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My Elvis Blackout and Neverland: Truth, Fiction and Celebrity in the Postmodernist Heterobiographical Composite Novel

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***My Elvis Blackout and Neverland: Truth, Fiction and
Celebrity in the Postmodernist Heterobiographical
Composite Novel.***

Exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a PhD. by
Publication, University of Huddersfield, accompanied by hard copies of *My
Elvis Blackout* (2001) and *Neverland* (2009).

I am the sole author of the above works.

Simon Crump, November 2014.

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Abstract

My Elvis Blackout and Neverland: Truth, Fiction and Celebrity in the Postmodernist Heterobiographical Composite Novel

A PhD by publication comprising two of my books, *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland*, accompanied by a reflective and critical exegesis, which examines notions of truth, fiction and celebrity in the composite novel through a broadly analytical and practice-based methodology. The exegesis begins by exploring the links between the methodology of the fine artist and the new creative writer. It then demonstrates that *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* represent an original contribution to knowledge in the way that they explore and develop literary form (the ‘composite’ novel), and, in their exploration of celebrity, myth-making and fictional hagiography, and that the two books function as performative critiques which probe the boundaries between fiction and the fabricated reality of celebrity culture.

My exegesis analyses Linda Boldrini’s term ‘heterobiography’ (2012) with particular reference to Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy The Kid* (1981), which as a bricolage relies upon the reader’s pre-conceived recognition of the historicity of its protagonist and continually tests the boundaries between fact and fiction. In this section of the exegesis, I propose that what sets *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* apart from *Billy The Kid* is that whilst Ondaatje’s book certainly does exploit the confusions between fact, fiction, autobiography and history, it remains firmly set within the timeframe that its historical protagonist inhabits. *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* remain grounded within their readers’ expectations of American settings contemporary to their nominative protagonists, but both books also feature dilations in both historical and geographical setting.

Through analysis I have come to perceive ‘the celebrity persona’ as an identikit image assembled by thousands of witnesses. A photo fit photomontage tiered with impressions of subjective provenance, each layered transparency filtered through the fears and desires of fans and critics. Whereas other historiographic metafiction use historical figures as singular characters, *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* can be seen to be utilising an ‘identikit’ concept to present their respective protagonists as many-headed Hydras, or multiple probability ‘versions’ from parallel universes. By a conflation of terms, Hutcheon’s ‘historiographic metafiction’ (1988) and Boldrini’s ‘heterobiography’ (2012), *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* are in fact historiographic metafiction. The exegesis concludes by establishing my own works’ live impact on the overarching celebrity metanarratives, and their inevitable organic status.

My Elvis Blackout and Neverland: Truth, Fiction and Celebrity in the Postmodernist Heterobiographical Composite Novel.

‘There is no need to feel revolted: American culture has never permitted itself to be exemplified by Elvis Presley, and it never will. But certain Americans – and of course people from all over the world – have recognised themselves, and selves they would otherwise not have known, in Elvis Presley: Americans whose culture had taken shape long before Elvis Presley appeared, and those whose culture would have had no shape, would have been in no way theirs, had Elvis Presley been willing to keep the place allotted to him.’ Greil Marcus. *Dead Elvis*. 1991.

‘There appears to exist a non-dismissible chance that Michael was some kind of martyr. We won’t pity him. That he embraced his own destiny, knowing beforehand how fame would warp him, is precisely what frees us to revere him. We have, in any case, a pathology of pathologization in this country. It’s a bourgeois disease, and we do right to call bullshit on it. We moan that Michael changed his face out of self-loathing. He may have loved what he became.’ J.J.Sullivan. *Pulp Head: Dispatches From The Other Side of America*. 2012

My Elvis Blackout and *Neverland* are heterobiographical composite novels. The exegesis that follows will examine and analyse their status as composite works which function as performative critiques that probe the boundaries between fiction and the fabricated reality of celebrity culture.

Introduction.

a. My Elvis Blackout

My background is in fine art. After completing my degree in Philosophy I worked as a fine artist for over ten years and gradually established a network of: galleries who exhibited my work, critics who reviewed it favourably, and crucially an agent who promoted it. I made large photographic collages, which sometimes measured 18 x 24 feet. I had a studio, a steel cabinet full of expensive cameras, photographic lights and sometimes I even employed an assistant. The work was usually composed of medical and iconographic imagery, which was layered on transparencies to create a ‘third image’: a composite picture. These composites were then built into dense, complex overlaid images that were described as ‘deceptively attractive’ (Miksch, 1992: p. 6) despite their gruesome component parts and, as I intend to demonstrate in the conclusion to this essay, my methodology as a writer is still firmly rooted in and underpinned by my previous methodology as an artist.

My pictures were purchased by numerous collections including the Saatchis; The Arts Council of Great Britain; Kunsthaus Nuremberg; The Sous Sol in Paris; Zelda Cheatle; the Photographer’s Gallery in London, and by a range of private collectors, notably Griff Rhys Jones, Brian Eno and Dr. David Miller. At the time my work was regarded and reviewed as being postmodern (a term I did not really understand) and I was approaching the point where galleries and curators were asking me for my work, rather than me having to ask them for the chance to exhibit. Overall, it was beginning to look promising.

I was however, heartily sick of the whole thing. My practice as an artist had become unfulfilling, and frankly, ludicrous. The works had vitality in progress, but on completion, felt too heavily veiled in aesthetic formality. They became densely

decorative and the intended impact of the component imagery was less subtly obscured than smothered and buried. Also, the whole process was becoming prohibitively expensive, creatively frustrating and physically untenable. Each time I embarked upon a new project I felt as if I was trying to organise a loveless wedding. I eventually reached the stage where after attempting unsuccessfully to photograph a local Elvis impersonator in the deep end of a swimming pool, nearly drowning us both and ruining a perfectly good Hasselblad camera in the process, I decided to go for 'the big one', the greatest picture I was ever going to make, the one I'd been talking about making for years. I bought a dead horse from a firm called Casualty Cattle in Derbyshire and arranged for it to be delivered to my studio by trailer. From that point on, things began to go wrong for me. Horses are actually quite a lot bigger than you think. The 'great work' never got made, I finally realised how ridiculous my practice as an artist had become, and looking back upon the whole grisly business, I am still amazed that nobody tried to stop me.

In *Pam Flett*³ artist and writer Joanne Lee states: 'Almost every day I find myself having an interior battle between writing and visual art' (2014: p. 24). That was never the case for me. As soon as I decided to put pen to paper and the first few faltering stories materialised upon the page, I knew that there would be no going back. I was never going to be William Blake; for me it was definitely a case of either/or, but never both.

The word 'epiphany' is over-used in terms of creativity. One rainy morning I found myself unable to face another day in the studio under the lights with a rapidly decomposing dead horse. I decided to stay at home and began to write down a selection of ideas for all the pictures I now realised that I would never make. This was

an epiphany of sorts for me. As I started to write in earnest, I began to understand that I could still make these pictures, much bigger pictures in fact, and I no longer had to deal with any of the encumbrances I had struggled with as a visual artist. It was a revelation to discover that writing was also all about making pictures and that the process itself was unfettered by anything other than my own imagination. With writing, I really could do anything I wanted. I had no need for a studio or any equipment and I didn't even need to get dressed. In my writing, I could control how my characters thought, how they behaved, and what they had to say. I could even control the weather. This felt like a new autonomy for me – a creative practice less constrained and mediated.

The key difference here is that as an artist, I had always employed an additive methodology, establishing core images and then expanding, layering, decorating and elaborating upon them. In my writing, however, my faltering methodology rapidly became a viciously reductive process, getting it all down on the page and then 'making it less worse' (Goldman, 2001: p. 123).

[...] one serious intention was to create a work of art – after a while it began to make a noise like music; when it made the wrong noise, I altered it – when it made the right one finally, I kept it. (Lowry 1965: p. 200)

What emerged in my case was a disjointed cacophony of garbled short fiction. A few of the stories worked, a lot more did not, and the majority of them seemed just plain stupid. *My Elvis Blackout* was the outcome of all this. I did not know what I was doing; there was no plan other than to make 'something' like a piece of my visual art, but with words instead of pictures. I had no idea if the stories were of any merit, or even if they would ever be published; at this stage this was all of no real concern. I

finally felt connected with my imagination and internal life in a much more direct and uncomplicated way than I ever had when I was a fine artist. David Shields remarks in *How Writing Saved My Life* about his growing sense of frustration as a writer, and that contemporary visual artists seem to be more ‘ontologically inquisitive’ than contemporary writers (2013: p. 173). My own uninformed and unreasoned experience whilst writing *My Elvis Blackout* was quite the opposite, in that, and to paraphrase Joanne Lee, I now felt that I finally had access to a whole sensory realm rather than being limited to the purely visual (2014: p. 6). For me, this felt like a real unfurling of options, the discovery of a whole new language, which better translated my thoughts and ideas.

These were the first stories I’d written since I was at school. As an avid reader, I suppose I must have absorbed at least something relating to the craft of fiction, but the overall approach here was of trial and error. I was aware of Burroughs’ cut up experiments and although I did not overtly employ his technique in my own writing, I did settle upon something more along the lines of a method utilised by unscrupulous second-hand car dealers. The ‘cut and shut’ technique (Autotrader, 2014) is a crime well known to the insurance industry. Two insurance write-offs are harvested and then welded together to construct one apparently serviceable, but altogether lethal vehicle. As I scanned through the wrecks of what I had written, I found that sometimes I could do just this; I could simply reverse the front end of one failed story into the back end of another and then weld them both together. For example, two half-narratives, one about anti-Semitism, the other about witchcraft, became ‘Lansky Brothers’ in *My Elvis Blackout*, and verifiable narratives about Elvis’ life conjoined with speculative fictions became ‘Gladys’, ‘August 1970’, ‘Lady in Red’, ‘Fun, Fun, Fun’, ‘Scatter’, and ‘Elvis: Fat Fucked-Up Fool’. It seemed to work. The stories

finally began to do their ‘job’; I will address my perceptions of what that ‘job’ was later in this essay.

After a period of vacillation, *My Elvis Blackout* was finally published and I found myself in possession of a four-figure advance from Bloomsbury Publishing and a three-book deal.

b. Neverland

If *My Elvis Blackout* was written in innocence, *Neverland* was written in experience. The starting point for *Neverland* came from a suggestion by my agent that I write ‘something like the Elvis book again, because that did rather well.’

I was reluctant to repeat a formula merely because it had ‘worked’ once in terms of sales and critical attention, even if it was my own formula. As a rule, I try to make each book I write something new, a part of my on-going experimentation, development as a writer and research into my own creative practice. Nevertheless, I began to cast around for another celebrity whose life and career might respond to the treatment Elvis Presley had received in *My Elvis Blackout*. I did not want to write a disappointing sequel to a book that had done so well for me, and at one point, had been described by the publishers Bloomsbury as ‘acclaimed’. I felt that I needed a much stronger link to the first book, some kind of continuity with at least its own internal logic.

Whoever my protagonist was going to be for the new book, I was determined that he or she should not be merely a celebrity who was famous for being famous. My protagonist needed to be somebody who had prodigious talent, had worked tirelessly for their fame and then become flawed and corrupted by it. I briefly considered Princess Diana Spencer, drawn to the tragic figure she cut and the manner of her

death, but soon rejected her as a potential subject because she had married into celebrity rather than achieved it.

Whatever fictions I had indulged in whilst writing *My Elvis Blackout*, there was one fact I would never have conceived of: that Elvis' daughter would one day marry Michael Jackson – a 'ship' in the vernacular of fan-fiction¹ – but in this particular case, a fact. So here was a potential ready-made connection between the two books.

The circumstances and manner of Elvis' death from an overdose of prescription chemicals in August 1977 and Jackson's transition from the 'King of Pop' to 'Wacko Jacko' (bear in mind that he was still alive as I wrote *Neverland*) held many parallels. The timetables of Elvis' and Jackson's lives were soaked in as much congruence as one cares to distil. Elvis' and Jackson's careers followed and were following similar trajectories: early success grounded in raw talent, supplemented by hard work and dedication, leading to world-wide fame, wealth, seclusion, retail therapy, drugs and unhappiness.

