A Conversation with Stephen Graham Jones: Horror, Weird Fiction and the Way of Slashers, with Sopapillas for Dessert

BILLY J. STRATTON & STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES

While I initially planned for this to be an interview, it was really a conversation, and one that occurred at a pretty cool Mexican joint in Denver near DU's campus before Stephen visited one of my classes to talk about *Ledfeather*. Be sure to check out El Tejado if you're ever in the area—they make a mean michelada! The transcript included here follows the conversation as it took place—minus the food orders and background conversation, which any postmodern writer would usually revel in, as well as the divvying of sopapillas—while being faithful to the cadence of language. Only a few minor changes were made for clarity and context. Given the occasion for the meeting and visit, the focus touches on *Ledfeather*, and then moves on to a discussion of Jones's more recent works. My primary interests were in the turn towards the genre of horror since *Mongrels*—a subject he is always eager to discuss, while also delving into other related matters such a weird fiction, the publishing industry, the function of literature, and as always, the future of humanity. You know, as Blink 182 calls it, "all the small things." Anyway, enough of my blathering, so let's get on to the reason you are here and reading *this*: the incomparable Stephen Graham Jones.

Stratton: I want to talk about the trajectory of your work from *Mongrels* to the present, but also through *Demon Theory*, how do you see the horror stories you've written as developing from your own point of view?

Jones: Well, *Demon Theory* was the second novel I ever wrote. I wrote *The Fast Red Road* and then *Demon Theory*, so I've been doing horror forever, but didn't get *Demon Theory* published until 2006. And then, even before 2006 I felt like I had been forced, but it was really my own response to the response to my books. . . for a lot of years I became like two writers on two different tracks. *Demon Theory* was the beginning of the horror track, and I went on to *It Came From Del Rio*, *Zombie Bake Off, The Last Final Girl,* all that stuff. So, for a lot of years it was tricky to maintain, being on two, like, separate tracks, if that makes sense.

Stratton: Yes, for readers too, there seemed to be a strange dividing line between those two groups of novels where readers of one set were often not all that aware or experienced with the other.

Jones: It almost made me feel like I should be like Brian Evenson, be like him and his real name for some readers and then BK Evenson for other projects, or . . . Iain Banks and Iain M. Banks, right? I never did that because I was afraid I would do my good work under one name and my so-so work under another name. I don't know if I trusted myself, I mean. But, you're right, *Mongrels* was the point where I was able to knit myself back together, be one writer instead of two. It felt good.

Stratton: Definitely, you were able to be the whole 'you' as a writer.

Jones: With that, I was able to use horror in a . . . I don't know, a less "normal" way, the werewolf, I mean, but *Mongrels* was really about family, just, through this weird delivery method—stories mixed with flash fiction to create a novel, and things not necessarily moving in a casual way. More associative, I guess. But, ever since *Mongrels* I felt like I was one writer again. So, from there I wrote *Mapping the Interior*, *The Only Good Indians*, *Night of the Mannequins* and *My Heart is a Chainsaw*, so those are all works I've done as a single writer.

Stratton: That's where there is a key difference from a book like *Ledfeather*, which is very literary, challenging and postmodern in a sense, to *Mongrels* which really opened your work up to a whole new set of readers.

Jones: Oftentimes, in literary fiction the stakes can be kind of low, too, dealing with questions like 'will I not get over my parent's divorce from fourteen years ago,' stuff like that. But in my work, like when my wife reads it after we've been together for thirty-one years, she recognizes all the little parts of biography I put in there and she says it gets hard to tell where the real stuff stops and the make-believe starts.

Stratton: That could be especially disconcerting with your horror stuff. Because you do a lot of first-person narration in horror as any good crafter of horror does, as that's among the core things a horror writer must be able to do. But the question almost becomes, well, how do they know how to do these things, in some uncomfortable sense?

Jones: Yeah, the person writing this sure does seem to know a lot about hiding bodies . . .

