

Retrospective: Three New Novels by Phil Rickman

By June Pulliam

Rickman, Phil. *The Chalice*. London: Pan, 1998.
----. *The Wine of Angels*. London: Pan, 1999.
----. *Midwinter of the Spirit*. London: Pan, 2000.

Welsh novelist Phil Rickman has created his own variety of Celtic magical realism. His tales, always set in (or near) Wales, deal with the intersection of traditional pagan beliefs with Christianity. His novels always show how these two different belief systems have complimented each other for centuries. But when outsiders with no respect for the old ways attempt to supplant them, Rickman illustrates how violent, bloody conflicts arise. Surprisingly, Rickman often doesn't make use of the supernatural at all--instead, the horror in his tales is of the more carefully woven psychological variety, heavily dependent on a thorough development of character and setting.

As a horror writer, Rickman doesn't depend so much on going to extremes with a monster that is truly frightening in its capacity for violence and suffering. His tales are more eerie and disturbing than blatantly disgusting. And the attention paid in his books to the minutia of local legend is one of the central pleasures of reading his work. The progressions of Rickman's stories are similar--an outsider arrives in small Welsh village to learn that life in the idyllic sticks isn't some sort of BBC version of *Mayberry*, and in the end, comes to admire how local traditions are interwoven with those of the dominant culture.

Overall, Rickman pens damn good stories, and the similarity of his novels (they're even a consistent length of approximately 600 pages) is comforting rather than redundant. His earlier works, *Candlelight*, *December*, and *Curfew*, are better known to American readers. The three novels above aren't as easily available on this side of the Pond, but for the most part, are worth the extra trouble of special ordering them through your local bookseller.

The Chalice is the weakest of Rickman's most recent novels. In this tale, the dark and foreboding tor in Glastonbury has always contained a sort of mysterious power that attracted painters and poets to the area. A pre-Christian structure, it has nevertheless been incorporated into Christian legend. Joseph of Arimathea was said to have brought a teenaged Christ to the island where a tree of thorns sprung from his discarded staff, and the town's cathedral is supposedly the resting place of the Holy Grail. The actual history of the area has also generated its own folklore. One of the Cathedral's bishops was martyred by Henry VIII's men, and the church's chalice used to catch his blood. This

chalice became the Dark Chalice, sort of anti-Holy Grail that holds dark powers and is rumored to be buried in the tor.

It is these sorts of myths that draw New Agers to the town. Tensions arise when the staid townspeople become fed up with the recent influx of newcomers, pagan hippie types who wish to worship outside of the church and attempt to stop Glastonbury's progress by halting the building of a superhighway through the town. In the middle of these often nasty clashes, people are dying mysteriously and violently. *The Chalice* has all the usual elements of a Rickman horror novel, but the characters are rather one-dimensional—the trust fund hippie and her nasty, manipulating patrician brother, the New Age yuppies, the money-hungry contractor, the crusty old man. We've seen these people before, and they hold no surprises. Another weak point is the relative lack of attention Rickman pays to the local myths that are such an integral part of characters' motivations. Such comparative lack of detail is uncharacteristic of Rickman and deprives the reader one of the great pleasures of reading his novels. *The Chalice* is also one of Rickman's few novels to rely on the supernatural to explain human behavior. Unlike some of his other works, in *The Chalice*, the supernatural is the only explanation for some events—the reader isn't allowed to see that the supernatural is perhaps a matter of perspective. One person's paranormal activity is another person's collective unconsciousness. It's this lack of subtlety that makes *The Chalice* a weak novel.

Conversely, *The Wine of Angels* is one of Rickman's better works. While some of the characters here are rather derivative, his female cleric is quite original. In this novel, Rev. Merrily Watkins leaves an inner city Glasgow ministry to become vicar of Lewardine, a picturesque village of black and white cottages. Lewardine isn't immune to the problems of small towns in the twentieth century. Residents want to stimulate their flagging economy in a place that doesn't have much to offer the modern world, but also don't want economic growth to interfere with their unique way of life. They're also hostile to some villagers' plans to stimulate tourism by performing a play about their colorful past culminating in the hounding to death of a sensitive cleric accused of witchcraft, and suspected by modern historians of being a closeted homosexual. As with all of Rickman's novels, new confronts old, and blood must be shed before accommodation can be made. People whose behavior might offend the town's more conservative elements, from a bratty teenaged trollop to the village wise woman, disappear or die mysteriously, and people look to Rev. Watkins to help heal an increasingly more fractious village life.

Rev. Watkins is a refreshing character, and she's what makes this book enjoyable. She's doubly an outsider character, one whose function is to acquaint the reader with the unfamiliar. As a newcomer to the village, she relates the uniqueness of Lewardine. And as a female minister in what had been until very recently an old boy's club, she is also an outsider whose questioning of Church of England doctrines familiarizes the American reader with the dominant culture of the U. K. As an official representative of the Church of England, she's pressured by many factions to give the village an ideological shape. Will she demure to the right and suppress embarrassing Church history, will she accede to the wishes of the left and lay bare all of the Church's horrible secrets, or will she choose a middle path that attempts to accommodate all points of view? And no matter

what she decides, will her actions give the Church cause to stop ordaining any more women?

Midwinter of the Spirit is the only one of Rickman's stories not set in Wales, but it is set on the Welsh border. Rickman's second Merrily Watkins story is also well written and original. In this sort of homage to William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*, Rev. Watkins is poised to take over the Church of England's Deliverance Ministry, a kinder, gentler version of what was once called exorcism for a faith whose leaders all too often no longer believe in evil or possession or God for that matter. But strange things are happening in and around the Cathedral (the famous shrine of St. Thomas Cantilupe) and Merrily is unprepared to deal with the powers of darkness while protecting the reputation of a faith that is becoming increasingly redundant in a modern world. To make matters worse, the retiring exorcist, who strongly disapproves of female priests, refuses to offer any guidance. But unlike Blatty's *The Exorcist*, Rickman's tale doesn't end with a skeptical minister having his flagging faith redeemed after witnessing true evil (just before he sacrifices his life for Mother Church). This story ends with Rev. Watkins continuing to have many unresolved issues of faith, and the Church of England as an institution isn't sufficient to answer these questions.

Necropsy: The Review of Horror Fiction, Volume I (Spring 2001)