then they might also be willing to spend several hundred dollars on fine press books that feature some of the best writing that contemporary practitioners of the ghost story or weird tale might have to offer. Essentially, Chad and I are trying to





find an audience among not only collectors of fine press books but also collectors and readers of vintage supernatural works and the kind of trade books published by specialty publishers like Ash-Tree Press.

*Why ghost stories? How and when did you start reading them, and why did you want to start publishing new ones?*

BOYD: I first came to supernatural fiction like most members of my generation through the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Ray Bradbury and Stephen King. As an adolescent, Bradbury's *The October Country* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* made enormous impressions on me, as did the best Poe and King stories like "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Jerusalem's Lot." In high school, I discovered H. P. Lovecraft, and I began collecting Arkham House books by Lovecraft's circle, writers like Clark Ashton Smith and Frank Belknap Long.

I didn't become an avid reader of classic ghost stories until the late 1990s when I learned of Ash-Tree Press and Ghost Story Press. I immediately began buying as many of their titles as I could, and I soon fell in love with the writers who are considered to be the giants of the Victorian and Edwardian ghost story—M. R. James, Oliver Onions,

*Michigan artist Ladislav Hanka has master's degrees in both printmaking and zoology. He currently works full-time as an artist creating wood engravings and etchings "based in a sense of awe before nature; the desire to know and record it intimately and to do the creation honour."*

H. R. Wakefield, Vernon Lee, J. H. Riddell and J. S. Le Fanu. By 2001, I had started to acquire first editions of vintage works I really admired, as well as obscurer titles that had never been reprinted or reissued.

When Chad and I began seriously thinking about Alpenhouse, he asked me to send him copies of some of the high spots of supernatural literature so he could begin to familiarize himself with the genre. I chose to send him not only traditional ghost stories like M. R. James's "Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad," but also landmark weird tales like Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows" and Arthur Machen's "The White People." Admittedly, Chad's tastes didn't always match my own, which was great for our collaboration process because I began to rethink what appealed to me about a number of the stories I had sent him. Chad was really drawn to stories that are beautifully written and have a great deal of psychological and metaphorical complexity. For instance, Chad really loved Robert Aickman's brilliant "Ringing the Changes," and that's the foundation we both began to work from in terms of thinking about the kinds of stories we would like to publish.

*Does the focus of Alpenhouse allow you to do anything different from a design perspective that you couldn't or wouldn't do with Sutton Hoo?*

CHAD: While there are collectors who appreciate the quality of the book art at Sutton Hoo Press, there are those who also collect specifically the poetry that I select. Since my background is in poetry, and since I believe that good and great poetry is finally the most important thing in the world, my editing inclinations have been toward it. I did not want collectors who collect that original



editing impulse of mine, and who desire to be completist collectors of Sutton Hoo Press in that regard, to be forced into collecting unrelated projects. So I developed a separate imprint. Of course, it is my hope as both a businessman and an editor that under the Alpenhouse imprint I'll be able to make publication choices that are every bit as important to readers interested in the mysteries of literature as are the choices I've made as the editor for Sutton Hoo Press. So far, it has begun to prove out that way, as most of my regular collectors have purchased *The Decorations*.

*What role has the ghost story played in society? Is it different now than in its heyday of 100 years ago? Leaving horror as a separate thing altogether, how does/should the contemporary ghost story differ from the traditional Victorian ones?*

CHAD: Boyd is really the one to speak on this issue, but I would say the following, and it has been the central point in Boyd's and my discussions of almost anything literary, including the supernatural fiction we have shared and discussed. As a teacher of poetry, I always taught my students, in the form of a pseudo-adage, that poetry is not a receptacle for hidden meaning (which many are taught by poetry-phobic schoolteachers); rather, it is a vehicle by which human emotional complexity is constantly revealed. And we always talk about that word *constantly*. Coming back to great poetry is an opportunity to continue the process of discovering what that poem can teach a reader about human ambivalence. This is the general standard to which I hold all literature. Ramsey Campbell's story is a good example of this principle.

BOYD: In recent years, Michael Chabon, who won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Clay*, has talked frequently about his great affection for the works of H. P. Lovecraft, Arthur Conan Doyle, and M. R. James, masters of what

he refers to as "stories with plots." In his introduction to 2003's *McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*, Chabon characterizes current short fiction, his own included, as "the contemporary, quotidian, plotless, moment-of-truth revelatory story... sparkling with epiphanic dew." Chabon laments the disappearance from slick mainstream magazines of the enormous variety of popular short stories that any reader could find prior to the early 1960s, including not only horror and science fiction stories, but also crime stories, sea stories, war stories and historical stories. At one point in this same introduction, Chabon recounts telling David Eggers, the publisher of *McSweeney's*, that "horror stories are all psychology" and "All short stories, in other words, are ghost stories, accounts of visitations and reckonings with traces of the past."

What I like about Chabon's remarks is that he recognizes that distinctions between "literary" short fiction and "genre" short fiction are meaningless; great stories are great stories regardless of what "category" we try to fit them into. From Chad's and my perspective, the best ghost stories, therefore,





## HALLOWE'EN SPOOKTACULAR

are no different from the best works of literature, and they serve the same function that literature does in any culture or society: they illuminate the human condition and the complexities of the world in which we live as they grapple with the most pressing social and cultural issues of their time. As Chabon so astutely suggests, above all, great works of short fiction, whether they are by William Faulkner or Walter de la Mare, achieve the above without sacrificing compelling plots.