Stratton: [Laughs] that's the craft. And you watch a lot of horror movies, but I don't feel like your early readers were always aware of that. I did want to go back to your references to weirdness, though, so how do you think your latest writing fits with or challenges the writing being put forth under the banner of weird fiction?

Jones: You know, I like to read weird fiction, but I don't know if I can write weird fiction all that well. Probably the closest weird fiction story I've come up with was "Brushdogs."

Stratton: Hmm, I kinda feel like *Mapping the Interior* fits into that category too, in some ways.

Jones: It's possible with weird fiction—it's possible I'm making one subgenre such as "cosmic horror" stand in for the whole genre, here. But weird fiction to me, the story pattern, it's somebody finds an old book or artifact or whatever the thing is, and because of that brush with this whatever, they peel up a corner of the wallpaper of their life and look behind to see the vast terribleness of everything, but all they can do is try to close it back. You can't fight Cthulhu; you can't fight these cosmic entities. And so, the story is, 'I now know my own insignificance in the universe, and I have to live the rest of my life knowing how little I matter.' The horror I usually write, and prefer, I guess, is the horror that ends with "I made it." There's hope in the world.

Stratton: Survivance.

Jones: Exactly, weird fiction doesn't have the same kind of hope to me. But? If all fiction on the horror shelves was hopeful, that'd actually be kind of a bummer, I think. What's fun about horror is that you never know if it's going to end up, down, or in the middle. Takes all kinds to round the genre out, let it keep on living.

Stratton: That's right, it's more the acceptance that there is no hope. The world is absurd and has no meaning or worse, but it's not that one doesn't have agency. It's more that we are caught up in a larger web of processes [Jones: yeah, correct] so much greater than us that it limits our agency and becomes the source of terror.

Jones: Exactly, I think that kind of stuff is fun to read but I don't think I can write it 'cause I don't want my fiction to bring people down, if that makes sense?

Stratton: Thinking about it in that way, this takes me back to *The Fast Red Road* and the Goliards. That's similar, but instead of peeling the corner back on something supernatural or from the beyond, you're finding something in the world that you never knew about before. [Jones: Yeah, that's true]. And then there's a kind of shock like we also see in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* with Oedipa Maas trying to figure out what WASTE and the Trystero might be.

Jones: That's totally right, I never thought about it like that. So yeah, *The Fast Red Road* really does conform to that story arc.

Stratton: Yeah, and *The Bird is Gone* and *Ledfeather*, too.

Jones: If we look at *The Fast Red Road*, *The Bird is Gone* and *Ledfeather* as three books in a series, I do see the first two as more in the realm of weird fiction, but *Ledfeather* is where I was . . . well, let's go back to 2005. When I'd written those first two, I was just working at an instinctual level and hadn't really thought through the differences between weird fiction and horror. I feel like by 2007, and *Ledfeather*, I was starting to get more of a sense that I wanted to end with an up-ending rather than just bleakness, you know. "Bleak" is easy, I think. Staging an up-ending is a lot more difficult. At least to me.

Stratton: What you were just saying seems also to reflect a similar distinction between general readers and academic readers. In the former, you're just in it; you're just reading the story in the moment without trying to attach all sorts of theoretical models or philosophical ideas to it. And while you may be engaging with the weird, it's more on a visceral level, you're not thinking about the parameters of weird fiction or whatever defines it. You're liberated from that apparatus when you can be a reader who reads without a pen in your hand, underlining or writing notes in the margins. There's a liberation in that, I think.

Jones: That's right; there is. I don't know how to do it, but it must be great.

Stratton: [laughs] I don't really know how either. But connected to that, so for those familiar with your earlier works there is a natural development in the trajectory of your writing that can been seen over

time. But can you share your insights on this theme for those who may be less familiar with your body of work and haven't read a lot of your earlier novels or for those who found you later through novels such as *Mongrels*, *Night of the Mannequins*, *The Only Good Indians*, *My Heart is a Chainsaw*, and who discovered your works after that?