Like Elvis, Jackson was once unstoppable, outrageous, and effortlessly cool. He had the hits, the style, the talent and an ego to match. Elvis was the King of Rock, Jackson was the King of Pop. Elvis got fat and weird, Jackson got thin and weird. Both men 'slipped silently across the threshold that separated private citizen from public property [...] forsaking personhood to become a persona' (Withmer, 1996: p. 155). It was this transition that intrigued me most. It was the key aspect of their lives that I wanted to explore, and in my own practice-based manner, sought to contribute

¹ A 'ship' in fan fiction is the act of selecting two fictional characters from disparate sources, and pairing them up to create new romantic/ sexual fictions.

to knowledge of this subject by endeavouring to re-contextualise celebrity into the sphere of private life.

Whilst writing *My Elvis Blackout* I had become rather fond of Lamar Fike. Lamar was a friend of Elvis and one of the ‘guys’ (Nash, 1995: p. 2), the original self-styled ‘Memphis Mafia’ (Nash, 1995: p. 1) – the men who looked after Elvis and in truth, were often simply paid to be his friends. Lamar was an exception; he loved Elvis. In real life Lamar was already quite a character; he had a very dry sense of humour, and an incisive turn of phrase: ‘I’ll give you Elvis’ relationship with [Priscilla] in a nutshell: You create a statue. And then you get tired of looking at it’ (Nash 1995: p. 266), and he could also be quite intimidating. Frank Skinner reported being terrified of Lamar when he met him² (Skinner 2002: p. 389).

Lamar could also be touching when talking about his relationship with Elvis and the overwhelming sense of loss he constantly felt for his best friend:

Even now, I dream about Elvis three or four times a week. Very vivid dreams. In one, I said, ‘Where are you?’ He said, ‘It’s not anyplace you’d want to be right now.’ I said, ‘Well, where is it?’ He said, ‘Son, it’s not Cleveland’. Last night, I woke up and heard him call my name [...] After Elvis’s death, I went to a psychiatrist for three fucking years. I had two or three hundred hours of psychotherapy, trying to get over it. The doctor said. ‘You’re going to have these dreams for the rest of your life.’ And he’s right. There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think of Elvis. (Fike, in Nash 1995: p. 761)

² In 1998 Skinner paid £11,000 for a blue velvet shirt reputedly worn by Elvis at the iconic Tupelo 1956 concert. The documentary *A Little Bit of Elvis* (ITV 1998) tracked his journey from Memphis to Vegas searching for provenance, which was partly provided by Lamar Fike.

Lamar was an obvious candidate to be the narrative stepping-stone between the two books. As soon as I'd finished the first story 'Fumes' and realised the link – however tenuous – I set aside any concerns about a second-rate sequel and began to enjoy the whole process. 'If I knew then what I know now' is the well-worn phrase. And in this case I did.

It took me three years to research and write *Neverland*. I read everything I could find to read about Jackson. I listened to all of his music, I subscribed to his fan forums, and I checked the weather and local news in Los Olivos³ every day. I even visited bird table webcams and community chat rooms. Everything I did for three years, I wondered how Jackson might have done it and how he might be feeling if he did. In retrospect, I was 'method acting' Jackson as a character.

I completed the book on 25 June 2009. Three hours later I read on Yahoo News that Michael Jackson was dead.

In spite of this momentous news, I made a conscious decision to resist the temptation to add anything to the book or to amend my portrayal of Jackson now that he was dead. Absolutely nothing in the book was changed. There was no point; the stories had instantly changed in themselves by default. Upon Jackson's death they immediately became more poignant, as they assumed the timbre of eulogy or post-mortem.

Neverland includes a very short story, 'Gold', in which Jackson commits suicide. There are no hesitation marks here. The main character is dead; anything that follows is a matter of conjecture. *Neverland* also has a happy ending of sorts for

³ Los Olivos, California is the location of Jackson's Neverland Ranch.

Jackson, 'Mike's Roofing', but with Jackson's 'real life death' these hopeful fantasies are no longer a possibility.

The Composite Novel

I first encountered the term ‘Composite Novel’ in Paul March-Russell’s *The Short Story* (2009: p. 105). On further study, I began to identify *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland*, my two formerly indefinable, disjunctive, unclassifiable, problematic books as in fact part of a definite and developed narrative form.

The key contemporary text when examining the origin, evolution and classification of the slippery creature known as ‘The Composite Novel’ is Dunn and Morris’s *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* (1995). To ground my own writing in a theoretical context, I intend to analyse the first chapter of this book in relation to *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland*.

Dunn and Morris begin by making the point that although the term ‘Composite Novel’ has been in use for two centuries; it originally referred to collaborative works (Dunn & Morris 1995: p. 17) such as *The Sturdy Oak: A Composite Novel of American Politics by Fourteen American Authors* (Jordan. Ed, 1917), and that its usage was developed by Eric Rabkin (1976) because he ‘felt the need’ (Dunn & Morris, 1995: p. 3) to be able to use the term when teaching Faulkner’s *Go Down Moses* (1942), a seven story narrative arranged in ‘unchronological’ order (Dunn & Morris, 1995: p. 66).

J.W. Beach describes ‘a composite view’ of a cycle, which the author establishes and then develops ‘to build a set of stories into a larger whole, in which by some compositional device, they are given a semblance of organic unity’ (1932: p. 475). The underlying thought here appears to be a growing frustration with the limitations of the term ‘Short Story’ or indeed ‘Short Story Cycle’ as an adequate description of a collection of stories where the cumulative effect is greater than the sum of their component parts. I would suggest that this is where the modern definition

of the composite novel begins in earnest. Malcolm Cowley, again in relation to Faulkner, suggests that the term stems from the desire for ‘something more’ (1949: p. 7); a way to describe a genre that he states ‘Faulkner has made peculiarly his own’ (1949: p. 7). Cowley later went on to extend this definition to say that the composite novel ‘...lies somewhere between the novel proper and a mere collection of short stories’ (1960: p. 15).⁴

The definition and usage of the phrase ‘Composite Novel’ was given further credence by Ingram (1971) and then Reid (1977) and in 1989 Mann referred to the term ‘Short Story Cycle’ as ‘the concept of the unified short story collection’ (1989: p. 5). Note that the terms short story collection and composite novel were still generally interchangeable at this point. Dunn and Morris however, make a clear distinction between the two descriptors:

[...] *composite novel* and *short story cycle* are terms diametrically opposed in their generic implications and assumptions. *Composite novel* emphasises the integrity of the whole, whilst *short story cycle* emphasises the integrity of the parts. (1995: p. 12)

On the face of it, this appears to be the definitive quotation on the subject; a clear definition, which sets the two narrative forms irrevocably apart. To state this bluntly, in terms of my own intentions and experience as a creative writer, I cannot subscribe to that distinction. I believe that *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* can function as either/or, or indeed both. This does not make them unique, but it does make them unusual.

I would suggest that *My Elvis Blackout* can and will operate simultaneously under both ‘diametrically opposed’ descriptors. Its stories can be read end to end; the

⁴ The use of the words ‘proper’ and ‘mere’ here, say a great deal about the popular perception of the short story as the ‘little brother’ of the novel (May 1994: p. 78).

reader encounters a young Elvis in 'Crown Point' at the very beginning of the book, traces his misadventures and failings in 'August 1970', 'Stairway to Heaven', 'Jungle Room' and discovers him dead on the final page in 'Elvis Spotters Guide'.

Alternatively, the stories can be read at random and they will still function as a composite narrative of sorts. The reader's experience here reflects the manner in which the book was written and it is the reader who completes the circuit of the creative process.

This bricolage format, I would suggest, situates *My Elvis Blackout* within the recent tradition of experimental non-linear narratives exemplified by J.G Ballard's *Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and William Burroughs' *Naked lunch* (1959). Burroughs stated that the chapters/vignettes that comprise *Naked Lunch* were to be read in any order the reader desired, and Ballard offered his readers this piece of advice in the introduction to *The Atrocity Exhibition*:

Readers who find themselves daunted by the unfamiliar narrative structure of the *Atrocity Exhibition* - far simpler than it might appear at first glance - might try a different approach. Rather than start at the beginning of each chapter, as in a conventional novel, simply turn the pages until a paragraph catches your eye. If the ideas or images seem interesting, scan the nearby paragraphs for anything that resonates in an intriguing way. Fairly soon, I hope, the fog will clear, and the underlying narrative will reveal itself. In effect, you will be reading the book in the way it was written. (1990: p. 2)

In his introduction to the new Galley Beggar e-book edition of *My Elvis Blackout* (2013: p. 2), Professor Jon McGregor offers the reader advice which reflects both Burroughs' and Ballard's conception of how to navigate their books:

Did I say 'vignettes'? I'm not sure if that's the right word. Stories? Fragments? Arrangements? Derangements? I think the clue, and the best way of reading this thing, is there in the title: these are *Blackouts* - moments of half-glimpsed vision, hallucination, recollection, distorted rumour and myth. As with all the best books, *My Elvis Blackout* needs the reader to tune into its particular wavelength, or to choose a way in which to read it. My reading is to take these as the snatched and garbled transcriptions of police notebooks, psychiatric reports, dream diaries, prison letters and napkin notes of small-town America; or at least, the image of small-town America as twisted through the prism of transatlantic popular culture. (2013: p. 2)

Depending on which order they choose to read its thirty-seven separate narratives, the reader's experience of *My Elvis Blackout* will of course be different, but they will still be left with the intended thematic undertone of melancholy and loss that pervades the book. These stories can stand alone and crucially they can work together; the real unifying experience of this book is what happens inside the reader's head:

I found reading the collection a profound and melancholy experience. I came away feeling that after the laughter had died away, Crump's vision was far bleaker than I'd imagined. Broken, damaged people populate the stories and the dysfunctional side of human nature prevails. Crump uses Elvis as a cipher for all that is chaotic, mass-hysterical and sociopathic. (Amazon customer review, 2009: Appendix III)

Since writing *My Elvis Blackout* I have come to understand the construction of the book as practice-based research. Having written a disjointed clutch of short stories, I printed them out and laid them out on the floor. In retrospect, I was intuitively

arranging them compositionally in order to visualise the stories as a ‘whole picture’ to establish some kind of coherent ‘order’, not necessarily a conventional linear narrative, but some kind of contiguous connection between the fragments which made up the book.

I was not aware why I was employing this ordering process at the time; it just seemed like the right thing to do. With hindsight, I was applying an intuitive low-tech, DIY approach to marshalling my stories: knocking the component pieces of the narrative form into shape. This is the technique that Joyce employed in *The Dubliners* (1914), where the fifteen stories form sub-groups that reflect and address childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life. The key difference here being that I was not Joyce; he knew exactly what he was doing, whereas I was instinctively applying a more ‘Fine-Art’ based structural strategy to my writing, utilising key images and repeated refrains.

In terms of authorial or editorial intention, Ingram proposes three distinct types of short story cycle⁵:

1. The Composed Cycle. i.e. Something that was always intended to be.
2. The Completed Cycle. i.e. It evolved into one during the creative process.
3. The Arranged Cycle. i.e. It was done afterwards. (1971: p. 17)

The closest *My Elvis Blackout* comes to Ingram’s descriptors is as an ‘Arranged Cycle’, but for me, Ingram’s use of the word ‘afterwards’ is problematic. The act of creative writing is not segmented into discrete, well-defined, singular units, nor is it a

⁵ It is important to note that from this point I am defining the terms ‘short story cycle’ and ‘composite novel’ as broadly interchangeable when reflecting upon my own experience of the writing process.

straightforward linear methodology. There is no ‘afterwards’; the writing process may be over, but I would propose that in arranging the stories, the creative process is still very much on-going. I regard my obsessive ordering and re-ordering of the stories to be a key factor in that creative process and crucial to what makes the two books composite novels, as distinct from being solely short story collections. For me, that was the exact point when *My Elvis Blackout* first assumed its dual status as both a short story cycle and a composite novel.

Ingram ascribes editorial intervention as a key factor in these distinctions (1971: p.17). I had no editorial intervention as I wrote and completed *My Elvis Blackout*, and even when the book was picked up by Bloomsbury, who have a very competent and experienced editorial team, they did not change one single word or even suggest any changes. I had expected that the book would be pulled apart and that all sorts of arguments would ensue; truth be told I was rather looking forward to those arguments, but when I mentioned this to Mike Jones, my editor at Bloomsbury (who certainly was not known for holding back when it came to editing and later wrought terrible and justified havoc upon my first ‘conventional’ novel *Twilight Time*), his blunt response was: ‘I’m not really sure what we’re dealing with here, Simon, in fact I have no idea. It works; it is what it is. So let’s not fuck about with it, eh?’ I would suggest here that I had already done the editorial work and made the editorial decisions myself in terms of Ingram’s definition.

