

# LEST YOU SHOULD SUFFER NIGHTMARES

A Biography of Herbert van Thal



Johnny Mains

# LEST YOU SHOULD SUFFER NIGHTMARES

A Biography of Herbert van Thal



Johnny Mains

*Dedicated to everyone who worked on the  
Pan Book of Horror Stories from 1959 - 1989*



**Screaming Dreams**

FIRST EDITION  
- 2011-

Published by  
**Screaming Dreams**

25 Heol Evan Wynne, Pontlottyn, Bargoed  
Mid Glamorgan, CF81 9PQ, South Wales, UK

[www.screamingdreams.com](http://www.screamingdreams.com)

Copyright © Johnny Mains 2011

Johnny Mains asserts the moral rights to be  
identified as the author of this work

Originally published in a different format in *Back From  
the Dead: The Legacy of the Pan Book of Horror Stories*  
(Noose & Gibbet 2010)

Cover illustration  
Copyright © Les Edwards 2011

Back cover photograph  
Copyright © Lou Mains 2011

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form  
without prior written permission from the publisher

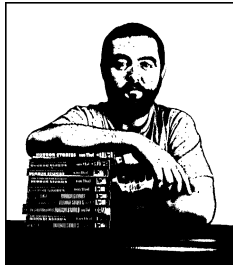
ISBN : 978-1-906652-11-1

Printed in Great Britain by the  
MPG Books Group, Bodmin and King's Lynn

# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
LEST YOU SHOULD SUFFER NIGHTMARES	3
LETTERS: 1971 - 1980	39
HERBERT VAN THAL CHECKLIST	49
AUTHOR INTERVIEWS AND COMMENTS	53
SFX ARTICLE – FEBRUARY 2010	79
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	87
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	89

# INTRODUCTION



It takes me a while to screw my non-fiction head on, so as I was gearing up to delve once again into the world of Herbert van Thal, I decided to read through some of the introductions he had written in the several anthologies and collections he edited.

What comes across as clear as day is how utterly passionate he was about horror fiction. If he admired someone's writing he would champion it until his last breath. He believed that *'writing in the horror genre was an art in itself and 'we still suffer nightmares, and we are no further advanced in our ideas about death, so the unknown still holds for us a fascination, and the supernatural story can still hold our attention and moreover, frighten us.'*

While his practises as an editor and literary agent may at times seem rather odd and sometimes breathtakingly shocking, one cannot deny that Herbert's heart was always in the right place when it came to getting stories he thought would genuinely chill out to as many people as possible.

When I started writing van Thal's biography for *Back From The Dead: The Legacy of the Pan Book of Horror Stories* I only had a small Wikipedia entry to go on. It took over a year to try and find a photograph of him and everywhere I turned I hit wall after

wall. When trying to delve into his dealings as a literary agent at London Management nobody from those days who worked in the same building as HvT was willing to speak to me, which furthers my suspicion of the 'double dipping' and other dodgy practices I had uncovered. But, little by little the biography came together, and a couple of weeks before BFTD went to go to print I managed to trace van Thal's step-daughter, Susan Brook, who is now living in America. She filled in some of the gaps and, as the clock was ticking down I put her additional information into the book. I was thrilled to receive her blessing and it made the many, many months of pain utterly worth it.

Since last March when the BFTD was published I've discovered some other slivers of information and have added, as far as I am aware, a complete bibliography. It's been a real treat to add a these few missing pieces to help build the picture of this truly enigmatic editor and publisher, and I am thrilled that Steve Upham at Screaming Dreams has published *Lest You Should Suffer Nightmares* in its new form.

Johnny Mains  
Norfolk  
September 2011

# LEST YOU SHOULD SUFFER NIGHTMARES



*Why do we like Horror Stories? In most of us lurk a streak of cruelty... in the Horror Story there is in all of us a primitive sense of the sinister and the macabre.*

– Herbert van Thal

**T**he *Pan Book of Horror Stories* are a series of books which has long passed into legend – stories of the *conte cruel*, the downright disturbing and the outlandish have been etched into the memories of many a reader who discovered them; most in a school playground, trading paragraphs of hideous deliciousness with only one aim; to disgust and delight as much as possible. But what of the series' first editor – the mysterious and shadowy Herbert van Thal, named 'The Archivist of the Pit' by reviewers? Where did his love of horror stem from? What darkness was prevalent inside such a man who has been described as being 'rather mousey and timid?'