Jones: Yeah, I always feel like the readers who came to me after *Mongrels*, *The Only Good Indians*, *Chainsaw*, or whatever, I'm always worried when they're going back to my earlier stuff, especially *The Fast Red Road*—which ,my whole heart is still in those books and I love them and I don't wish to dismiss or diminish them—but I do always wonder if I am ever going to hear from those people again. Because those books, they're not the same at all. To me they're totally different.

Stratton: They are, but that's because there was a particular thing you were trying to do in those works, I think. With *Ledfeather* you were able to say I've done that kind of narrative how I wanted to and now I can move forward to other interests.

Jones: Yeah, definitely, with *Ledfeather* in 2007, I had a two-and-a-half-year dry period after that. I don't think I had another book come out until 2010.

Stratton: It was a little while, and then you started cranking out with a lot of horror that sort of presaged *Mongrels*, but the difference was through that you were able to get the attention of bigger presses, and then land deals with Tor and Morrow. I'd like to hear you talk about what that shift has done for you career, but also your writing process in which your books started getting into the hands of so many more readers.

Jones: Well, you're right. I started hitting hard and heavy between 2010 and 2014, with a lot of books in that period. The indie press scene and the commercial publishers, well, it's the same and different, I guess. The commercial presses have marketing and distribution, and it's amazing and wonderful and you really need that. What I like about all the indie stuff I did, and I really recommend that to all writers, I got to figure out what kind of writer I was. There was nobody saying don't do this, or even if they did, I just went to another publisher. So, I got to try crazy stuff like *The Long Trial of Nolan Dugatti*, that's a ridiculous, wild book. And *Zombie Sharks with Metal Teeth*, I couldn't have done that with a commercial press. I see so many writers who their first book is a big hit and then they are on that career path, but they can never play. And play is where we learn how to do stuff.

Stratton: Are you still able to sneak "playing" into your current works? You seem to be a master of that process now [the sopapillas arrive], but in a way that maybe you couldn't have done if you had written *Mongrels* at the beginning of your career, in say, 2004.

Jones: Yeah, if *Mongrels* had caught on with a readership that early, I think I would have gotten locked in. Since 2016, all my book contracts have been for horror novels, which is fine with me as I love writing horror, but I wonder if I would've been in that corner in 2005 or 2006 and by 2015 I would've been trying to break out and push out of those walls.

Stratton: It's clear that you love writing, just writing in its purest form, do you see those lines of division? Or, is it all a cohesive development—from your perspective?

Jones: Yeah, to me it's cohesive. Even if it's not cohesive content-wise, they all have the same amount of heart. They all come from the same place. Content doesn't really matter; genre doesn't matter.

Stratton: That's interesting when you apply that to the category of native/ indigenous literatures, as there are critics and scholars for whom content is the most important thing. Almost as if writers are being read to see what list of boxes are being checked, whether that be sovereignty, treaties, or land. But if you think about something that's far from that kind of thing, whether *Growing Up Dead in Texas* or *Mapping*, the whole story about where those characters are in the world is itself a commentary on the processes of displacement, the nature of sovereignty, or the lack thereof. Can you comment on that?

Jones: When *Growing Up Dead in Texas* was about to come out, I did one final read of it. Not for the publisher but for me. And I was asking myself—like to me, everything that I had written before *Growing Up Dead in Texas* was Native whether it was explicitly stated or not, but I was wondering about *Growing Up Dead in Texas*. So, I went back and reread it, and to me it's really the same as *Mongrels*, which deals with pressing Native issues all the way through.

Stratton: And you always have the shadow of Palo Duro Canyon in your West Texas novels.

Jones: Hopefully, by the time this comes out we can talk about my next West Texas novel . . . *I Was a Teenage Slasher*.

Stratton: Hopefully! So, for the last question, no rules and you have complete freedom, what novel would you write.