Neverland was different. I was four books and eight years down the line as a writer and more confident about what I was doing. I also had a publishing deal in place and knew for certain that one day I would see the book in print and in the shops. *Neverland* fits neatly into Ingram’s second definition ‘The Completed Cycle’ in that it evolved into a composite novel during the initial creative process. By this stage in my

development as a writer I knew about the composite novel (in everything but name) and the book was written as such. I wrote what I considered to be the key stories ‘Fumes’ (the link from Elvis to Jackson), ‘Moonwalk’ (intended as a homage to Jackson’s talent) and then several end pieces (‘Gold’, ‘Mary’ and ‘Mike’s Roofing’); the rest of the stories spread out, or were at least arranged around them. There is more of a story arc here. Lamar’s stories hold the book together in what has been described as an ‘uber narrative’ (Dyson, 2009: p. 35) and even though the narrative deviates wildly, it always comes back to Lamar.

Dunn and Morris stress the importance that each section/story/text piece within a composite novel is ‘individually complete and autonomous’ (1995: p. 8). They also discuss the significance of the naming of these sections, citing Anais Nin’s *Collages* (1964) as a composite novel which does not name its component narratives, and Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John* (1985) - a collection of eight stories featuring one narrator growing up in Antigua – as one that does (it even has a contents page). This ‘para-textual evidence’ (Achter, 2011: p. 1) is a device I employed in both *My Elvis Blackout* – because I had always given my pictures titles – and in *Neverland* as a means to establish a further stylistic link between the two books.

In *Neverland* all the stories are autonomous, but some are more autonomous than others. There are three Lamar stories which barely stand alone (‘Cool’, ‘Shot’, ‘Meanwhile Back At The Ranch’) as evidenced by the fact that I have never performed them at a public reading as they require too much contextualising for them work effectively as brief, self-contained pieces. Once again, *Neverland* does not conform to one of Dunn and Morris’s suggested definitions. A composite novel, I propose, is slightly different in form every time, which is what continues to engage me about this rather peculiar form of narrative.

Reader Response in the Composite Novel.

In his essay *Truth in Fiction: A re-examination of Audiences* (1977) Peter J.

Rabinowitz proposes four basic types of reader (1977: p. 128) for which I offer further distinctions:

1. The Actual Audience. i.e. Lay people, civilians who have not been paid to read the book, as opposed to Literary Critics, who are paid to read the book.
2. The Authorial Audience. The audience who the author had in mind when writing the book.
3. The Narrative Audience. This is a more complex notion of readership. Rabinowitz asks “What sort of person would I have to pretend to be- what would I have to know or believe- if I wanted to take this work of fiction as real” (p128), citing Jules Verne’s *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) and making the point that a contemporary reader of this story, to become a ‘Narrative Audience’ would have to ‘pretend not to believe in moon travel, so that we can then, as a narrative audience, pretend to be convinced that it is possible’ (Rabinowitz, 1977: p. 128).
4. The Ideal Narrative Audience. The audience the narrator wishes he/she was addressing. Rabinowitz uses the word ‘narrator’ here advisedly; he is not talking about the author, he is referring in fact to an unreliable narrator and an audience who trust implicitly everything he/she has to say.

All of the above, as Rabinowitz concedes in the closing paragraphs of his essay, does not constitute a fully finished theory of fiction structure. He states that definitions of specific types of reader are not mutually exclusive, but are

representative of different strands within a multiplicity of reader responses, that embody distinct levels of response, to works of literary fiction. In consideration of Rabinowitz's article and in relation to *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* I have become increasingly aware of the complex and problematic nature of attempting to fathom what a reader 'gets' from a book.

At this stage, I prefer to return to March-Russell's point that it is ultimately the reader who decides if a collection of short stories actually constitutes a composite novel (2009: p. 105). To extrapolate this notion, I propose that the author can never second-guess their readership, and that once a book is disseminated, every reader brings their own subjectivity to each reading. To state this simply, it is ultimately for the reader to decide how to interpret the structure and content of *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland*.

To quote Howard Devoto: 'Do The Meaning: You assemble a picture and it gets a meaning, *and then you do the meaning*'⁶ (In Lowrey, 2011: p. 2). This is by no means a retreat from analysing reader response to my own books; it is a rationalisation of my own experience of the phenomenon. In simple terms, there appear to be almost as many different definitions of distinct forms of The Composite Novel as there are composite narratives, and there are as many types of reader response as there are readers. As Andrei Tarkovsky states: 'A book read by a thousand different readers is a thousand different books' (in Gianvito, 2006: p. 34). In terms of *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland*, this is a viewpoint with which I am inclined to agree.

Both the anecdotal and printed reviews of *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* (See Appendices III) have provoked such a diverse reader response that a general

⁶ My italics.

interpretation is particularly problematic. Both books have been characterised as ‘sick’; ‘blackly comic’; ‘disturbing’; ‘downright disturbing’; ‘fucked-up’; ‘odd’; ‘comfortingly odd’; ‘sad’; ‘infantile’; ‘profound’ and ‘obscure’ (See Appendix III). As their author, I would always hope to achieve any possible combination of the above responses to my writing; I also aspire to make my ‘ideal reader’ (Rabinowitz 1977: p. 128) laugh at/with my words on the page, then question that initial response and feel guilty about it afterwards. For me, this is ‘The reader’s share’ (Freund 1987: p. 92).

Neverland seems like a work of conceptual art, reflecting what the reader brings to it; though the same point might be made of most books with a flash of originality to them. It is almost impossible to extract quotes from the book without misrepresenting its tone: ‘funny, ridiculous, surreal, and mesmerically repetitive’ (Self, 2009 p. 1).

In her essay *Literature in the reader: Stanley Fish and affective poetics*, Freund cites Fish’s proposal that a sentence is an ‘event’ (1970: p. 125):

[...] something that happens to, and with the participation of the reader. And it is this event, this happening – all of it and not anything that could be said of any information one might take away from it - that is, I would argue, the meaning of a ‘sentence’. (1970: p. 125)

Retrospectively, this is an accurate explanation of what I set out to do aleatorically in *My Elvis Blackout*, and more knowingly in *Neverland*. I propose to extend this notion of ‘meaning’ beyond the component sentences in the stories, to the stories themselves and then even further to encompass the cumulative effect of these short pieces upon the ‘actual audience’ (Rabinowitz, 1977: p. 128), a process which Fish characterises as ‘cognitive mediation’ (1970, p.126).

In 2005 I was invited to read at *The International Festival of the Short Story* in Croatia. I was fortunate enough to share a stage with Denis Johnson, author of *Jesus's Son* (1993), a multi-faceted collection of eleven connected stories narrated by a drifter in contemporary America, which has been described as 'a kind of cubist chronology' (Dunn & Morris, 1995: p. 170). We had been paired for the gig because both our books were about America but were clearly something 'other' than short story collections. Denis heckled me during the performance and at one point snatched *My Elvis Blackout* from me (which he had already read) and read out my story 'August 1970' for me, saying that it required 'a fuckin' American accent to do this right'. After the gig, Denis asked me if I thought that *My Elvis Blackout* was a novel. I said that I didn't know and that I didn't care. I asked him the same question about *Jesus's Son* - a book that Dunn and Morris define as a composite Novel (1995, p.170). Denis replied: 'I dunno Simon. It's not for poor bastards like us to figure... it's for them, them other, other smart folks out there.' I would suggest, based upon my own experiences that the final decision, the casting vote, rests with the reader ('them other smart folks out there') rather than solely in academic analysis and taxonomy of the texts. March Russell (2009: p. 104) cites Robert Lusher's idea of the 'open book' whereby the reader is presented with the possibility, almost a kit of parts; '...to construct a network of associations that binds the stories together and lends them cumulative thematic impact' (Lohafer & Clary, 1989: p. 149).

In *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland*, this invitation to become 'co-creator' (Munn, 2014: p. 5) is always available to the reader (and as I have demonstrated – in *My Elvis Blackout* they are not even required to read the book in any particular order), but whether the reader accepts this invitation is entirely up to them. Dunn and Morris make *some* reference to the reader's response to a composite novel when determining

its ultimate classification, but they do not examine the idea in detail, a point which March-Russell makes when he suggests that the whole notion of defining a composite novel ‘tends to gloss over the extent to which subjective interpretation plays in how these texts are perceived and understood’ (2009: p.107). The notion that ultimately all creative writing becomes a collaborative process is not new. Almost every author has had the experience of sharing their work pre-publication with at least one trusted reader or editor, and when the book is finally released into the wild, anything can and will happen. For me, this is my overarching experience of being a creative writer: the sharp end, the last word of the collaborative process lies with the reader.

Studies in neuroscience (Kanwisher & Moscovitch, 2000) have demonstrated that ‘we’ always try to make sense, to construct our own internal narratives out of a series of seemingly random events, just as ‘we’ pareidolically,⁷ ‘see faces in hills, the Moon and Toasties’ (BBC, 2014): if the links, however tenuous, are there to be made, ‘we’ will always attempt to make them.

My Elvis Blackout and *Neverland* may appear to be disjunctive at first sight, but I would suggest that they contain enough clues and enough narrative links, for example, the sporadic first- person narratives in *My Elvis Blackout*, and Lamar’s ‘uber narrative’ in *Neverland* (Dyson, 2009: p. 35), for the reader to make sense of them, and ultimately to construe their own narratives, and, as Kennedy (1995) proposes, they might even enjoy the process.

The discovery of connections instead, remains the reader’s function and enhances the pleasure of the text. Lacking a continuous narratorial presence, the sequence – like the decentred modernist novel – places the reader in a strategic position to draw parallels, to discern whatever totalising meanings may inhere

⁷ Pareidolia: The imagined perception of pattern or meaning.

in the composite scheme. The aggregate text at last yields a global perspective of wholeness or collectivity that some readers would call the defining experience of the story sequence: the vision of unity or community. (Kennedy, 1995: p. 196)

This 'subjective interpretation' (Russell, 2009: p. 104) in terms of reader response, is ultimately what makes *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* composite novels: 'In other words, whatever intentions there might have been behind their composition, their classification is dependent upon the uses they are put to by their readers' (Russell 2009: p. 105).

Truth and Celebrity

a. Truth

At the heart of fiction, even the least worthy of the name, some sort of truth can be found. (Conrad, 1969: p. 185)

Kafka once described the search for ‘truth’ as similar to the difficulties of a blind man in a room with no light looking for a black cat that is not there. Kafka never met Elvis. Nor did he attempt to deal with the strange, multi-headed beast that is, in this day and age, the interpersonal residue of human politics that make up the complicated legacy of America’s most enduring icon. Elvis does, in fact endure; that is not a subject of debate. But the multi-coloured light of truth shed by his former friends and acquaintances is that of sunlight refracted through a prism. When a biographer moves, like a piece on a chessboard, from the square of one person who knew Elvis to that of another, the change in colour and environment can be so overwhelming as to cause wonder if the same ‘Elvis ’is, in fact being discussed. (Withmer 1996: p. 1)

To begin by stating the obvious, *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* communicate a good deal of truths. Both books are loaded with and grounded upon verifiable facts about their nominative protagonists. Of the thirty-seven stories which comprise *My Elvis Blackout*, thirty of them relate facts about Elvis’s life at Graceland and beyond, and in *Neverland* thirty-seven of the seventy-two stories utilise facts about Jackson as either their starting point or controlling idea.

It is true that Elvis kept a badly-behaved pet chimpanzee called Chatter; owned a Messerschmitt micro car; that he was given to burying his valuables in the yard; that his mother was addicted to prescription drugs; that he owned a ranch called the Circle

G, and that he expired in the bathroom. Similarly, it is true that Michael Jackson lived at Neverland Ranch near Los Olivos; kept life-size mannequins in his bedroom; was friends with Uri Geller; set fire to his hair whilst filming a Pepsi commercial, and crucially that he married Elvis's daughter Lisa Marie Presley. These facts formed the starting points for the collection of fictions, convoluted chronology, intertextuality and general confusion that characterise both books.

