'Seek the truth, then doubt it'

*Undercliff*, Mark Brend (262pp, £8.99, Hornet Books)

Thanks to Alistair Fitchett's intriguing review of Mark Brend's novel *Undercliff*, I soon found myself immersed in 1970s London, as the protagonist Martyn Hope finds himself gradually sucked into a fringe religious cult as well as a strange relationship with Amelia. Martyn at first finds emotional support in the Olive Grove church, and everything seems ordinary enough, if a little creepy, but before too long Hope goes on a holiday-cum-retreat to a big old house the church own in Devon, and is also invited to become part of an 'inner circle' who seem to organize and control the meetings and members.

Martyn wisely resists, but one of the outcomes of this decision is the peculiar (to Martyn, anyway) disappearance of Amelia. He becomes obsessed with the idea that Amelia has been abducted after choosing to become part of the inner circle, since she was invited at the same time as himself. Martyn is clearly psychologically and emotionally damaged by this point – perhaps understandably so – and becomes convinced that the pair in charge of the Olive Grove are not what they seem, and that bad things are afoot. So convinced that he takes himself down to Devon again, to hide out and watch the retreat centre, and also contacts an old school friend – who has become a more mainstream vicar – to assist him with this. Chaos, confrontation, lots of action and hiding, and what could be construed as magic, occurs before the end of the book, which I found left the story open to many interpretations.

Do we have an unreliable narrator, living in the grip of delusion; or a straightforward fringe church whose religiosity is too controlling; or are we in the world of the paranormal and weird? The book is framed as a text sent by Martyn to Adam, a friend of a friend, giving it not only the 'authenticity' of non-fiction, but also another layer of distance from what happens. It's a gripping, moody read, and I felt compelled to find out more about the author and book.

Some basic research turned up the fact that I had actually read (and enjoyed) a couple of other non-fiction music books by Mark Brend (he has written several, most recently *The Sound of Tomorrow* [Bloomsbury 2012], which explores early commercial electronic music, as well as  an associated Radio 4 documentary, *A Sound British Adventure*), and also that he is a songwriter/composer/recording artist who has released six albums under various artist names and been described by the *Sunday Times* as a ‘homegrown hero’. Best of all was the fact that he now lives in Exeter and that we have several acquaintances and friends in common from when I lived there. It wasn't too difficult to contact Brend and after an initial email flurry between us, get him to agree to an interview.

*Your novel* Undercliff *recreates the early 1970s in superb detail. Did you research the era, or is it just memory? I grew up in London and it all seems very familiar and convincing!*
I wouldn’t say I researched the era, but it isn’t all memory either. More like absorbed knowledge. I was a child in the early 70s so I do have *some* memories of those times, but I think most of the references that give *Undercliff* whatever sense of period it has derive from a long-running enthusiasm for the music, books, TV, films, cars and fashion of that time and a little earlier. I think the recent past often has a particularly strong allure. The idea that things are comfortably in living memory, but already seem impossibly distant – a lost world.

I did live in London for more than 20 years, from the mid-80s onward, close to Nunhead/Peckham, where much of the London action in *Undercliff* takes place. I think my research extended to confirming that a couple of pubs I mention by name, that I recall from the 1980s, did indeed exist under those names in the early 70s.

*One of the main strands of the novel is the way the book's main character, Martyn, gets involved in a UK fringe church, seemingly arising out of the USA Jesus movement and the hippy era. It's all very believable and you use real references such as the singer-songwriter Larry Norman. As a writer, how much non-fiction has to be in a fictional text to convince the reader?*As a novice novelist I’m not sure I can answer that. I do like books that drop in references to real people, places and events, and mix them up with invention. Like *The* *Hound of The Baskervilles*, for example. Dartmoor is real but Grimpen Mire is imagined. But I think convincing the reader probably depends more on character and plot creating a believable world, or somehow persuading the reader to suspend disbelief while they’re reading. But I don’t understand the mechanics of how that works. I don’t read fantasy literature, but isn’t some of that completely imagined, with no ‘real’ non-fiction references?
 *You have a background playing in various bands, and writing about music. Was it easy to invent The Flock (the Olive Grove's house band)?*
In a way it was, yes. And a lot of fun. Musically, I imagine them somewhere in the overlap between what we now call acid folk, and prog, with the gospel angle grafted in – sometimes rather awkwardly, so that the join is too obvious.

*You mention The Christ Tree and some other weird religious folk albums that have either been reissued or put online in the last decade: is that an interest of yours? Have you thought about faking The Flock's album? Count me in!*
It’s an interest to an extent, but not obsessive. I think The Christ Tree are well worth a listen, but an awful lot of music I’ve been pointed to with a description of ‘lost classic’ turns out to be nothing of the sort – just lost for good reason. I must confess, as a long time contributor to magazines like *Record Collector* I have some previous form in this regard. In that world there’s currency in unearthing or at least being aware of that mythical brilliant lost album, all but ignored at the time, then forgotten for 40 years. More often than not, though, records placed into that category end up being rather disappointing when you actually listen to them. The story is better than the record – in my experience, anyway. They’re either not very good at all – or more likely – just ordinary. There are exceptions of course – like the great Bill Fay.

