

Interview with Matthew Hughes

May 25, 2011

Matthew Hughes' latest book, *The Other*, is a speculative, richly imagined exploration of society on the far edges of extreme. A blend of noir thriller which mixes Jungian psychology and witty banter, *The Other* is the kind of tale that has caused critics to hail Hughes as the "heir apparent" to SF grandmaster Jack Vance.

Underland Press reached Matthew in the Gargano Peninsula in Puglia, Italy, where he is currently care-taking the villa Vallecoppa, an olive farm tucked away on the edge of the Foresta Umbra.

UNDERLAND PRESS: Readers first met Luff Imbry in your previous work, *Black Brillion*. What made you decide to give him more page time?

MATTHEW HUGHES: I began doing the short stories for Nick Gevers, co-editor of *Postscripts*, who suggested he'd be good for a few episodes. Once I started writing them I came to like the character and the kind of situations he got into. I've always been a crime writer at heart, and Imbry is decidedly criminal.

UP: Imbry is a unique character, an unlikely hero for a novel. He's wickedly smart, but also immoral. He's an expert in antiquities, and, notably, he's fat. Where did Imbry come from? Does he have any literary precursors?

MH: He has filmic precursors: Kasper Gutman in *The Maltese Falcon* and Signor Ferrari in *Casablanca*, both played by Sydney Greenstreet. There's also a certain leavening from raffish

characters played by Peter Ustinov, such as Jules Basil the safecracker in the original *We're No Angels*.

UP: For the cover of this novel, you said you wanted Imbry to look like Newt Gingrich. Can you explain?

MH: No, I said Karl Rove. I wanted that look of pure, self-interested psychopathology. Also I see him as blandly featured and blond, whereas the actual cover art portrays him as a sort of jolly Barbary pirate. It doesn't matter, though. Characters are what they do, and Imbry is always doing, in his characteristic way.

UP: This book practically oozes with a sense of joy and fun. It seems like you might have had a fantastic time writing it. Can you tell us a bit about the actual composition process?

MH: I write about a thousand words a day and the story unwinds as I go. As I get toward the end, the daily wordage can pick up to two thousand or more. I do enjoy writing fiction, and I'd certainly rather write crime fiction, whatever the setting, than the corporate and political speeches that were my lot when I was supporting a family.

UP: How much did Jungian psychology affect the story?

MH: As much as I understand about it, which is, as the bureaucrats used to say, "just enough to be dangerous." The Jungian model of the psyche, as I crudely understand it, fits my own perception of how the inner reaches of my head function. I'm conscious, from life experience, of having a crowd inside me, whose elements combine in different permutations to perform different functions. The persona that does the writing, for example, is different from the one who does the typing and editing or the responding to interview questions. But we get along very well, and only once has he not shown up to work—about thirty years ago, when I had to write a speech for a deadline. I ended up doing it all by myself and it was very hard.

UP: Your books distinguish themselves with nearly perfect plots. They're highly satisfying reads. How do you plot a novel? Do you have a cheat sheet, an outline? Or does your narrative compass always point due north?

MH: I am an intuitive writer. I don't outline. I start with a character and a situation, and the "thing that happens" that triggers a conflict, and off we go, a thousand words at a time. Mid-book, I might go back to chapter one and add a few lines that presage what I'm writing at the moment. It sounds precious to say it, but I often don't know what's going to happen until it starts to develop. In my Archonate universe books, of which *The Other* is one, I do keep in mind certain background realities—like the existence of other planes and the fact that, unbeknownst to almost all of the trillions of citizens of the Ten Thousand Worlds, the universe is shortly going to make one of its cyclical shifts from being based on rational cause-and-effect to being based on "sympathetic association," a polite term for magic. Or like the fact that, having spread out over so many planets, humanity has had the opportunity to develop all kinds of strange cultures and social orders. Or that, so far in the future, everything that could have been tried has been. There is nothing new under all those suns. Or so just about everybody believes.

UP: Any more Luff Imbry novels brewing? He seems ripe for a sequel.

MH: That would depend on how well *The Other* does. I would enjoy writing a sequel, to find out who shanghaied Luff and shipped him off to Fulda, and why. Right now I have only the haziest notion.

UP: Anything you'd like to add?

MH: Well, it's self-serving, but those who enjoy this book might want to go looking for others set in the Archonate milieu. And if they like those, I'd appreciate it if they would pester their friends, family and associates to read me. And then, for a treat, I'd let them read Jack Vance.