These core stories are already known to the informed reader, absorbed from the outside world of 'extra-literary reality' (Hawthorne 1987: p. 93). The question about truths and meanings in literary fictions, which has provoked so much debate amongst theorists, centres around the disparity between the Saussurean notion that the language of literature presents a closed system, non-referential to anything other than itself, and a more pragmatic approach which:

[...] displays a property which may puzzle logicians but that doubtless appears natural to anyone else: their truth as a whole is not recursively definable starting from the truth of the individual sentences that constitute them. (Pavel, 1986: p. 17)

In the introduction to her book *A Thousand Darknenses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (2001), Ruth Franklin examines the transition from purely factual accounts of the Holocaust to what she characterises in her concluding chapter as 'third generation writing' (2001: p. 235) where she cites J.S Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2003). I am concerned here, with Franklin's general observations about the fictionalisation of a historical subject and her perception of the wider truths this process may reveal. Franklin makes a case for the validity of Holocaust fiction as a historically relevant recourse, arguing that the autobiographical works of Primo Levi have been understood as both novel and memoir. As Young states:

If there is a line between fact and fiction, it may be by necessity a winding border that tends to bind these two categories together as much as it separates them, allowing each side to dissolve occasionally into the other. (1990: p. 123)

In *On Autobiography* (1975), Lejeune makes a similar point about ‘the seemingly insoluble problem of establishing a distinction between autobiography and fiction’ (1975: p. 6). Franklin’s point here, not overtly stated but at least implied, mirrors Hawthorne’s concept ‘extra-literary reality’ (1987: p. 93), in that the modern reader of Holocaust fiction is already more painfully aware of some of the facts than a first time post-war reader would be. For my own purposes, whilst *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* are not autobiographies, they are, to employ Lucia Boldrini’s term ‘heterobiographies’ (2012: p. 2) – a term which I shall examine in more detail later in this section – and Lejeune’s frustration with the inevitable confusion between fact and fiction is certainly not the problem here; for me, it is a blessing and a key controlling idea for both books.

In my view the largest single difference between History and fiction [...] is that each establishes quite different relationships between writer and subject, and writer and reader. Had I discovered the nature of Humbert Humbert’s secret joys in real life, I would have had him locked up [...] nug between the covers of the fiction called *Lolita* I can revel in his eely escapades. His delirious descriptions; weep with him when his child slave escapes; yearn with him for her recapture. Through giving me access to the inner thoughts and secret actions of closed others, fiction has taught me most of what I know, or think I know about life. (Clendinnen, 2002: p.123)

In broad terms, ‘the map is not the territory’ (Korzybski, 1995: p.58). *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* can be read and interpreted as ‘historiographic metafiction’

(Hutcheon, 1987: p. 122), which seek to expand upon, critique and contribute to knowledge about the cult and status of celebrity in an age of mass culture. Semprum states:

They'll never really know... that leaves books. Novels preferably. Literary narratives, at least, that will go beyond simple eyewitness accounts. That will let you imagine, even if they can't let you see [...]. (1998: p. 25)

Although it may appear disingenuous, or even disrespectful to set up *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* against analyses of modern Holocaust literature (there is in fact a holocaust story in *My Elvis Blackout*, 'Lansky Brothers', which as a lyrical (Baldeshwiler, 1994: p. 231) story does attempt to make a wider point about the plight of Jewish exiles in America post World War Two), the point here is to focus upon the form, not the content. This literary fiction draws upon well-known facts and enables the reader to 'imagine what they cannot see' (Semprum, 1998: p. 25). These 'third generation narratives' are in fact performative critiques (Borden, 2001: p 5) about life in the camps which transcend notions of reportage in the same manner that *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* seek to expand investigations of fame and celebrity beyond strictly factual accounts of the lives and careers of Elvis and Jackson. The act of imagining here, is also an act of 'empathy' on the part of the reader, and as a writer, the 'reworking' of reality is a means of putting it into perspective (Franklin, 2011: p. 15).

E.L. Doctorow (who I will return to in a later section of this essay) states:

All history is composed. A professional historian won't make the claims for the objectivity of his discipline that the lay person grants him [...] fiction has no borders, everything is open. You have a limitless possibility of knowing the truth. (Doctorow in Farca, 2013: p. 43)

Despite the aforementioned disparate nature of reader responses to *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* (see Appendix III), the most commonly used word in both peer and customer reviews is ‘celebrity’, so at this stage of my analysis it is beneficial to examine the wider notion of celebrity in literary fiction.

b. Celebrity

We all love our stars, but we much prefer them broken. We want our bluesmen to have ‘killed a man’ and served their time in Parchman Farm. We want our rappers to be tooled-up wounded gangstas. We want our rock stars to take drugs, paint pictures with their own blood and hurl televisions from hotel windows.

So that’s that. Elvis Presley is dead, Michael Jackson is dead. We got what we wanted. Our singers as stars and victims. (Crump, 2009)

The portrayal of celebrities in literary fiction (real person fiction) is an established authorial device. Tom Cruise appears in Brett Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991); Cary Grant is the protagonist in Wu Ming’s *54* (2006); Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor feature in Jess Walter’s *Beautiful Ruins* (2013); Ian Fleming appears in William Boyd’s *Any Human Heart* (2010), and ‘Posh Spice’ in Irvine Welsh’s *Acid House* (1994). Similarly, Alma Cogan is the protagonist in Gordon Burn’s *Alma Cogan* (2004), and in *Richard* (2001), Ben Myers presents a carefully- researched, but nevertheless imagined account of the two week period which followed the disappearance of Richey Edwards, lead singer of the Manic Street preachers. Michael Jackson makes a brief appearance in Saul Bellow’s *Ravelstein*

(2000) and Elvis features throughout Nigel Cox's *Jungle Rock Blues* (2004) as Tarzan of the Apes. Margaret Thatcher appears in Alan Hollinghurst's *Line of Beauty* (2005) and also in Gordon Burn's *Born Yesterday* (2005) and the entire Kennedy clan appear in various guises in Mike Resnick's (ed.) *Alternate Kennedys* (1992). Lee Harvey Oswald appears in Don DeLillo's *Libra* (2011), and in *Star of the Sea* (2003) Joseph O'Connor gently pokes fun at a young Charles Dickens, eagerly gathering source material from the book's central character, Pius Mulvey. This is by no means an exhaustive list but is cited here for reference.

As I began to write the initial sections of the fragmentary stories that eventually converged to form *My Elvis Blackout*, I felt that they required some kind of cohesion, something to unite them, at least a titular collective noun. This desire was motivated by my reading of Mike Resnick's (ed.) *Alternate Kennedys* (1992), a speculative, 'what if?' collection of short fictions by different authors, which capitalises upon the American public's fascination with the Kennedys, their families, their politics, their power and their sex-lives. This anthology situates the Kennedys in Hollywood, in an all-Kennedy rock band playing for Elvis Presley, and depicts a castrated JFK burning in hell with Marilyn Monroe.

I had already decided to experiment with Elvis as my main protagonist for a variety of reasons. I was drawn to Elvis partially by my interest in his early Sun recordings, because I had already been using Elvis memorabilia in my artwork, but mostly due to the amount of media attention given to Gail Brewer Giorgio's new book, *The Elvis Files: Was His death Faked?* (1990). This reawakened my interest in older books that I had already read about the subject, notably Hans Holzer's *Elvis Presley Speaks: The Astonishing Evidence of Spiritual Contact With Elvis From Beyond The Grave* (1978), W. M. Henderson's *He Was Nobody, He Was Crazy – He*

Was Stark Raving Elvis (1985), and Steve Dunleavy's *Elvis What Happened?* (1977). The attention that Giorgio's book received reignited the flame amongst the faithful. Once again, thirteen years after his demise, it seemed as if everybody had an Elvis story to tell, whether they had seen his face reflected upon their kitchen ceiling, spotted him selling gas in Montana, or had merely stepped outside and seen a cloud that looked a little like him. These pareidolic (see footnote 1) fictions were *about* Elvis, not a definitive article, *real* Elvis but an imagined, rampant id or projected super ego, alternate universe Elvis; yet, somehow they still seemed to express and echo elements of what Gordon Burn has characterised as 'the psychopathy of fame' (2008:p. 1). Writing *Neverland*, I selected Jackson for similar reasons. His life had already become a kind of fiction, a convoluted and unreliable fable. Much of this awkward, glitzy myth had been perpetuated by Michael himself (Elephant Man's Bones, Balcony incident, Hyperbaric chamber)⁸ in a misguided attempt to appear 'interesting', and he was already hobbling himself in terms of public perception, which had shifted in tone from appreciation of his talent, to ridicule of his eccentricities as exemplified by his tabloid epithet 'Wacko Jacko' (Taraborrelli, 2004: p. 599).

The two texts I will examine in more detail in this section are E.L Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) and Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works Of Billy The Kid* (1989). These are considered choices; *Ragtime* situates and 'syncopates' (Gussow,

⁸ Jackson and his long-term manager Frank Dileo were usually highly skilled in manipulating the media. In 1986 Jackson allowed himself to be photographed sleeping in a hyperbaric chamber and in 1987 offered London Hospital Medical College \$1 million for the skeleton of John Merrick 'The Elephant Man'. Both publicity stunts backfired and the tabloid press began to refer to Jackson as 'Wacko Jacko'. In November 2002, appearing for fans on a fourth floor balcony of the Hotel Aldlon in Berlin, Jackson introduced his son Prince Jackson II (a.k.a 'Blanket') to the world and held the baby boy over the rail. This incident caused widespread outrage and further cemented the 'Wacko Jacko' epithet.

1975: p. 1) familiar historical figures in unfamiliar historical settings, and *Billy The Kid* examines and fictionalises an early American icon within a broadly heterobiographical (Boldrini, 2012: p. 6) context. These two books are contiguous texts, which share similar sensibilities with *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland*, but with significant differences, which I will examine. All four texts exhibit shared approaches and methodologies: historicisation, historiographic metafiction and fictionalisation/fictionality.

At first glance, *Ragtime* appears to be a conventional historical novel, but it rapidly becomes evident that it is anything but. *Ragtime* features Houdini; Emma Goldman; Evelyn Nesbit; J.P Morgan; Henry Ford and Sigmund Freud, and through a series of ‘interlocking stories’ (Gussow, 1975: p. 1) portrays an imagined America in the early years of the Twentieth Century. Doctorow has described his book as ‘a novelist’s revenge’ (Gussow, 1975: p. 2). I had no specific intention of literary ‘revenge’ as I wrote *My Elvis Blackout*, but the phrase resonates. I was, however, attempting to enact a ‘revenge’ of sorts against my own unworkable fine art practice, and to portray the commodification of celebrity by showing, extending and magnifying its excesses, not merely by describing them. *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* draw heavily upon the same techniques and methodologies that Doctorow employs in *Ragtime*. As performative critiques, as ‘doing thinking’ (Borden 2001: p. 5) they seek to probe the boundaries between fiction and the fabricated reality of celebrity culture; they are well defined by Doctorow’s term ‘Fictive non-fiction’ (Gussow, 1975: p. 2). Celebrity is already its own particular species of fiction and both of my books take this as their core premise. Celebrity ‘is also a kind of death’ (Burn, 2009: p.1) whereby persona and identity is subjugated and masked by publicity, marketing and sensationalistic news culture. Both books also reflect my interest in

‘fleshing out’ the archetypes/stereotypes of celebrity stage personas via trauma and responses to trauma.

As in *Ragtime*, (and *The Collected Works of Billy The Kid*, which I will examine later), *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* combine verifiable facts with imaginings and speculations. They deliberately confront their reader with truths ‘dressed up’ to look like fictions. Elvis buries his valuables in the yard, he keeps a badly behaved pet monkey (as did Michael Jackson) and Jackson wears surgical masks and goes door to door as a Jehovah’s Witness. To state this simply, some of the oddest, most ‘unbelievable’ and unlikely scenarios in these two books are verifiable facts. Initially, this was not a conscious ploy on my part, but having recognised its effects and possibilities, I decided to exploit it.

[...] a series of very short stories, scenes, sketches and vignettes, most of which feature Elvis Presley, or a version of him. The Elvis here is disturbed, twisted and violent, driven mad by fame and the permeable membrane between real life and the public image. His story is made from sparks of flash fiction; it is a mirror ball made of highly polished razor blades, reflecting different aspects of the King. (Self, 2009: p. 2)

Doctorow has said of *Ragtime*:

It defies facts. Give ‘em all sorts of facts- made –up facts, distorted facts. I begin to think of *Ragtime* as fictive non-fiction....Who’s to say it didn’t happen? (Gussow, 1975: p. 1).