Fake the Flock album? Yes, I have thought about it, but it would be a lot of work. If the book gets adapted for TV or film and someone gives me a budget, I’ll see what I can do. It would be very important to get the technical details right. You’d want decent but not quite top of the range instruments, for example. The bassist probably had a Hayman. And there was definitely an Eko acoustic guitar with a Barcus-Berry pick-up clipped into the sound hole in there somewhere, plugged into an HH PA.
 *You're also working on a soundtrack EP to the book, rooted more in psychogeography or hauntology – is that correct? Tell us about that.*
I wouldn’t call it a soundtrack – more incidental music to accompany the book. It’s written and performed by fariña, originally active between 1995 and 2005, in which time we released two albums. The EP is the first release since we reformed in 2018. It comprises several short instrumental pieces, which try to capture the mood of some of the scenes in the book. This track is a taster, with a video I made with singer/songwriter and artist Darren Hayman:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRViJ1h2t6M

*'Seek the truth then doubt it', the strapline on the front cover, obviously ties in with the way the main character Martyn ends up questioning the group he has become involved in. I understand books aren't autobiographical but is this the story of an author responding to the recent exposés of the unhealthy practices of various cults or fringe groups who presented themselves as radical christians – such as The Jesus Army – or the result of a more general awareness of occult interests? Or just a good yarn?*
It’s meant to be a good yarn. Whether it is or not, it’s not for me to say, but that was my intention. It isn’t a vehicle for ideas or theories, and it certainly isn’t autobiographical. The book was written over years, so isn’t a response to any recent events, either. I don’t really know what you mean by ‘awareness of occult interests’ – I don’t know anything about that at all.

Having said all that I do think some of the themes – for example, people presenting themselves as benign spiritual leaders yet possibly with disguised dubious intent – have continuing resonance, both in a Christian context and beyond. During the period in which the book is set there was a lot of this going on – hippie-ish sorts of religious groups, some of which were actually perfectly orthodox, others of which most definitely weren’t, but which superficially looked much the same as the orthodox ones. I liked the idea of somebody lacking the knowledge and insight, initially, to tell the difference.

*The area of Devon the second half of the book is based in is, again, very realistic and well observed; it's also mostly quite recognisable even when you've renamed parts of it. I'm assuming it's a part of the country you know well, and have an affection for?*
Yes, I know it well. I live about 15 miles from the stretch of coast where much of the action takes place – between Beer and Sidmouth. It always strikes me as an area ripe for creative reimagining. I wrote about it here:

https://www.caughtbytheriver.net/2019/05/sidmouth-to-beer-a-visitors-guide-to-the-undercliff/

*This is a book where much is left unsaid, and we are left with the same clues that Martyn is, yet may draw different conclusions. For the reader, Martyn may be delusional or paranoid, perhaps even slightly instance (insane?). I'm presuming this is part of your authorial intent? What would you say to readers who prefer more concrete narratives?*It is part of my intent, yes, though I do think if anyone is interested enough a particularly close reading reveals that there’s a little more ‘said’ than might be first grasped. I wanted to leave some things open to question because I think that’s how life is, so often. We don’t always arrive at definite opinions about things, events don’t tie up neatly, we look back at experiences and don’t really understand what happened. I think that’s particularly the case when we encounter someting that might seem to have a supernatural element. There’s often a 'did that really happen, or am I imagining it or exaggerating it?' response.

I understand that some people want more resolution, but I couldn’t have it both ways. I didn’t want a golden age crime sort of thing, where there’s a complex puzzle that is solved in the end – though I like those sorts of books to a point.

*Why the move to fiction now? Can you talk about your influences? Some reviewers have mentioned* Rogue Male*, which I can understand in terms of the way Martyn has to hide himself, but we've also mentioned the much stranger, and to me more interesting, novels of Charles Williams. I think I mentioned Christopher Priest to you, too, mostly on account of the deadpan way he presents occult possibilities.*I’ve had a few attempts to write fiction before, which I abandoned when I realised they were hopeless. With *Undercliff* I just kept going, and had enough belief in it to get to the end of a first draft, and then review what I had and think there might be something worth pursuing.

As for influences, that’s a hard one. I’ve read widely for decades, and – I suppose – have been influenced by everyone I’ve read, to some extent. So it would be wrong to pick out one or two writers. I do like Geoffrey Household – *Rogue Male* in particular, but also many of his other books (which often revisit the same themes). There’s a later one called *The Sending* in which he places his traditional West Country manhunt story in a supernatural context. But to say that was an influence in the sense that I was thinking about it when sitting writing *Undercliff* wouldn’t be right.

I like Charles Williams’ novels, though find his poetry and theology almost unreadable. I think his prose style if more than a little overcooked, but I like the way he has apparently supernatural events breaking into everyday life, and then explores how people respond to that.

I’ve not read any Christopher Priest.

*I'll be honest, I wasn't totally sure the book needed the framing device of a manuscript being read by a minor character in the story. What prompted the decision to adopt that device? I'm never sure if this kind of 'distancing' implies more distrust or belief in readers!*You might well be right. Part of it is simply that I’m a sucker for that device. Also, very early on in the writing of *Undercliff* I had the idea that Adam (the minor character you refer to) might return in a subsequent book (see more below).
 *What are you working on at the moment? Will we see more fiction? Are Martyn or The Two going to return in a sequel?*
I’m working on another novel set in the same part of the world, about 15 years earlier. But the story doesn’t relate to *Undercliff* at all, and there are no shared characters. I do have an idea for a combined sequel/prequel to *Undercliff*, which might be novel 3, though it’s very sketchy. Adam, the recipient of the *Undercliff* manuscript, would come centre stage, which is one reason why he and the manuscript appear in Undercliff (see answer to the question above).
 *Thanks for your time.*Thank you.

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