

Gene Gregorits shoots the shit with David Peace

Ripper's Out There, In a Yorkshire Way

If you *really* want a “heartbreaking work of staggering genius”, leave Dave Eggers’ so-named hunk of soggy, sickening indulgence to the coffeehouse, university, and yuppie crowds, and pick up **Nineteen Seventy Seven** instead. *That’s* the heartbreaking work of staggering genius. It’s the single most unbearably and inconsolably dark work of art in any medium that I’ve ever encountered...easily my favorite book of all time. His esoteric manner of defying all the great traditions of literature, and a strange commitment made by him to deliberately lose himself in the ugly moment, is something that has been rivaled by few. Only Nelson Algren comes to mind.

Certainly, no one with enough intellect and courage to fully absorb a David Peace novel could ever attest to being unchanged by it. Peace makes almost any other fiction writer look like a bourgeois phony, posturing softie, or sub-cultural gimmick. He writes books that I occasionally get goose bumps or anxiety just thinking about; I consciously *avoid* thinking about these books, they bring on dread like a particularly blunt gust of freezing rain. They exist in a dark, brutal universe which is, unfortunately, based largely on fact and his own personal memories of rainy and wretched Northern England. One could label the guy as a punk successor to James Ellroy, but that implies a dip on the morality scale. With Peace, that’s hardly the case. His writing is *intensely* moralistic, but it does not yield to genre boundaries, nor to conventional plot structure. He does not always make the reader’s job easy, but offers the persistent and patient reader the greatest of rewards: unvarnished truth. The musical equivalent of a Peace novel would be a recording in which every single instrument can be heard stuck in the red zone, animal noise and crying symphony at once, like an ungodly overlap of

Gene Gregorits & David Peace



Throbbing Gristle and the Kronos Quartet. A perceptive reader might also “hear” transmogrified trace elements of The The or Iggy Pop’s Stooges. Music is important to Peace, probably in much the same way it was to Hunter Thompson, and any other writer who does not view the process as a calm or therapeutic one. Peace’s violent literary psychosis plays on both your heart and your last nerve, with a battering, clanging, and naggingly desperate narrative that throws more sparks than a cattle car careening down rusty tracks at 100 miles an hour. The overall emotional and atmospheric density of his work is central to its spooky, psychotic appeal. Just an excerpted slice can slam into you, **HARD**, but the entirety of a novel, like a large death toll, is difficult to fully condense into a single logical response. At a certain point, it seems necessary to let this material numb you a little; there is no other conceivable way to make it through. But no matter how necessary, the strength and size of Peace’s heart does not allow you any numbness. When a character is beaten, you’re taking that beating with him. Every word David Peace writes is imbued such enormous regret and compassion and devasta-

tion that he himself seems to be driven to temporary insanity by it...because he is so intimidatingly deft with poetry, it only seems natural that he would use that to throw you into the same void. And his navigation of the void is performed with the cunning of an old pro, yet it feels like a man martyring himself for all the evil in the world. He operates in this fashion to such a degree that anyone who actually *enjoys* the horror of his books may well be perfectly capable of it...and that could truly be the most disturbing aspect of them. Collectively, they are one enormous teardrop.

Nineteen Seventy Four, Peace's debut, was the first time I'd found another writer who'd mastered a specific style of writing that I'd already conceived, and for years had been attempting to crack on my own, that I thought *needed* to be done by *someone*. It was like seeing a terrible truth proven, by force, to those millions who would rather use the written word for attention-getting purposes, or financial ones. (And also to myself...after reading Peace, my own fiction work read like hyperactively scribbled pornography.) Here is a man that writes only to communicate damnation, as a means of confronting evil, and no other type of writer could possibly be more relevant to this exact moment, in 2005, when we are damned to a future of rigged elections and frat boy leaders, of conformist bigotry, pre-fabricated rebellion, and youth subcultures so willfully impotent that they may as well not exist at all.

Peace translates evil in a manner few others have barely even considered, and as such remains hands down the most exciting and important thing happening in literature today. He may indeed write, as one critic has said, "like a man with one hand down his pants and the other on a shotgun" and this is both accurate and a damn fine use of hyperbole (it seems impossible to write about him without it), but Peace is in no way limited to crime fiction. At this time, I am not sure that there is a genre tag that applies comfortably to Peace's work. In England, they call it "Yorkshire Noir"...but I think that's selling him far, far short.