More than one scholar of supernatural fiction has noted that the Victorian era and the Edwardian era, the two strongest periods in terms of the development of the ghost story, were periods of great social upheaval characterized by war, economic instability, distrust of government, and increased criticism of traditional gender roles. Is it any surprise that the best supernatural stories from these eras would therefore express people's anxieties and fears about accepted and changing cultural mores and institutions? In fact, when one really delves into the genre, the range of issues that the traditional ghost story explores is quite astonishing. Walter de la Mare's "A.B.O." (1895) and Bernard Capes' "A Ghost-Child" (1906), for instance, both concern hauntings that are the results of abortions, a subject that was certainly considered far more taboo then than it is now.

As the above examples indicate, from Chad's and my perspective, great contemporary ghost stories only differ from traditional ones in that they are rooted in characters and situations that are central to the 21st century. Much of the underlying subtext—gender roles, social status, child abuse, sexuality, death, grief and loss—remain the same. What contemporary ghost stories can do, however, is invoke a wider range of what constitutes an actual apparition. In Fritz Leiber's seminal "Smoke Ghost" (1941), Leiber created one of the first truly modern ghosts, a spectre composed from the smoke, grime and industrial waste

of Chicago, a entity that, in the author's words, "would haunt coal yards and slip around at night through deserted office buildings...with the hungry anxiety of the unemployed, the neurotic restlessness of the person without purpose." What better metaphor could a writer pick for an exploration of alienation and meaninglessness amidst the seemingly impersonal modern, industrialized city?

*Do you see the press's publishing program possibly expanding to more than one book a year?*

CHAD: I think we will gauge the response and follow suit. But I have sheep and chickens and ponies, and another press to run, and a child, and a lot of learning about all sorts of things to fit into the next 40 to 50 years. Right now I'm incubating eggs in an ingenious machine. Farming inventions are wildly complex, simple and practical all at once.

*You certainly set the bar high with your first author. Tell us about working with Ramsey Campbell—what was his initial reaction to what you're doing with Alpenhouse?*

CHAD: In my experience, it is always the most noteworthy authors who are the easiest to work with, and who are most willing to trust my skills, such as they are, to handle the publication of their stories and poems in a fine press format. So there is very little story here; we solicited, we negotiated, he agreed. Ramsey was always sweet, gracious and appreciative. What more can you ask? What I really appreciated was that he took us very seriously, as is evidenced by the terrific story he wrote. He's a champ; I'd like to meet him someday.

BOYD: Ramsey Campbell is someone whose work I first read in high school, and over the years a number of his short stories have certainly left impressions on me, particularly "The Voice of the Beach," "Mackintosh Willy" and "Apples." When I began pitch-



ing authors' names for Alpenhouse's first book, Ramsey came to mind immediately because he is highly regarded both as a modern master of supernatural fiction, and as a critic and historian of the genre.

He was very enthusiastic about the project from the beginning, and the wonderful story he wrote especially for Alpenhouse is clear evidence of his commitment to the project. *The Decorations* essentially tells the story of a boy, Davy, who has to confront the reality of his parents' divorce and his grandmother's fear of death during a Christmas visit to his grandparents' home. It's quite chilling and, ultimately, quite moving.

*Are you going to focus on works by established authors in the field, or will you also be considering new/emerging authors?*

BOYD: For our first few titles, we are focusing on established authors in the field because we hope to plug into an existing fan base in terms of getting the word out about Alpenhouse Apparitions. However, by "established" authors, we mean writers who have reputations as contemporary masters of the ghost story, and such individuals aren't necessarily authors who have published a great deal of books or are known by a wider mainstream audience. Our goal is simply to publish the best ghostly tales available anywhere, and in so doing to publish some of the best contemporary fiction being written by anyone in any field. We want works that have a depth of psychological complexity in which the supernatural situations function both figuratively and metaphorically. If a relatively unknown writer we had never heard of were to submit a story that knocked our socks off, we would absolutely want to publish that work!

*What will you be producing for the 2006 book? Do you have anything lined up beyond that?*

BOYD: We are currently working on a story by Ron Weighell, a piece that straddles the

line between the classic Jamesian ghost story and the kind of weird tale characterized by the work of Lovecraft and Blackwod. It's very restrained and yet pulpy at the same time, which seems like a contradiction, but isn't.

Like *The Decorations*, Weighell's piece was specifically written for Alpenhouse, and the story contains numerous references to some of the major achievements in printing from the past few centuries. Weighell is the author of the much-sought-after 1997 Ghost Story Press collection *The White Road*, and while he is a carpenter by trade, he's a terrific writer, as our book will demonstrate.

Other writers we are currently working with or in discussions with include Paul Finch, Lisa Tuttle, A. F. Kidd and Terry Lamsley. Chad and I are hoping to have a few surprises up our sleeves over the next few years as well.

*The Decorations (2005, 40 pp) by Ramsey Campbell was printed from Joanna types with Perpetua titling, on dampened Jobannot and Somerset papers. The edition of 250 copies is signed by Campbell and artist Ladislav Hanka. The standard edition is bound in quarter cloth with French marbled paper and gilt stamped spine; the deluxe edition of 26 lettered copies is bound in a contemporary half leather and marbled paper binding designed and executed by Julia Leonard of Iowa City, and housed in a clamshell box. Contact the publisher at [www.suttonhoopress.com/Alpenhouse](http://www.suttonhoopress.com/Alpenhouse).*