Hutcheon states this more formally and claims that for Doctorow, ‘there is no neat dividing line between the texts of history and literature, and so he feels free to draw

on both' (1998: p. 23). In *Ragtime* Doctorow employs the technique of intertextuality to blur this line even further.

Another type of reincarnation is, metaphorically speaking; the rewriting of historical traces, and has to do with Doctorow's source of inspiration for his novel and with intertextuality. He borrows and rewrites a plot line from nineteenth century German author, Heinrich von Kleist, who wrote 'Michael Kohlhaas'. His use and modification of an inter-text are a few steps further from notions such as truth, originality, and objectivity. More than that, von Kleist's story is based on a medieval chronicle of the history of Hans Kohlhasen. Thus, Doctorow writes a fictional text by rewriting another fictional text that is already based on a historical one. By this act of intertextual plagiarism, he creates a new character and story, and places them in the context of American history. Yet his new story and character have nothing to do with objective history. (Farca, 2011: p. 48)

Doctorow combines historical and fictional characters and appears to relish the challenge of exploiting the unreliability of history. He takes what 'we' as readers already 'know' about these real 'verifiable' people – Hawthorn's 'extra literary reality' (1983 : p. 97) – and places them in new and unfamiliar situations. This is a broadly speculative approach and Doctorow never allows the facts to interfere with a good story. This is essentially an Aristotelian approach.

A short critical overview of the treatment of history explains the theoretical context against which Doctorow works, and the one to which he adheres. Since antiquity, critics have mused over the relationship between history and fiction. Aristotle, for instance, sees history and fiction (or poetry as he calls it) as antithetical

subjects because ‘the historian,’ he argues, ‘narrates events that have actually happened, whereas the poet writes about things as they might possibly occur’ (Farca, 2011: p. 48).

Micheal Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy The Kid* (1981) is comprised of citations, drawings, photographs, poetry and prose. A great deal of scholarly texts have been written about the book, many of them seeking to locate a term to best describe and categorise the work. Ondaatje has referred to it as a ‘pre-novel book’, a narrative that marked a shift from his perception of himself as a poet to a novelist. He has described it as ‘more like a collage than a formal A-Z plot’ (Presson, 1996: p. 88). The book has been described variously as a ‘biomythography’ (Hochbruch, 1994: p. 8), a ‘new fiction biography’ (Jacobs, 1996: p. 12), a ‘docudrama’ (Jones, 1989: p. 28) and George Bowering goes so far as to suggest a new genre ‘the Ondaatje’ (1999: p. 89). The mixture of texts in the first and third person, spoken by or about Billy, and of biographical accounts locates it on the boundary between (fictional) autobiography, biography, and poetic reconstruction (Boldrini, 2012: p. 73).

I would suggest that *Billy The Kid* is essentially a composite novel. In fact, it presents the reader not only with a very good example of the form, but also serves to illustrate the open ended nature of the term, which I regard as being creatively beneficial rather than problematic, and, I would seek to retain this as an open-ended descriptor since it reflects the paradoxical – indefinable but ultimately defining – quality of ‘the genre that had no name’ (Dunn & Morris, 1995: p. 29).

Linda Boldrini (2012: p.2) cites *Billy the Kid* as an example of a ‘heterobiography’ (an autobiography written by another) and additionally includes Peter Carey’s *True History of The Kelly Gang* (2002), Peter Ackroyd’s *The Last*

Testament of Oscar Wilde (1983) and Steven Marlowe's *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus* (1987) in her list of examples. Boldrini also cites Lejeune's (1976) notion of the autobiographer's 'pact' with the reader to tell the truth, and makes the distinction between the ethical consequences implied by this 'pact' in a heterobiography:

Yet, the assumptions which underpin this 'pact' remain firmly in the reader's view, all the more so by being openly broken: the claim to truth inherent, at least to an extent, in any text that relies on the reader's recognition of the historicity of its character is a crucial aspect of the success of these texts.

(Boldrini, 2012: p. 26)

Boldrini is in fact referring to Hawthorn's 'informed reader' (1987: p. 93); they already know the name and they already know something of the setting and protagonist. The name brings with it its own set of preconceptions and authority even if it is essentially 'identity theft' (Boldrini, 2012: p. 2) that is being perpetrated here, and in relation to *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* this appropriation borders upon legalised libel.

Boldrini goes on to state:

[...] [heterobiographies] bring into focus precisely the thinness of the dividing line between the autobiographical (they are written in the first person) and the biographical (they are written by another), between the historical (the protagonists are recognisable individuals whom we know to have lived) and the fictional (they exist within the texts but are not bound by any duty of fidelity to the fact. (2012: p. 2)

Billy the Kid is certainly a heterobiography in what it seeks to achieve, but it achieves it because it is essentially a composite novel: the heterobiography is the ‘what’; the composite novel is the ‘how’.

My Elvis Blackout and *Neverland* share many of the approaches and sensibilities described above. They are bricolages that rely upon the reader’s pre-conceived recognition of the historicity of their protagonists, and they continually test the boundaries between fact and fiction. According to Boldrini: ‘There is a certain authority that comes from history, the past that can longer be changed, it is this authority that these works explore and exploit’ (2012: p. 3). Boldrini also makes an obvious but nevertheless interesting point about the incomplete nature of any conventional autobiography, in that the date, manner and circumstances of their subject’s demise can, by definition, never be described. Billy already appears to be dead from the beginning of Ondaatje’s book. Elvis dies on page one of *My Elvis Blackout*; the reader witnesses his suicide in ‘Crown Point’. Jackson dies twice in *Neverland*; he is murdered by his grandmother (‘Granny’ p. 134), and hangs himself from the crosstree of his tent in the closing paragraph of the book (‘Gold’: p. 180).

In *Dead Elvis* (1991) Greil Marcus makes an interesting related point concerning myth-making and death. He is writing about Elvis here, but his observation could just as readily be applied to Jackson:

Such mythologizing pre-dated Elvis’s death, but it’s gathered irresistible force since. A dead person is vulnerable in many ways a living person is not, and it’s not simply that you can’t libel the dead. When the subject of a book is living, he or she can always make that book into a lie by acting in a new way. A dead person can be summed up and dismissed. And Elvis is especially vulnerable, because for much of America he has always been a freak. (1991: p. 35)

My books however, are unlike the typical heterobiographies Boldrini describes as she emphasises what she refers to as the ‘double I of the author and narrating historical character [...] of fictional narrator and historical person’ (2012: p. 3). In *My Elvis Blackout*, Elvis’s narrations are reserved particularly for introspective insights and realisations, formatted as internal monologues and diary entries (The titular ‘My Elvis Blackout’ and ‘From Elvis’s Secret Diary’, parts one to four). In *Neverland*, Jackson-voiced narratives occur only sporadically and for the most intimate moments of resolution; for example ‘Mike’s Roofing’, where we discover Jackson happy at last ‘high up on a roof on a clear blue day (2009: p. 177), far away from the madness of fame and fortune. In terms of Boldrini’s observations, *Neverland* is also Lamar’s heterobiography.

What sets *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* apart from the two texts I have examined in this section, is that although *Ragtime* and *Billy The Kid* certainly exploit the confusions between fact, fiction, autobiography and history, they are still firmly set within the timeframe that their historical protagonists inhabit. *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* represent wider ranging texts. They are grounded within their reader’s expectations of American settings contemporary to their nominative protagonists, but both books also feature dilations in both historical and geographical setting. Elvis can be found in modern-day Yorkshire for example, and Jackson can participate in the last great Gold Rush of 1898, cause chaos with his friend Uri in Meadowhall, Sheffield, or set up a roofing business in Doncaster.

My Elvis Blackout is an experiment in narrative. *Neverland* was conceived as a repeat experiment with modifications, designed to re-test and refine my methodology

on a similar subject; both books represent practice-based research⁹. *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* are short story collections, short story cycles and composite novels. Both books can be situated within the discourse of postmodernism. In structure and tone, both books embody several characteristics by which literature commonly identified as postmodernist is most-often defined; they are fragmentary, employ metafictional devices, pastiche, intertextuality, and are as ambiguous and resistant to strict classification as postmodernism itself.

My Elvis Blackout and *Neverland* are ironic, playful and often black in their humour. They are certainly intertextual in terms of their overt references to and parodies of other texts, whether those texts be: Teenage Fan Magazines from the 1950s; discourses on Medieval Imagery; Fairy Tales; contemporary descriptions of the French Revolution; fan fiction, or even the last great Gold Rush. Text sources for these assemblages therefore reflect another modern and post-modern trait, that of the egalitarian appropriation of material from both high and low culture.

Both books feature the interjection of flash fictions, ‘generic fluctuations’ (Boldrini, 2012: p. 77) about the mundane, most obvious, prosaic aspects of life in their narratives. This represents an attempt to ground god-like antiheroes in something a little more ‘human’, which serves to make their celebrity appear more overblown and ludicrous by default. There is a series of fragmented, minimalist, often short and always very ordinary stories in *Neverland*. These fragments are like the dark fish in an aquarium; their role is to accentuate gaudier specimens by way of contrast. The literary critic John Self has observed that these stories (as indicated by their titles:

⁹ In ‘Practice Based Research: A Guide’ (2006) Linda Candy differentiates between *practice-led* research and *practice-based* research. In practice-based research it is the creative artefact itself that constitutes an original contribution to knowledge, not an accompanying exegesis of it.

‘Chris’, ‘Andrew’, ‘Harold’ and ‘Tito’) are all about men, different types of men perhaps, but all of them set in very different and much duller places than the excessive stage-set of Neverland Ranch and the histrionic antics of Michael Jackson.

Magical realism is an amorphous genre, a distinguishing mark of the postmodernist novel and a recurring trope in *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland*. Magic exists within the books as a ‘flexible convention’ (Thiem, 1995: p. 123). From the temporal distortion of Lamar’s big sleep to the resurrections of Chris De Burgh, readers are presented with situations that can only be explained by magical reasoning. Magical occurrences are either unconvincingly rationalized by participating characters with comic effect (‘Fumes’) or accepted by them without comment (‘Unicorn’) in an example of authorial reticence. This consciously presents the reader with a metafictional device, a knowingly strong challenge to, and subsequent exposure of, the literary convention and expectation of ‘suspension of disbelief’.

Neverland in particular contains multiple metafictional incidents that foreground the apparatus of the book. Michael and Lamar directly address the reader on several occasions. Lamar reveals structure and alludes to the author contemptuously through a simile: ‘just like one of those crappy stories written by some dumb English kid with a big nose and a funny surname’ (‘Shot’: p. 167). Spelling ‘mistakes’ within inter-texts which would typically be dismissed by readers as typographic errors, are frequently ‘flagged-up’ and mocked by characters in unsettling acts of metafictional pedantry, highlighting textuality and exposing semantic vulnerability. This running practical joke reaches a climax as Michael Jackson claims an award for ‘World’s Strangest Man’ under the illusion that he was being rewarded as the ‘World’s *Strongest* Man’. Self observes:

The book is full of gags like this, that are either very silly or don't quite work. This seems deliberate on Crump's part. He cripples his jokes, just as Stewart Lee does when he drives a gag into the ground through overlong repetition, which in itself becomes funny, then not funny, then funny again. The fact that the joke is not funny is itself a joke. It might be taken as reflection of the mixture of horror and amusement that anyone watching Michael Jackson's life over the last couple of decades will have experienced. (2009: p. 3)

Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon introduced the term 'Historiographic Metafiction' to describe '[...] novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages' (1988: p. 123). Historiographic metafiction is texts that in essence use metafictional devices to explore the workings of literature, lay bare its ontological status as fiction, and extend those metafictional approaches to historiography. They subvert and undermine the notions of authority, objectivity and singular truth associated with historical sources, by acknowledging and exposing that we know the past through its textual remnants and that those texts are subjective and can be manipulated. Both *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* deploy historiographic metafiction as a central premise. Elvis, Lamar and Michael Jackson exist within the books as collages of press clippings. They are characters reconstructed not from first-hand evidence, but textual reports corrupted, repurposed, construed by edit, juxtaposition and errors both of omission and typographical. This serves to practically critique the reliability of celebrity identity constructs, presenting them metafictionally as inherently compromised composites.

Through analysis I have come to perceive 'the celebrity persona' as an identikit image assembled by thousands of witnesses. A photo-fit photomontage tiered with impressions of subjective provenance, each layered transparency filtered through the

fears and desires of fans and critics. As a horse by committee is a camel, these multi-authored presences rarely resemble their intended target. This interpretation of my writing methodology clearly demonstrates the transition of my fine art practice from visual to textual collage.