Peace's career-making four part series, *The Red Riding Quartet*, is based on the murders committed by Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper. Although excessive in literary terms, the Quartet is basically a high-volume prayer to God. The books are fundamentally about the absence of God, in Yorkshire or any other land, a conceptual literary baseline which only serves to increase the resonance of Peace's unspeakably horrific vision of twisted and tormented human souls who haunted, and were haunted by, the crimes of the Yorkshire Ripper. His most recent book, released in 2004 by Faber, is **GB84**, a sweeping, multi-faceted, and ragingly violent saga of the UK coal miners' strike. The book *is* an unadulterated and unapologetic blood-portrait of Great Britain 1984.

I spoke to Peace via telephone, from his home in Tokyo.

Gene Gregorits & David Peace

GENE GREGORITS: I recently heard Primal Scream's record XTRMNTR, and it's nearly as psychotic and paranoid as your books.

DP: Well, I listen to music probably more than I read books. I listen to a *lot* of music when I'm writing. To be honest with you, I often tend to use music from the year that I'm writing about. When I was writing **Nineteen Eighty**, I was listening to a lot of Throbbing Gristle and Cabaret Voltaire. When I'm *not* writing, I like to listen to extreme music. I don't agree with these bands politically, but the Norwegian black metal groups. I don't know if you're familiar with them...

GG: Not the bands themselves, but I yeah, I know what they do and what they are about.

DP: I'm not going to defend them politically or anything. This band Dark Throne. It's dark and extreme, and that's the kind of music I like.

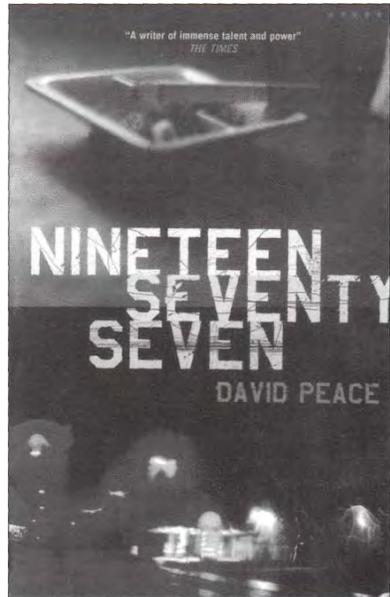
GG: Did you listen to a lot of Sex Pistols and Clash, during the writing of **Nineteen Seventy Seven**?

DP: Yeah. **Seventy Four** was Bowie's Diamond Dogs and also, particularly, Raw Power by the Stooges. **Seventy Seven** was mainly the Pistols and the Clash, and a reggae group of the time called Kulture, an album they did called The Two Sevens Clash. I used the punk song titles as the chapter headings. "What's My Name?", and "God Save the Queen", and what have you. Within the actual body of the text, there's no real mention of it because it wasn't noticeable at the time. A little bit later, it became more prevalent. Particularly in the north of England. But in 1977, it was more of a London-based phenomenon.

The music that was in Chapeltown and Leeds at the time was reggae music. People like Bob Marley had more of a cultural influence up there during 77. In Rastafarian culture, there was a feeling that 77 was the year that the apocalypse would come. That's why I riffed on that-

GG: You say frequently in that book, "the two sevens are clashing again".

DP: Yeah. If you're listening to that album, the reggae groups and the dub music of that time are very full of biblical imagery, and mixed it in, mixed their own Jamaica in with the cities, in the U.K., to produce this extremely apocalyptic feel. The Clash were the first band to really pick up on that. It uses a lot of the early Clash stuff as well, because they got their *name* from



that Kulture record. And then, with **Eighty**, it was Joy Division and Throbbing Gristle...

GG: "Hamburger Lady".

DP: [laughs] Yeah. **Eighty Three** was a bit more difficult, because it fragments, time-wise.

GG: I'd imagine that it was the most difficult book to write, out of all four.

DP: By far, yeah. Musically, as I say, things had gotten a bit twee, with stuff like Echo and the Bunnymen. At that time, I was into people like Swans and Birthday Party. There was *that* stuff. But that was very underground at the time.

GG: What book do you think would work best as a film adaptation?

DP: There *has* been some interest. People are very enthusiastic about it. But when you get into the reality of trying to raise the money, people just shy away. All kinds of people have been interested. It just never amounted to anything. Ideally, I'd like to see *all* the books filmed. But people seem more drawn to developing **Nineteen Seventy Four**, more because it has just one straight narrative. That lends itself more to a typical film adaptation. There is an English actor named Tom Bell. Have you seen *The Krays*?

