



## FORECASTING BLOOD AND SHADOWS

JOE R. LANSDALE GETS SANCTIFIED ON MIGHTY FINE ANTHOLOGY WORDS BY ROSS THOMPSON

If you believe everything you read in Joe R. Lansdale's work, Texas is a magical place running amok with mercenary biker gangs, killer ducks, madmen, madwomen, avenging Egyptian spirits, friendly armadillos, serial killers, possessed scarecrows, steam-powered giant robots... The list unravels like a lizard's tongue, and is just as rough and prickly.

**A**FTER WRITING for nigh-on 30 years and having published just as many novels and story collections, Lansdale has built a mightily impressive canon. Built in the sense that he has grafted tooth and nail, blood, sweat and ink to construct a style unique to 'hisownself', as he often signs off. Impressive in the sense that his writing stretches across and through genres. Horror, noir, western... this six-gun is loaded with bullets

a lot when you were young.

I was always an avid reader. It started with comics, and grew into novels. Early on it was Homer and Kipling and Poe and Verne and Wells, and later on I went bug fuck nuts for Edgar Rice Burroughs. I liked Jack London and Twain, and as I grew older I went from liking Twain to adoring Twain. I loved Ray Bradbury and Richard Matheson and Charles Beaumont and Robert Bloch and

"TEXAS IS A STATE OF MIND. IT'S A PLACE WHERE MYTH AND LEGEND AND DAMN LIES BLEND BEAUTIFULLY."

aimed directly at your skull – and, frequently, your heart.

Champion Joe has just released *Sanctified And Chicken-Fried*, an anthology of some of his finest moments. It's the ideal starting point for those unfamiliar with his unusual writing. But beware, there are wild things lurking in the cotton...

Looking back over your huge back catalogue of work, you redefine the word 'prolific'. You must have read

anything to do with Rod Serling. I grew into Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Raymond Chandler... you name it. And on and on and on...

What first inspired you to take up writing?

I loved comic books and started writing and trying to draw the comics, realised I wasn't much of an artist, and that the stories interested me more. I guess I started writing about the time I discovered paper and

pencils. If I had to point to the most important influence early on, I'd say my mother's encouragement and comic books.

Several of your stories are included in your new collection. The post-apocalyptic 'Tight Little Stitches In A Dead Man's Back' is particularly memorable.

That was an assignment story, and the first of mine to get serious attention. This was relatively early in my career and I had wanted to write something different, but when I started I thought it was the world's biggest loser. I think it was because it was so depressing, such a dark subject. I was at the same time trying to ring the bells of a lot of after the bomb novels, stories, and films I had seen growing up. I'm sure *The Day Of The Triffids*, both novel and film, was in the back of my mind. When I turned it in, I was less than pleased. I felt I had missed the boat. They loved it, and later, when I had some distance from it, I grew to be pretty happy with it.

What about 'Bubba Ho-Tep', with Elvis in an East Texan retirement home, battling an Egyptian mummy?

My mother had been in an accident, and had to stay in a rest home to recover. That became the background for the story, though the rest home my mother was in was a lot nicer and better than the one in the story. It naturally developed from there, and I added in the idea of it being a kind of rest home for the mentally unbalanced. People who believed they were other people. Actually, I never actually say that Sebastian Haff is really Elvis. He might be, and he might be... well, crazy. But the events that happen there with the Mummy, well, they happened... I think. That was the fun of the story.

You have commented before that early novels like *Act Of Love* and *The Nightrunners* were difficult to pitch because they were so different from the norm, so out there.

I had lost all hope of either of them being published. But, I guess it was about a year in limbo with *Act Of Love*, and *The Nightrunners* took longer. Editors weren't ready for it until then; it took time for the market to change, even if I was already doing this stuff in the late Seventies and early Eighties without success.

In terms of violence and disturbing material, they are pretty unrelenting, but you feel compelled to keep on reading.