Herbert (or Bertie as he was known to his friends) Maurice van Thal, the consummate Master of the Macabre was born on the 30<sup>th</sup> March 1904 in Hampstead to Bernard and Blanch, who he

## Johnny Mains

describes as a '*family which was far from snobbish.*' His first job after schooling at St Paul's, London from 1918 to 1921 was at a chartered accountants, where he soon became aware that he was pretty hopeless at it. During his lunch breaks he would go to a bookshop owned by '*an enchanting Darby-and-Joan couple*' on the Strand where he would rummage around for books that were mostly published by Grant Richards, whose horror back catalogue consisted of Arthur Machen, Barry Pain, W.C. Morrow, R. Murray Gilchrist, M. P. Sheil and Maurice Level.

After many attempts to get into the publishing industry, Bertie ended up working at a bookshop in College Crescent, Swiss Cottage, Hampstead. He was transferred from there after three years for lending out a book to a female he had taken a particular fancy to. At 22 he moved to lodgings at the Connaught in Seymour Street, Marble Arch – and was soon working at the F. and E. Stoneham bookshop in Broad Street. During the General Strike (3<sup>rd</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> May 1926) he was employed by the Metropolitan Railway as a porter.

His first break finally came when he joined the Holden imprint on the 21<sup>st</sup> June, 1927, here his first foray into the gothic was the two volume *Horrid Mysteries*, initially published by the Minerva Press in 1796. At Holden, they were produced as yellow backs, with stunning artwork by Paul Rotha. Listed as one of the seven 'horrid novels' by Jane Austen in her *Northanger Abbey* they were also mentioned by Thomas Love Peacock in *Nightmare Abbey*.

Sadly for Herbert, Holden's went into liquidation in February 1928, but at 24, he bounced back. It took eight frantic weeks of searching until he landed a position working for Peter Davies; a man who specialised in producing fine editions of reprints. At the time Bertie joined, Peter was venturing more into the general publishing arena. Amongst the variety of books published was an autobiography of J.M. Barrie's early years called *The Greenwood Hat, Being a Memoir of James Anon* and Dr. Marie Stopes' *Roman Catholic Methods of Birth Control*. They were also offered the chance to publish the classic work by Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* but turned it down, thinking there would be no need for such a book, coming just ten years after the end of the war. *Western Front* became one of the most popular books of its time.

## Lest You Should Suffer Nightmares

It was also around this time that Peter Davies republished Sheridan Le Fanu's *In a Glass Darkly* which Bertie was a fan of, and was sad to see that it did not sell as well as it should have. In fact Bertie was a fervent admirer of Le Fanu and regarded him as a neglected and forgotten author. He made great steps to redeem this and when he had his own publishing house, Home and van Thal – he published one short story from this author entitled *A Strange Adventure in the Life of Miss Laura Mildmay* in 1947, the first time the tale had been reprinted since its original publication in 1871. Not only did he reprint several of his short stories in *Great Ghost Stories* and *Tales to Make the Flesh Creep*, he also introduced the First Novel Library (1967) edition of Le Fanu's debut novel *The Cock and Anchor* and stated that '*it is a first novel of which no author need be ashamed. I hope it will serve the reader as an appetiser for the rest of Le Fanu's excellent work.*'

One can only assume that Bertie would be pleased with the recognition that Le Fanu has now gained with modern readers and he should be credited with helping to revive the authors work. Bertie privately printed his own short story; *The Old Lady Makes a Cup of Tea* in 1931 which had a limited run of 250 copies as its main purpose was to attract the attentions of a young lady he was quite smitten with.

The White Owl Press, based in the Strand and publishers of works by authors such as the supernatural scribbler H.A. Manhood, published Bertie's one and only collection, the strangely titled *Child Performer*. While this book is very slim and his style of writing takes a little work to get into, one desolate and otherworldly tale, *The Mask* is a revelation and it is a shame he didn't pursue his weird fiction further.

*(this is only a small section from the chapter)*

If you've enjoyed reading this extract then  
please consider purchasing the book!

Order online from : [www.screamingdreams.com](http://www.screamingdreams.com)