

BLACK COUNTRY CREATIVES ...

High Time

By David Gaffney

How living in a tower block in the Black Country inspired my novel, 'Out Of The Dark'.

The idea for my novel *Out Of The Dark* came from the two years I spent living on the outskirts of Walsall in the 1980s. The flat was on the seventh floor of a seven-storey block, one of an identical pair that stood at an angle to each other next to the intersection of the M5 and

M6 motorways, just between West Bromwich and Walsall. I liked the incongruous address – Acacia Avenue, the Yew Tree Estate: a block named after an African shrub, on a council estate named after trees found in English graveyards. It turned out that no one wanted to live in these properties. They were far away from everything, and some considered the area dangerous, always mentioning the big empty area of grass and the fact that teenage kids congregated on it at night.

I only ended up there because I had studied English and Film Studies at the Walsall Institute of Higher Education and had stayed on in the area because me and my girlfriend had a baby.

When we first arrived the flat was almost empty apart from a sofa, a high wooden stool like you'd have at a breakfast bar, and a grey plastic stacking chair. The first thing I did was to open the doors to the balcony and go outside to look at the motorway intersection.

I think that most other Cumbrians would have hated the idea of living right next to a motorway intersection, but to be honest, this was one of the things that appealed to me about the address.

I stood there and watched, fascinated, as six lanes of the M6 packed with trucks and cars and coaches and vans merged with six similarly crowded lanes on the M5 and marvelled at the looping slip roads, the underpasses, the overpasses, the fabulous feat of engineering that made the whole thing possible.

There was one problem. An opaque reinforced glass panel at the edge of the balcony completely blocked your view unless you were standing up. I studied this barrier to my viewing pleasure for a long time. Then I got the tall stool out of the kitchen, lay it on its side, and balanced the stacking chair on that.



Now I could sit up high and watch the motorway intersection while drinking my beer. Winter sunshine, a can of Guinness, Kraftwerk on the stereo and the motorways heaving with traffic in front of me. It was a blissful time.

Having been born and brought up in west Cumbria, where only fields of sheep and mountains formed your view, this to me was endlessly stimulating - much preferable to sitting by a river or fell. I had felt cut off in west Cumbria.

These two motorways seemed to connect me to the whole country, the whole world even. It was sitting there like that that I hatched the idea for *Out Of The Dark*. Starting with an image seemed a good idea. The image was this. A man sitting on a balcony looking out over the motorway. But was that an idea for a story? It felt a little like Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. Would the man see something happen on the motorway, or something he wasn't supposed to see on the street below?

I sat there and watched until it got dark. Chains of hazy red and white blobs moving past one another. I thought of the drivers looking over at my block of flats and seeing the lights in my window, lit up like illuminations for the entertainment of the motorway users.

Maybe they could see me watching. I thought about who he would be, this character who watched the motorway. What would have happened to him to make him end up here and what would happen to him afterwards?

Then I thought instead about the act of watching itself, watching the same thing over and over. I can happily watch the same film several times, and I am happy to watch an open fire, or a sky full of moving clouds, or random people in the street going about their business.

Perhaps we are no different than the cats we see sitting in the windows looking out at the world.

So that was it. A character who watched. But he didn't just watch anything. He watched the mundane, the ordinary, the less-noticed, the little-examined. The high rise flats, the traffic, the roundabouts, the parades of shops. The urban world fizzing about him. Watching for him would be a way of escaping from his past. And that's what the book would be about.

David Gaffney

Available for pre-order now from:

<https://www.confingopublishing.uk/product-page/out-of-the-dark-by-david-gaffney>