Whereas other historiographic metafiction use historical figures as singular characters, *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* can be seen to be utilising this identikit concept to present their respective protagonists as many-headed Hydras, or multiple probability 'versions' from parallel universes. Due to this, I propose that by a conflation of terms, Hutcheon's 'historiographic metafiction' and Boldrini's 'heterobiography', *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* are in fact historio-biographic metafiction.

As to what makes *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* unique, well unlike most of those, it doesn't seek to create a recognisable likeness of the celebrity; quite the opposite really. It works in two ways: on the one hand, taking what we know about Elvis and Jackson and extrapolating from it to extend our imaginative empathy for them. And on the other, using their recognised names and what we think we know about them to create a new character, by exploiting the differences between the reader's expectations and the jarring scenes on the page. This makes the books much more shocking, and consequently more affecting and memorable, than those other examples. (Self 2014: p. 2)

Conclusion.

Since their publication, *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* have attained a function and a shelf life that far exceeds any expectations I originally had about either book's impact or imagined 'sell by' dates on publication. Whereas my other works of literary fiction have enjoyed their brief 'month in the sun', favourable reviews in the broadsheet newspapers, blog entries, tweets and retweets, followed by modest sales, my two composite novels have achieved an impact which now transcends their textual limits and my preconceived notions concerning the reader as co-creator.

My Elvis Blackout in particular, has had an interesting life. The book has been published as a hardback, a trade paperback and an eBook. In addition, stories taken from it have appeared as a Compact Disc attached to the cover of *The London Evening Standard*, narrated by Nick Moran who starred in the movie *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*. The cover image has been reproduced as a poster, on a T-shirt, on a souvenir mug, and there is now even a moderately successful rock band of the same name who are currently opening for Captain Sensible's 'The Damned' on a nationwide tour. The book has been made into a short film (which incidentally is awful) and a stage version is now in development by the National Theatre. More recently, in a supreme example of loss of authorial control, the entire text of *My Elvis Blackout* has featured on a German Elvis fan site, attributed to another author; Bloomsbury Publishing's legal department has since dealt with this, but wholesale plagiarism, I suppose, is the sincerest form of flattery.

Neverland appears to be following a similar trajectory. It has recently been republished by Galley Beggar Press as an eBook and continues to garner reviews and

tweets six years after its original date of publication. When *Neverland* was first published, I made some attempt to intervene in and manipulate any reception the book might receive amongst the wider Jackson fan community, by anonymously joining all the forums and bringing their attention to the book by criticising it. Diehard Jackson fans by nature appear to be ‘completists’; they purchased the book in large numbers for no other reason than it had Jackson’s image on the cover, and *Neverland* swiftly became the book they had to have and loved to hate. The cultural impact of both these books now appears to be alive and continuous and independent of me. It is a fire that now burns by itself, and no longer needs to be stoked, which serves as both a direct parallel and a performative critique of the self-perpetuating nature of contemporary celebrity culture.

For me, writing remains my preferred creative medium and continues to challenge, to excite, and to offer up a seemingly limitless realm of creative possibilities. I have no immediate plans to revisit my visual work, although my former practice as a fine artist certainly continues to inform my writing, in that I still visualise my ideas in terms of pictures that I then describe on the page. The key difference here is that my imagination is now unfettered by technical constraints, and so far as I am concerned, I continue to make far larger and more detailed pictures than I formerly did as an artist.

My historio-biographic metafiction continues to invoke the metaphor of ‘the celebrity persona’ as an identikit image assembled by thousands of witnesses, which situates *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* organically into their own respective

*romans-fleuves*¹⁰. My novels are respectful of this model, as they acknowledge the ‘estuary effect’ of the celebrity phenomenon as it continues to build and flow, and to contribute to the larger narrative. For *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland*, their cultural longevity is dependent on both the continued witnessing of the reader, and on the fractal nature of the celebrity legacy: with each new node, their legacy is simultaneously preened, preserved and perpetuated. This symbiotic relationship generates a bacterial effect, creating spores of self-perpetuating celebrity, which upholds my notion of the function and methodological process of the historiographic metafictional composite novel. *My Elvis Blackout* and *Neverland* capitalise, exploit and deploy our on-going obsession with digital communication and the continuing trend of shock news culture. I can only speculate at this point, as to the continued impact of my books and their enduring contributions to their respective metanarratives, but they do both appear to have become an unfinished on-going, collaborative project that can only be completed by the reader.

¹⁰ *Roman fleuve*, a “novel stream”, refers to the notion of a novel series that documents the on-going history of a family or social group that also gives an overview of society at the time of writing.

Appendices:

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A. *My Elvis Blackout* – p. 59

B. *Neverland* – p. 93

Appendix I

Introduction to the new Galley Beggar Press edition of *My Elvis Blackout* by Professor Jon McGregor (2012)

The first famous person I met was Peter Mendham, the inoffensive midfielder from Norwich City's 1985 Milk Cup winning team. He appeared at a summer fete on Mousehold Heath. The deal was, if you bought a poster of the Milk Cup winning team he would sign it for you. I was excited to meet a real footballer, but I didn't know which one was him. Someone had to point me in the right direction. He signed my poster, and I went home and stuck it up on my bedroom wall. I knew which one was him by then; in the picture on the poster he was wearing the lid of the Milk Cup like a hat, and grinning in a way that only accentuated the size of his nose and chin. He had a distinctive face, a face which I had met in real life. Twenty years later, I saw his face in the paper again. He was in court for stabbing his girlfriend.

The trope of an iconic popular figure turning out to have a less than heroic personal life is a longstanding and persistent one, going back as far as Nebuchadnezzar's feet of clay and reaching a kind of grimly inevitable crescendo in the twenty-first century.

Sheesh. It better had be a crescendo.

Another word for a 'longstanding and persistent' trope is 'cliché', and it's cliché that Simon Crump plays with in *My Elvis Blackout* to such delirious effect. Years of biographical revelation have taught us to understand that Elvis used a lot of drugs, ate a lot of food, had a ton of wayward ideas, ran with an unruly crowd, and died on the john. We know this. We just hadn't gone the extra mile and conceived of an Elvis robbing banks and shooting people from hotel windows for sport. Or orchestrating the mass executions of witches.

That's the extra mile Simon Crump goes on our behalf. And it makes a kind of sense, especially when the cultural icon of 'Elvis' is mixed up, here, with so many of the other cultural landmarks which make up our sense of what America means. Some of those other cultural landmarks being: UFOs, pick-up trucks, motels, serial killers, trailers, tattoos, gingham aprons, potluck church suppers, pools, screen-doors, shotguns, porches, rocking chairs. (This list, of course, representing only a limited section of the American Experience – predominantly rural, working class and white. Elvis might have been a hero to most, but he never meant shit to Chuck D.) These are the things people think of when they think about 'Americana', and they're the things with which Crump decorates these outbursts of carefully articulated madness. They're the signs and signifiers for which 'America' is famous, an 'America' in which Elvis is still, famously, The King.

When I was at school, it was taken for granted that any connection with a famous person would bestow some aura of distinction upon you, and tangential claims to fame were a regular topic of debate. Peter Mendham didn't score me many points when Darren's auntie had once been out with Bobby Robson, or Paul's dad had gone to the same youth club as Tony Robinson, or Tracy's cousin had actually been on Jim'll Fix It.

Fame was something other; more brightly coloured and yet somehow two-dimensional. If you were famous, or if you were touched by someone famous, your life would be different. The rules would be different. Famous people didn't have to work, or go to school. They didn't have to tidy their rooms, or do the washing up, or look both ways when they crossed the road. They had people to do these things for

them. The rules didn't apply. They could do whatever they wanted to do. They could even eat people's hamsters, apparently.

It's no great leap, therefore, to imagine Elvis – the icon of twentieth century fame – burying jewelry in the garden, sleeping with under-age girls, spouting drug-addled nonsense on cookery shows – or, indeed, eating Vietnam veterans, bombing a Led Zeppelin concert, kidnapping and murdering and generally leading a deranged cult of followers who think nothing of having Chris de Burgh taken around the back of the trailer and done in.

Well, okay. It's quite a leap. But it's a mark of Simon Crump's deranged talent that he succeeds in making these freakish vignettes ring with an awful note of truth. (Note, here, that 'awful' doesn't just mean 'very unpleasant' but also 'uncomfortably and utterly hilarious'. This might not apply to everyone. Dear Reader: if you are not amused by the thought of a gingham-wearing Elvis Presley stapling his own eyelids together to keep from having to do the washing-up, *My Elvis Blackout* might not be for you.)

Did I say 'vignettes'? I'm not sure if that's the right word. Stories? Fragments? Arrangements? Derangements? I think the clue, and the best way of reading this thing, is there in the title: these are Blackouts – moments of half-glimpsed vision, hallucination, recollection, distorted rumour and myth. As with all the best books, *My Elvis Blackout* needs the reader to tune into its particular wavelength, or to choose a way in which to read it. My reading is to take these as the snatched and garbled transcriptions of police notebooks, psychiatric reports, dream diaries, prison letters and napkin notes of small-town America; or at least, the image of small-town America as twisted through the prism of transatlantic popular culture. These are plays on the clichés and fears which haunt our understanding of what it means to be

American and very famous; to be out of reach, untouchable, disconnected with what the rest of us know as reality. They are plays which should have made Simon Crump famous in his own right when this book was first published in 2000, and which I'm delighted to know are being thrust into the hands of unsuspecting readers all over again.

Ladies and gentlemen, Elvis has left the building. This is all that remains of what he left us.

(As a postscript, let me add one more story of fame. This may or may not be relevant. I have a friend who used to waitress at the Harry Ramsden's fish and chip shop in Leeds. Jimmy Savile was a regular customer. He grabbed her arse; she tipped a fish and chip supper all over his greasy lap. She was taken out the back and fired. We used to think this was a funny story.)

Professor Jon McGregor

November 2012

Appendix II

Introduction to the new Galley Beggar Press edition of *Neverland* by John Self (2014)

“If I were born with a name like Simon Crump, I would spend the rest of my life trying to get all that anger and resentment out of me by being very rude about other people.”

- Chris de Burgh

*

At around 9:00pm on the evening of 25 June 2009, Simon Crump finished writing *Neverland*, his book – *this* book – about a fictional Michael Jackson. It had taken him three years. A few hours later, the real Jackson’s death was reported on gossip website TMZ.com. The internet went mad. Twitter crashed. CNN struggled. Crump’s publisher brought forward publication of the book.

The real Michael Jackson was – what? Funny. Eccentric. Pitiabile. Exploited. So Crump’s Michael is a pixel-perfect replacement. He has “Disney music comin’ out of the fibreglass rocks in the rose bed.” He has an unpredictable relationship with his wife Lisa. “You’re going to put together a 1/32 scale model of Mac & Mike’s water forts whether you want to or not! Don’t fight me, baby, I’ve got a wicked temper and you are liable to get hurt.” He has long circular conversations with best friend Uri (“His eyes grew a shade darker”), which are funny, then not funny, then funny again. Most of all, he is forever seeking, forever lost, forever trying to fill a hole: right from birth, really.

Michael was born with gold in his mouth.

He left his mom without too much trouble. He shimmied out. The midwife held him in her white-gloved grip. She struck his face and a shining nugget plopped onto the soiled sheets of the birthing table. He sang and he danced. He bit off his cord. He slipped on a white glove of his own and signed a few autographs.

‘We love you Michael,’ they all said.

‘I love you more,’ he said back.

They called a priest. After all, a minute-old baby isn’t supposed to act that way.

‘Where is the gold?’ he cried. ‘Where is the gold??’

For a while there was gold, lots of it, and there were cartoons and songs and dance and lunar walking and Motown and I want you back.

We fixed him though. Then we fucked him. And we took it all.

That is the entirety of the second story in the book, ‘Gold’. Crump, in editing *Neverland*, cut out 60% of the material: “get the stuff down on the page and then make it less worse.” This ruthlessness shows. *Neverland* is a short book but each story, or chapter, unfolds inside the reader’s head like an origami flower. Its lean and hungry look is welcome in a world where novels seem to be growing ever longer. Some stories recur or develop – Michael and Uri, Michael’s quest for gold – while others stand alone, isolated and seemingly unconnected to Michael except by a brotherly strangeness, such as a series of portraits of men which give just enough information to drive the reader into a flurry of imaginative empathy. Here is ‘Andrew’ (again, in its entirety):

I've been on six twelve-hour night shifts and sad as this may seem your party has been the end of my tunnel. Not everyone lives his or her life alone and for a little while it seems my whole world is all right.