GG: Not yet, no.

DP: He plays Jack the Hat in that film. And Tom Bell...when I close my eyes and think of Jack Whitehead, I always thought of it as being him. There's even been a few journalists who said, "if you're going to make a film, you've gotta get Tom Bell." He's quite an extreme actor, with a big personality. I know a guy who knows him, and it seems that if there's anybody who's living that kind of emotionally fucked up life, like Jack Whitehead, it's Tom Bell.

GG: What kind of movies do you like?

DP: I like the films from the periods I write about. I do like *The Exorcist*. *Clockwork Orange*. I know people are very critical of it, but I really like *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*.

GG: I don't like David Lynch personally, but that film does have some very strong imagery in it.

DP: Some people really adore him, and some people really hate him. I've gotten into arguments with people about him. I don't watch TV. Back in England, that's all I fucking did, was watch movies. I went to Manchester Polytechnic to get my degree, and they had a kind of art house cinema there. Movies started at 10 A.M. You could spend the whole day there. Get a cheap bottle of red wine, and just sit there, watch movies all day for two or three pounds. *Bad Lieutenant* is a film I really love, one which I associate very much with the Quartet.

GG: I called *you* a bad lieutenant in one of the Quartet reviews I wrote.

DP: That's so funny, because I just read that this morning. But yeah, *Bad*

Gene Gregorits & David Peace

Lieutenant and *King of New York* are two films that I want to see again. I admire Abel Ferrara's body of work. Aside from films, I'm very inspired by the paintings of Francis Bacon. I could lose myself for days looking at his work. (pause) I don't see anywhere near the number of films that you do, but I just saw *The Pledge* with Jack Nicholson. It's very rare that you see a film that doesn't cop out in the ending. That one is well worth seeing. Someone said to me, "you have to see *The Pledge* because it's as close as a movie can come to something like **Nineteen Seventy Four**. I saw **Seven** with my wife here in Japan. Brad Pitt is a major pin up star in Japan, so the cinema was packed with women, Brad Pitt fans. I remember, at the ending of that film, people were just hysterical. Every now and again, the motion picture industry will put out something that *doesn't* pull its punches.

GG: Now, one reviewer who loved your *Quartet*, was nevertheless, as I remember, extremely skeptical of the books' morality, or of the morality of you re-creating such hideous crimes, in such an overtly bleak and psychologically aggressive way...when these crimes are still fresh in people's minds, in the minds of the victims' families. How would you respond to that?

DP: Well, that's a tough one, yeah. I hate to be over-dramatic, but the big baffle within me is that I have been writing these books for so long. I *grew* up during the era of the Yorkshire Ripper. It had a personal effect on me and my family. Obviously, my mother was not killed in a Ripper attack. Fortunately, I am one step removed. That is where and when I grew up, and that is how I remember it. Nothing that I have researched has caused me to doubt my recollections. Even reading about the people involved who were trying to *protect* the public and *solve* the crimes, has actually hardened my resolve about the failure and deep corruption of the police department. But, one of the reasons why I changed all of the victims names...see, some people have asked me about why, in real life the Yorkshire Ripper was Peter Sutcliffe, but in the book he is referred to as Peter Williams. It might be a little cosmetic, but I did at least change the victims names.

GG: You changed their dates of death too, I noticed.

DP: Specifically because, as I say, I was born then and raised then and that's what I remember. But I'm going back there to some extent through *choice*. I choose to write these books. Even if I *don't* choose to write them, I choose to have them published and earn money out of it. That's the moral dilemma I have about it. But I wanted to change the names and dates because it *is* a fiction, yeah? That's one of the reasons why, for example, in the third book and the last book, I'm dealing more with the fictional crimes. It's another reason why I used a sort of fairy tale motif. There is a big difference between the fiction and the reality.

GG: Well, "fairy tale" is a good word to describe the first book in a sense,

too. The surrealism of the first book. There are certain things which go so far, that even if you're not familiar with the Ripper murders, one's eyebrows might perch up a bit, reading about a guy like George Marsh who has this underground bunker. That's almost going into a David Lynchian reality, but the hardness of the books keeps the reader from getting swept up in too much surrealism. I mean, it may be outrageous, but it's very believable at the same time.