These issues developed as I wrote, as they were concerns of mine. I tried to make violence real to make it more personal. I thought it was easy to just dismiss it. I think I saw the same thing in David Lynch's work, where he made you feel repulsed and somehow attracted at the same time to violence. The idea was to show how we crave this stuff, and then feel bad about it. To show that we are creatures containing both sides of the coin. We couldn't write about or be intrigued by these things if they

weren't in us. We make our choices on which side of the fence we want to fall.

#### What about the Hap and Leonard series?

Hap and Leonard are a contrast in ideas. They have grown more alike as the series has gone on, at least in the sense that they fit together better than before. But they are different. They are both violent, but Hap likes to tell himself he isn't, not by nature. Leonard is much more pragmatic, although he has a hotter temper that can cause his pragmatism to fly out the window. Hap is always looking for an idealistic reason to do things: a purpose. They are both tarnished knights, and probably see themselves that way, and on some level get off on it.

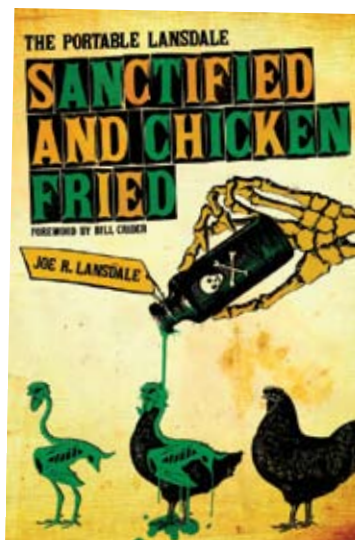
It's a novel close to my heart. My parents were in their 40s and late 30s when I was born, and they had gone through the Great Depression, so I've always had a fascination with it, and I think that comes through to the reader. I also think that those times gone by intrigue people. They are never the good old days as we like to remember, but they are different, and as time moves on, those days seem almost alien. A time when the world wasn't cut up into small plots and people knew each other better. We miss that. But, there were always snakes in the garden, and that's what I think intrigues people.

#### What is it about Texas that you find so fascinating?

Texas is a state of mind. It's a place where

Vintage, as well as a collected *Drive-In* book, containing all three of the novels. There's new Hap and Leonard, *Vanilla Ride*, out later this year. As is often the case, Hap and Leonard set out to do a favour for a friend, and the favour turns out to have serious complications. A basic ass-whipping turns into something far deadlier. Also, the novel has a cool assassin. And there's another new Hap and Leonard for 2010.

**SANCTIFIED AND CHICKEN-FRIED: THE PORTABLE LANSDALE IS AVAILABLE NOW FROM UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS.**



“I LOVED COMIC BOOKS AND STARTED WRITING AND TRYING TO DRAW THE COMICS, REALISED I WASN'T MUCH OF AN ARTIST, AND THAT THE STORIES INTERESTED ME MORE.”

#### It's also refreshing to see men sharing emotions, saying they love one another, crying, that kind of thing.

I've always found the stuff about men not being able to express their feelings a little silly. Some can't. Some women can't. But many men I know are good at it and quite willing to do it, at least with other men. I wanted to present a pair who were very good friends and it was obvious they were, and that their relationship was akin to brothers. It was also about the idea that sometimes you make your own family, and blood is less important than you think.

#### Your murder mystery, *The Bottoms*, continues to garner critical acclaim.

myth and legend and damn lies blend beautifully. It's a place where the people are strong-willed and are often at odds even with themselves. Being a liberal, you would think I'd find it tough here, but instead I find it interesting. The same things that can make many people here narrow-minded, often contribute to other factors, such as loyalty, sincerity and toughness. It also brings about some of the strangest and deadliest people around. As a writer, hell, what's not to like?