He's special and he doesn't speak. Every day for sixteen years he leaves the flat and he gets a paper. One day he gets a paper and he also points at some mints.

The woman behind the counter finally cracks.

'If you could talk, Andrew, what would you say?'

Unique, and uniquely odd, as *Neverland* is, it is not without precedent. Indeed, it is a natural(ish) progression from Crump's first book, *My Elvis Blackout*, which drew the responses that top and tail this introduction. They are books of what Gordon Burn called the psychopathology of fame, or as Crump puts it, how "we all love our stars, but we much prefer them broken." They are the cold shower after *Heat-world*. The bridge between the two books is Lamar, former Elvis lackey and "still 250lbs of fine-lookin *hombre*." He is our guide to Michael's world, having been "out cold" for sixteen years after Elvis's death, and now gaining employment in Neverland. When they meet, Michael tells him, "I made love to Lisa in my Mickey Mouse pyjamas. And then I asked her to marry me. One day she's going to give me a little boy of my own." This nudge-nudge stuff is as close as Crump gets to mocking Michael: elsewhere, the vision is of sad-eyed sympathy, perhaps with an occasional shake of the head.

Neverland is a book of contrasts. It is both absurdly silly and a work of serious artistry. It is a product of frightening imagination and originality, which turns whole pages over to extracts from Wikipedia. Its subject is all-American but it is full of

quintessentially English cultural reference points, from Pulp's 'Common People' to Cannon and Ball. Its author refers to it as a collection of stories, yet it is clearly much more coherent and unified than that. But it is the beautiful clashing sound made by silly jokes overlaid on a sadness that pervades every page that makes the reader marvel at *Neverland*'s starkest polarity, and ask: was there ever a book simultaneously so dark, and light?

*

"We do not know who is this Simon Crump but he is not welcome in our town."

- German Elvis fansite

Appendix III

A collection of press, comments, blogs, and reviews which provide some indication of the variety of reader responses to the two books.

A. *My Elvis Blackout*

The Guardian - Books Blog

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2007/nov/29/akillerbookaboutelvis>

Sam Jordison - Thursday 29 November 2007

A killer book about Elvis

Simon Crump's short stories about the king of rock'n'roll are a brilliant antidote to hollow novelty books. And Chris de Burgh

If this decade of publishing is to be remembered at all, it looks likely to be marked down as the time when the industry was entirely taken over by celebrity biographies, celebrity cook books and celebrity novels that weren't actually written by celebrities. In short, a pretty depressing time for anyone who likes to walk into a bookshop and be surprised and for anyone who doesn't have a burning urge to read 10 tomes containing the collected thoughts of Wayne Rooney.

It's especially tempting to start lambasting the industry at this time of year, in the run up to Christmas when the what-the-chuff-will-I-buy-my-brother-in-law books begin to dominate the market. All the same (perhaps not entirely surprisingly) I found myself agreeing with Eloise Millar's recent assertion here that there are still reasons to be cheerful about the state of UK publishing. Not least because I've been re-reading Simon Crump's gloriously deranged *My Elvis Blackout*. The very existence of this little book is proof positive that there is still space for the strange, the grotesquely

funny and the wilfully, swearily offensive within the mainstream of publishing.

Readers with long memories may recall that I've already sung the praises of *My Elvis Blackout* in a piece I wrote a few months ago about the enduring appeal of Elvis in literature. I make no apology for trying to flog the book again. Now that I've located another copy (readers with especially long memories will recall that a friend had borrowed mine on an upsettingly permanent basis), and re-read it, my fervour has only increased. *My Elvis Blackout* is a work of genius. Of particularly twisted and unsettling genius, but genius all the same.

The book takes the form of 37 short stories in which the King of Rock and Roll - "hero and model to teenagers the world over" - joins a choir in order to torture and murder Christians, labours under the delusion that he's a major rock-star (when really he's just an inmate in an asylum who's afraid of potatoes), and kills both Barbara Cartland and Chris De Burgh, among other grotesque acts.

Needless to say, it's very funny - but *My Elvis Blackout* is more than just a laugh riot. Seekers of profundity will find plenty to ponder in the acerbic take on the cult of Elvis' personality and the suitably uncomfortable intimations of mortality in all the graphic reminders Crump provides of the fragility of flesh.

It's also a mark of Crump's talent that Elvis remains a strangely sympathetic (albeit psychotic) character throughout. In most of his guises, he is as much a tragic figure as a comic villain, as sad as he is mad. Although the back cover contains a quote from an Illinois Elvis impersonator complaining about people making a mockery of his hero, Crump's book actually appeals to the Elvis fan in me, although I must admit that those who like Chris De Burgh will be plain horrified at the way he appears in these pages. hilariously, the singer himself seems to have objected, too, telling a concerned fan who wrote in to his website about the book: "if I was born

with a name like Simon Crump, I would spend the rest of my life trying to get all that anger and resentment out of me by being very rude about other people... I look at my beautiful family, I look at the house that I live in and I look at my fans all over the world, and I look at my successful career and I think, well it's all based on jealousy and envy and really I don't give it a toss." Ouch.

In this matter, as in many other things in life, it's probably not a good idea to listen to the composer of *The Lady In Red*. Simon Crump is a superb writer, as is further evidenced by his novel *Twilight Time*, which I've just finished having been inspired to hunt it down after re-reading *My Elvis Blackout*.

Set in a National Trust property similar to William and Walter Straw's obsessive shrine to their parents, this book provides a distinctly discomfiting look at the mentally ill and beaten down Bruce Glasscock. That name may suggest over the top puerile comedy, but this is a work that operates on a far lower register than its gonzo predecessor. Moments of extreme violence and superbly pitched swearing reminiscent of *My Elvis Blackout* do slip in when Bruce forgets to take his medication, but it's the overpowering atmosphere of numbness and the cold, measured descriptions of Bruce's tedious every day routine that matter here. If anything, the end result is even stranger and darker. Once again I found myself marvelling that something so uncompromisingly ugly could have leaked out into the world, sponsored by Bloomsbury, no less, the publishers of *Harry Potter*. Once again, I was very pleased that it had.

Of course, it's possible to take such optimism too far. Simon Crump is never going to get the marketing support of Russell Brand and you'll almost certainly never see him in the three for two piles. At least he's there, however, if you trouble to look for him, and for that we should be grateful.

Meanwhile, here's the full glorious exchange from the Chris De Burgh website:

October 21, 2004

Lance Johnson (35) from Mesa, Arizona, USA:

I read a book called My Elvis Blackout by Simon Crump. I wouldn't really recommend the book, but I read it out of curiosity due to the fact that you were in it. In this book, the author's character kills you and you come back for a little time in a zombie-like state. As much as we like to say that these types of things do not bother us, I imagine that is not really the case. How do you personally deal with something sick and hateful like this?

Chris de Burgh:

Well, you know what Lance, if I was born with a name like Simon Crump, I would spend the rest of my life trying to get all that anger and resentment out of me by being very rude about other people. It doesn't bother me in the slightest. What is the old saying? Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me. Or something like that. No, I wouldn't even give this a passing thought. When you are a famous person, you are there, you are up for grabs to have people have a go at. I know there are comedians who make fun of me. But, you know, I look at my beautiful family, I look at the house that I live in and I look at my fans all over the world, and I look at my successful career and I think, well it's all based on jealousy and envy and really I don't give it a toss. Thanks for the question though!

I have my suspicions about Lance...

Just Williams's Luck

<http://justwilliamsluck.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/my-elvis-blackout.html>

Tuesday, 12 March 2013 - My Elvis Blackout - Simon Crump

'The long dream is over'

I got a Kindle for Christmas. Hurrah, I am now part of the 21st Century. Apparently. My main excitement on receiving one was that I would be able to take up Galley Beggar's Press on their kind offer of an e-book copy of Simon Crump's novel *My Elvis Blackout*. This novel has had an extraordinary life already as Crump mentions in a new afterword that comes with this edition. It has been 'a chapbook, a hardback, a trade paperback, a tee-shirt, a short film, a CD and even a band'. It has also at one point been reproduced in its entirety on an Elvis fansite attributed to a man named Jurgen. Now it is available again with a new introduction from Jon McGregor, a fantastic review from the ever-reliable Mr. Self and a few quick words from me to support this short, fucked-up and truly unforgettable little gem.

How on earth to begin to describe this bizarre book? *My Elvis Blackout* comes as a series of short fictions or vignettes. Each features or is about Elvis in some way, shape or form but not the Elvis that we know. This Elvis comes in many guises and each story might be said to illuminate some facet of his character or some aspect of fame, celebrity, culture, indulgence, violence and death. To pinch the best line from John Self's review, 'it is a mirrorball made of highly polished razor blades, reflecting different aspects of the King'.

There is violence and absurdity on every other page and often at the same time (this after all is a novel in which Barbara Cartland's mutilated body is buried on only the second page and Chris de Burgh is murdered not just once but twice after coming back as a headless zombie). But then there are moments that are strangely affecting, perhaps all the more so coming as they do buried amongst so much mayhem. The chapter headed *Elvis: Fat Fucked-Up Fool* has an opening paragraph that shows perfectly the combination of madness and pathos.

His greatest fear was of being poor and he dwelled upon it constantly. He

took handfuls of jewels and cash into the backyard at Graceland and buried them - little treasures to call upon should he find himself penniless. The guys would watch watch Elvis digging in the dark. He cut a pathetic figure as he grunted and sweated over a growing heap of earth, and they would laugh to see his white jump-suit soiled with mud, and they would laugh at this very sad, but nevertheless highly entertaining creature trying to ward off his worst nightmare, and they would laugh and laugh until the tears ran down their bloated piggy faces and down their fat pink necks and into their fancy silk shirts which Elvis had bought them all from Lansky brothers, because he loved them so.

That is a killer paragraph; seemingly throwaway and yet marked by an unforgettable image, biting comment and even an appeal for sympathy. Brilliant. Another example of the way this collection can unseat the reader comes near the end in a chapter titled, Yorkshire Elvis: Part Two. After all the violence that has preceded it, this story seems to augur something horrific when our hero waits for his wife to leave the house before getting out something secret from beneath the floorboards, especially when a missing girl is mentioned. But then Crump gives this particular incarnation of the King a secret you couldn't possibly expect and makes the story into something else entirely. It is hard to know what you might find as you go through the pages of this novel, and very hard to adequately describe the thrill and joy of reading a book that manages to be both silly and deadly serious at the same time, flippant and deadly; as volatile and entertaining a book as you're likely to read all year.

AMAZON REVIEWS - My Elvis Blackout (Hardcover)

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/My-Elvis-Blackout-Simon-Crump/dp/0747553769#customerReviews>

I laughed so hard I made myself sick, 13 Nov 2000 - A Customer [5 stars]

This book is not for the faint-hearted, or for those lacking a sense of humour. I've never read anything like these stories - few people have - and they display a weird, radioactive brilliance that stays in the mind for a long time after you've finished. Elvis, in Crump's hilariously twisted world, is everything from a hero to a lunatic. In a sustained, kaleidoscopic hallucination, the author takes us on an Elvis-fuelled journey during which we are compelled to cross the threshold between imagination and psychosis; a world where everything is bounded by the neverending cult of the King.

Frequently fragments of Elvis' life, or legend, break madly loose into unsuspecting real life (I think my favourite moment is the King's revenge on Led Zep for insulting him with their misjudged British humour during a chance meeting: he 'bombs' one of their gigs with bags of pigs' blood). We meet Elvis as a Yorkshireman, as a high-school kid, as a cannibal (his hairdresser narrates that particular episode). It's hard, here, to give you much of a feel for My Elvis Blackout, except to say that every time at home any visitor's eye catches Bloomsbury's (very beautiful) hardcover edition I press it into their hands and make them read one or other of the stories. It's often quite hard to prise it out of their grasp after that.

Ultimately, though, and to my surprise, I found reading the collection a profound and melancholy experience. I came away feeling that after the laughter had died away, Crump's vision was far bleaker than I'd imagined. Broken, damaged people (even a decapitated Chris de Burgh) populate the stories and the dysfunctional side of human nature prevails. Crump uses Elvis as a cipher for all that is chaotic,

mass-hysterical, sociopathic -- and has a lot of sick fun along the way.