Jones: *I was a Teenage Slasher* **is** my dream novel.

Stratton: Wow, so you've done it.

Jones: Yeah! It's written very much in the voice of *Growing Up Dead in Texas*, but it's got bodies left and right.

Stratton: Well, and as you know, that's the foundation of America, really, bodies left and right. But those bodies, unlike the bodies we find strewn about in horror, are swept under the rug and hidden in history.

Jones: But they come back in all the horror stories.

Stratton: For someone who is such a prodigious writer, especially as we talked about all the books you wrote from 2010 and 2015, how has the process been different since you started working with Morrow, Tor and Simon & Schuster, but also since getting all these awards and accolades?

Jones: I mean, it's changed in that there's more deadlines. And it's changed in that—at the indie level when an editor tells you to 'change this,' you can always put down your flag and say, 'literary integrity, I'm leaving it in.' With a commercial press, I can plant that same flag if I want, but I've got to understand that I'm planting it through the foot of somebody who's got to argue with marketing, production, distributors and

salespeople, so they might fight less hard for me at those meetings if they've got a flag stabbed down though their foot.

I'm lucky enough to work with an editor who never tells me to do something. He just tells me how he thinks it should be. He'll always qualify it by saying, "you don't have to do this, but I think the story's better if you do this." And so, I'm always like, I'm not going to do it and then I try it out two or three weeks later and it's better [laughs]. It's nice to work with somebody like him. Because, I think, if I were working with the kind of editor who says, "it's got to be this way," I would probably just go somewhere else, you know. I react poorly to people telling me how something should be, rather than saying that there might be another way, and that other way might be better. What if I just give it a try, see if it works?

Stratton: Let's return to that previous question. Why is this upcoming novel, the one with bodies everywhere, *I Was a Teenage Slasher*, the quintessential Jones novel?

Jones: First, it's set in West Texas, which is *Fast Red Road* territory and where I started out. And it's high school, for some reason—and maybe it's a failing on my part—but it's an era and age that I write well from. Also, it's West Texas, it's high school, set in 1989, and I know 1989 pretty well. And it's the slasher genre, but I'm not just enacting the slasher genre. It's, and I don't know, but meta is the wrong word and I hate to call everything that . . .

Stratton: Self-reflective?

Jones: Maybe, that's it yeah.

Stratton: Or self-aware?

Jones: It is self-aware, yeah.

Stratton: Self-referencing?

Jones: A little bit, but there's no movie titles in it. I use . . . like in *Chainsaw* where I use titles on every page, there's not a single title in this one.

Stratton: So, are those titles the map? And if so, maybe you don't want to give that map to readers in this one.

Jones: Yeah, well there's characters who know all the slashers. There's two characters who do, anyway. And then everybody else has to learn the slasher as well. Just, not in the way they would have chosen, were they given a choice.

Stratton: Final question, what is your world, the world Stephen Graham Jones is trying to recreate is his fiction?

Jones: I dream of a world that's fair. Evil is a dangerous word, I think, but a world where bad stuff is punished, and where kids don't go hungry. I can't do that in the real world. I can't seem to change things so that's going to be the case, and maybe that's for the best, nobody should have that power, or you end up with a Thanos. And, too, I worry sometimes that if everything was a *Star Trek* future, we'd just stop growing and moving. Because we're not actually as good and sterling as those *Star Trek* people.

Stratton: Something that gives hope through the bleakness, like you were saying about *Ledfeather* earlier. But a hope that has to come out of suffering and loss.

Jones: It does, but the trick is, you have to remain receptive to it. Like in the end *Ledfeather* when the side of Doby's hand touches the side of Claire's hand. He's had a lot of terrible stuff happen to him, but he hasn't given up. That's one of my favorite endings I've ever done, and I sort of think all my endings before and after are some version or take on that. I want to believe in good things, I mean. In possibility. In "maybe." Without "maybe," I don't know . . . why even try, right?