DP: (laughs) I'm not going to deny that Lynch is an influence. To some extent, there *was* a guy named Donald Nielsen. This was prior to the Yorkshire Ripper. He was known as the Black Panther. He was, at that time, Yorkshire's most famous criminal. And he *did* kidnap a woman, but for money. No sexual motivation, but for money. And he kept her in an underground sewer, or bunker-type place. And also, the murders of the children, in 74 and 83, are based *very* closely on the murders of four girls in Japan, that I researched. That was a guy called Myazaki Tsutamo. He kidnapped a four year old girl, brutally murdered her, and then, six months later, he sent a box containing the bones, ashes, and some photographs of the girl, to the parents. I mean, *horrific* crime.

GG: I didn't take very much as being farfetched at the time, but then, looking back on it, learning more about the case...but then again, it goes along with the horrible nature of the books. The entire *climate*, or "vile psychic weather", as Cathi Unsworth so brilliantly put it, of the time, was so unbelievable, too...that life could be *that* relentlessly unbearable for men, the reporters and cops.

DP: Yeah. Oh yeah.

GG: When you were a kid, did you have a palpable sense of there being such a rottenness in Yorkshire?

DP: Very much so. My parents were schoolteachers. They didn't divorce or anything when I was a kid. They're still together. We had a family unit. Me, my sister, my mom, and my dad. A nice little house, and a garden. I think it was a very secure world, yeah? We lived in a suburb of Leeds. The minute you went into the center of town, it was a dark and dangerous and threatening place. I don't know if you've ever *been* to the North of England...

GG: Only to London.

DP: It's in the very architecture and landscape of the place. This is at the ass end of industrialization. There was *massive* recession. It was a very bleak, ailing place. And then you had the contrast then, as you went further north, and got out of the city, and then it got *very* very bleak. That's the scene of the Moors murders. Everything seemed to be charged with some element of threat or danger. And these crimes, the crimes of the Yorkshire Ripper, they began in 1975. But it wasn't until 1977 that he murdered this girl named Jane MacDonald, who was his first known non-prostitute victim.

Gene Gregorits & David Peace

GG: It's strange, the similarity in names between the two Rippers' hunting grounds. Jack worked in Whitechapel. Sutcliffe did Chapel-town. Chapel-town *was* the Whitechapel of Northern England.

DP: Oh yeah! Very much so. Of course, the press *did* fix upon that fact, at the time. Anyway, she was walking home from work. She'd had a date in town and missed the last bus home. She said goodbye to her boyfriend and was shortly thereafter murdered by the Yorkshire Ripper. This is when it crossed over. People *knew* about those murdered prostitutes, but they weren't panicked about them I can remember *that* quite vividly. I was only ten when that happened. I was ten and she was sixteen. We lived about five miles apart. As a ten year old kid, I was reading Marvel Comics, and Sherlock Holmes. believe it or not, I wanted to be a cop! That's what I wanted to be. In fact, me and my brother-

GG: That does not surprise me at *all*, David. (laughs)

DP: (laughs) Me and my brother, he's a bit younger than me. My parents had this garage and a little place behind the garage where they kept tools and stuff. It was like a little office, yeah? We were gonna solve the cases of, like...missing pets, and that kind of...crap. Then the Yorkshire Ripper started, and we took all the press clippings, put them on the wall.

[laughing]

GG: There's one or maybe two characters in the Quartet who have these backyard sheds, like little think tanks, where they work on their own case theories.

DP: And that's exactly where that comes from, right. Peter Hunter was-

GG: *Peter Hunter*, yeah! He had his own shed, for private research.

DP: He did, and that's exactly-I mean, that *whole thing* is taken...because I had a (laughing) backyard shed. You'd think I'd be a little more elaborate, I mean, I could have said-

GG: Well, you were already thinking on a cop level, at least as much as a child can...

DP: Me and my brother, we'd go out and be looking for Tabby the missing cat, and the Yorkshire Ripper at the same time. (laughing)

GG: (laughing)

DP: But the crimes just *kept on happening*. It built up and up. At this stage, this is when it got weird. When you got to school, you'd hear things. The famous line was, "he's somebody's husband, he's somebody's son." I'm not saying I thought my father was the ripper, that sounds a bit hysterical, but if you talk to any kid who grew up at that time, they were *all* unsure of, if not their own father, then somebody else's father. The old guy who lived on his own. *Everybody* was suspected of being the Yorkshire Ripper.

GG: Well, it's all happening within such a small region. America is huge, and serial killings that occur here, and have occurred here, they have the