#### What's have you got coming up next?

Short story collections are forthcoming, and there will be new editions of all the Hap and Leonard books from

## BOOKS SHORTS

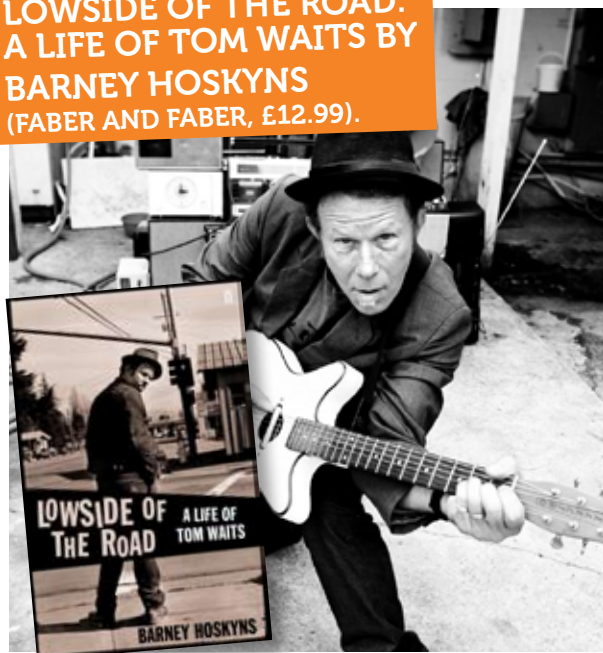
True crazy scientist stuff with Alex Boese's *Elephants On Acid*, a compendium of some of the most startling and downright bizarre experiments conducted in the name of science. Ever wondered why we can't tickle ourselves, or whether it's true that women who play hard to get are more desirable? If so, this is the book for you. Elsewhere you'll find real life Dr Frankensteins, zombie kittens and, yes, elephants tripping out of their tree. The fun is only slightly marred by Boese's somewhat lame jokes and ham-fisted puns. You should still be able to pick up the original 2008 publication, but, if not, a new paperback edition is due in June (Pan Books, £7.99).

Part memoir, part historical document, part State of the Nation analysis, Timothy O'Grady's rather wonderful travelogue *Divine Magnetic Lands: A Journey In America* has just been released on Vintage paperback (RRP £8.99). O'Grady left the States in 1973, at the age of 22. The book finds him returning to the country some 30 years later and provides a wonderful examination of contemporary America and how the great nation has evolved over the past three decades.

For a brief moment in the Nineties it seemed that dance music might usurp the old guitar-based guard in the popularity stakes; the public came to worship at superclubs such as Cream and Ministry of Sound, temples of hedonism presided over by the DJs. Back then the big name DJs were afforded all the acclaim and adoration of rock 'n' roll royalty. They earned astronomical fees and many such as Paul Oakenfold, Pete Tong and Fatboy Slim became household names. Dom Phillips traces the rise and fall of their kind in *Superstar DJs Here We Go!*. Available now from Ebury Press (RRP £12.99).

## BOOK REVIEW

### LOWSIDE OF THE ROAD: A LIFE OF TOM WAITS BY BARNEY HOSKYN'S (FABER AND FABER, £12.99).



**F**EW WRITERS HAVE MANAGED to decrypt Tom Waits' cryptic enigma or explain just what drives the man who has adopted so many intriguing musical personae over the preceding decades. He is a puzzle unsolved, an algorithm with plenty of rhythm but no balance. Plenty of unofficial biographers have tried to penetrate the force-field with which Waits surrounds his family, but none have come close to getting past the security barriers. He remains a mystery, their book remains a miss. Barney Hoskyns knows this. He admits it himself in the prologue to his book, in which he bemoans Waits' insistence on remaining unsolved, on keeping his cards and his family photographs under his rumpled hat.

Hoskyns was stonewalled at most turns by anyone and everyone connected either musically, socially or by blood to Waits. To his credit, he spits out the sour grapes, and gets on with the business of connecting the dots, shading between the lines, and trying to explain what makes Waits tick. Fortunately, Hoskyns' writing is sharp, funny and rattles along at a dizzying lick. He is especially strong on analysing each album in turn, highlighting obscure references and unpacking lyrical Chinese boxes. Considering the obstacles in its way, this is an immersive read, even if Hoskyns doesn't truly manage to answer the book's main question: just who is Tom Waits? One suspects that discovering that would spoil the fun somewhat. Still, more power to him for trying. *Ross Thompson*