I suppose I can't recommend *My Elvis Blackout* enough.

The Closest Most People Get To Paradise, 21 Aug 2002 - Timothy [5 stars]

This is it. Arguably one of the comedic masterworks of this or any other century. Crump takes an already ridiculous and faintly sinister figure and turns him into one of the most darkly humorous protagonists you will find in any work of fiction.

If you are sentimental or attached to Elvis in any conventional way, you must never read this book. However, Crump's genius is really his ability to paint Elvis as a sadistic, self-obsessed maniac, and keep the reader rooting for him throughout this extraordinary collection of vignettes and short stories.

"*My Elvis Blackout*", like all the best comedy, is subversive and clever with a definite tinge of real nastiness. If you are brave in your taste and not cowed by the "tyranny of the masses" who decide what is "funny" or "acceptable", you cannot help but love this wonderful little book. If, on the other hand, you prefer sitcoms to Chris Morris, this is about as close as you should come to making it a purchase.

A clumsy but evangelical review, 4 Dec 2000 - A Customer [5 stars]

The consensus in the "*My Elvis Blackout*" fan community is that it's almost impossible to describe it without making it sound like one of the worst books in the world - a catastrophe from beginning to end. It is truly horrible almost all the way through and is almost unforgivably blasphemous (after all it's *The King* we're talking about here). It's also hugely original, very very funny, appealingly blatant in its theft of Jayhawks lyrics, and superbly controlled - which is how come it's ended up so good. What Crump has done is he's written the book well - that's his trick. If he had

written it badly it would have been awful.

So it has ended up being the exact opposite of one of the worst books in the world. It is instead one of the best books in the world. The very worst book in the world is "The Actual" by Saul Bellow. What a stinker.

AMAZON REVIEWS

<http://www.amazon.com/My-Elvis-Blackout-Simon-Crump/dp/190696436X>

Elvis, and his bizzare unknown life.

By Robert Fakes on December 1, 2000

Format: Hardcover

This slim volume of short stories is an absolute must for those of you who like your fiction with a twist of the bizarre and perverse. Taking 37 fictional episodes from the life of Elvis, Simon Crump warps our view of this 20th century cultural archetype in an intelligent and hilarious manner. Highlights include the execution of Chris de Burgh on Elvis's orders, followed by resurection and strange talk of stigmata related trauma, and Elvis's bank raid with Roy Orbison being foiled by his pet chimp Scatter. I highly reccomend this book.

Surrealist Writing

By C. Gilbey on May 25, 2002

Format: Hardcover

This has to be one of the most surreal, and yet entertaining books that I have read in the last year!

It could have the ability to heartily offend, but goes so far over the top that, like

a Salvador Dali painting, it carries you into a trip as far out as the shag carpeting on the walls of Elvis' den in Gracelands.

I bought this book earlier today and have been reading it since I got home a few hours ago. An absolutely riotous read. Made better if you grew up under the shadow of the king's music. Everyone who ever heard and loved an Elvis record should read this book. But you better have a strong constitution and an equally lurid sense of humour

Asylum - John Self's Shelves

<http://theasylum.wordpress.com/2012/12/17/simon-crump-my-elvis-blackout/>

December 17, 2012 - Simon Crump: My Elvis Blackout

I've written about Simon Crump here before – even interviewed him – and I was keeping this, his 'best known' book, as a reliable treat. That went the way of all good intentions – of all good books, pushed ever further down the priority list by the clamour of later arrivals, which are more exciting and more urgent simply because of their newness. Fortunately, its reissue this month by Galley Beggar Press, as an ebook, has made it new all over again.

My Elvis Blackout was initially published in 2000 by Bloomsbury. It was Crump's first book, and as a launchpad into the literary world it could hardly have been more dramatic. If you don't know what to expect from a new author, it's pretty safe that you don't expect a book where Elvis Presley buries the mutilated body of Barbara Cartland on page two, and executes Chris de Burgh not long after, only to have the "reedy-voiced, ferret-faced little bastard" come back from the dead as a headless zombie. The problem with this book, then, is that its excesses come at the

beginning, and that the silly stuff and the stupid stuff is likely to provoke in many readers the urge – never far off in me – to chuck it aside and move on to the next one.

I persisted with it, but nonetheless finished it up – not long after I started it, as it's less than 25,000 words long – still uncertain. Still mystified, in fact. Was it funny? Was it serious? Was it any good? The only thing I didn't doubt was that it was interesting. As a debut, it seemed less fully achieved than *Neverland* (Crump's fourth book), and less modulated too: fifty shades of black to the later book's subtle gradations of colour. I put it aside and pondered it. Then I went back to it, and re-read it, more slowly this time, not by design but for the usual reasons (work, children).

Second time around, it seemed absolutely right to me: or more firmly wrong. One enthusiastic Amazon review of *My Elvis Blackout* says that it is impossible to describe it without making it sound like one of the worst books in the world, but I am going to try. It is a series of very short stories, scenes, sketches and vignettes, most of which feature Elvis Presley, or a version of him. The Elvis here is disturbed, twisted and violent, driven mad by fame and the permeable membrane between real life and the public image. His story is made from sparks of flash fiction; it is a mirrorball made of highly polished razor blades, reflecting different aspects of the King.

The stories are told by Elvis himself and by people who know him, and they are full of sudden jerks and switchbacks, with comedy flipping into terror and then sentimentality in the space of a page or two, and anticipated punchlines turning to dust. One of the early stories has Angie Crumbaker recounting her fling as a high school girl with Elvis in 1959. "I had missed a lot of fun this year by being Elvis's

girl. Yet I certainly didn't blame him. It wasn't his fault that he had problems." But even she can't foresee the confession Elvis is soon to make to her:

'For the last couple of months ... well, I've been stealing wigs from Eveline's House of Hair and Feminine Beauty, taking them back and shampooing them, I just can't stop myself, it makes me feel so good.'

As with so many of the tales here, it soon turns to death, reported both flippantly and tenderly. "At that moment," says Angie, "Elvis looked so handsome that my aching heart began to bleed." Later, he is heading up the "Memphis mafia," with echoes for his friends of Joe Pesci in *Goodfellas*. "Nobody dares laugh, as there's no telling what Elvis might do." Thereafter, he kills Chris de Burgh, twice. At times the strangeness seems unexplainable by design; elsewhere, you can see what Crump is up to: extrapolating fancies from slivers of known fact. For example, the story 'Elvis: Fat, Fucked-Up Fool' begins: "His greatest fear was of being poor and he dwelled upon it constantly." True, no doubt, but Crump flings the idea around and turns it into a dark fantasy of underage sex, ice-cream and buried valuables. Jarringly juxtaposed with this is the next piece ('Ex-Elvis'), a series of single lines laid out centrally on the page like inner sleeve lyrics, and which draw an austere and pitiable picture:

Way back home there's a funeral.

All the police carry guns.

Something she said worries him.

Somebody stole his crown.

Sometimes he cries in his sleep.

All he has is a radio and a guitar.

There's a pain in his chest and he throws up all the time.

The more you read it, and re-read it, the clearer it becomes that *My Elvis Blackout* is at its heart a tragedy: of internal conflict and turmoil, of a man unknowable to anyone including himself, of real life lost to the distorting mirror of fame. Indeed, it ends up seeming like the most eloquent (and violent) expression of the psychopathology of fame since the best of Gordon Burn. I was reminded when reading it of Burn's observation that "almost everything I've written has been about celebrity, and how for most people celebrity is a kind of death." Indeed, in *My Elvis Blackout*, Crump seems to merge the twin poles of Burn's world: the seedy low-key fame of snooker players or Alma Cogan, and the psychopathy of the Wests or Peter Sutcliffe.

When Elvis himself speaks in the book, as in the four chapters of 'An Amazing Talk With Elvis', he sounds altogether sober and subdued, his reports of life and what brought him here having the tone of a formal witness statement or court report. Here and elsewhere the words read like found material from other sources. Elvis tells of his real history and of how he was remade for public consumption, so that the moral

begins to look like Kurt Vonnegut's in *Mother Night*: 'we are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be'. There is a terrible confusion of identity, in the story 'Loma Linda', where the distinction is thoroughly blurred between reality and delusion ("He sincerely believed that he was a major rockstar") – yet whichever is the truth, this particular Elvis is still tortured and unhappy. "He refused to eat anything except potatoes. 'These are buried in the ground,' he said, 'and could not be poisoned by radiation.'"

As the book goes on, the tone becomes more muted, although death is still everywhere. ("Under the tangle of dead hairs on the pillow, a dark stain spread out from where her mouth had been.") The narratives spread beyond Elvis to those known to him, such as his tailor Bernard Lansky, who gets a fictional life, from the plausible (fleeing Nazi Germany) to the fanciful (tried and hanged for witchcraft: "Elvis was present too and accompanied the hurried procession to the drop. Bernard Lansky almost ran towards it"). The witchcraft theme recurs, with a story ('Jungle Room') that springboards from the North Berwick Witch Trials. Here one of Crump's signature moves appears: puncturing something interesting and disturbing with a joke, a technique which walks a line between uneasiness and laziness. Often enough, though, he pulls it back again just in time, and so the effect overall is of a unified vision rather than a limited range. Dissociation reaches its apex at the end of the book, when Elvis impersonators are conflated with the French royalty at the time of the revolution, persecuted by Marat and executed by guillotine. It is a strong and subtle finish, and reiterates the preoccupations of this book – the oddest I have read all year – and the fragile threshold that James Salter described in *Light Years*, which sums up one aspect of *My Elvis Blackout* beautifully:

There are really two kinds of life. There is the one people believe you are living, and there is the other. It is this other which causes the trouble, this other we long to see.

comments:

Seamus Duggan said,

December 17, 2012 at 9:40 am

It's hardly inexplicable to kill Chris De Burgh as many times as necessary. You have certainly managed to avoid making this sound like the worst book ever to me and this goes on my New Year's list.

Lee Monks said,

December 19, 2012 at 12:35 pm

Great review of a book everyone should read. It's a piece of work that has you simultaneously guffawing and deeply saddened. No mean feat.

Twelve from the Shelves: My Books of 2012 « Asylum said,

December 30, 2012 at 4:14 pm

[...] Simon Crump: My Elvis Blackout Certainly the strangest book of the year, and one of the few on this list (see also Baxter and Ridgway) that I read twice to appreciate better. It has to be read backwards, in the sense that it is only when it is over that its depths and subtleties are absolutely clear. It is "a mirrorball made of highly polished razor blades." It is sick, stupid, silly and very sad. [...]

My Elvis Blackout – Simon Crump | wordsofmercury said,

January 7, 2013 at 9:37 pm

[...] My Elvis Blackout is funny, macabre, funny and macabre. How profound it is I'm not sure. There is a certain extension of the representation of thought and behaviour beyond which profundity becomes difficult to attain. Of course, that may be a failure on my part to move beyond the extreme violence; and my complete lack of interest in Elvis probably doesn't help. The writing is punchy, the stories are inventive, Chris De Burgh is shot in the head. If it sounds like your sort of thing, you should give it a go. It's one of those books you have to experience for yourself; I can only wave my hands oddly in its general direction. At the very least, it's an experience you will probably remember. (For an excellent and much fuller review, read John Self's post at Asylum). [...]

Twelve from the Shelves: My Books of 2012 | Asylum said,

February 2, 2014 at 9:54 am

<http://theasylum.wordpress.com/2012/12/31/twelve-from-the-shelves-my-books-of-2012/>

[...] Simon Crump: My Elvis Blackout Certainly the strangest book of the year, and one of the few on this list (see also Baxter and Ridgway) that I read twice to appreciate better. It has to be read backwards, in the sense that it is only when it is over that its depths and subtleties are absolutely clear. It is "a mirrorball made of highly polished razor blades." It is sick, stupid, silly and very sad. [...]

Galley Beggar Press

<http://www.galleybeggar.co.uk/50-reasons-to-love-my-elvis-blackout-reprise/>

**50 Reasons to love My Elvis Blackout, reprise - Published by Sam Jordison
on 23rd April 2013**

This is a post I wrote on Boxing Day 2012, when we unleashed the Ebook of Simon Crump's classic My Elvis Blackout. I thought it was time it got another airing because damn this book is good and damn it, I still want more people to buy it. I'm happy to say we've sold a fair few since the book came out, and happy to say that we've had some great feedback from people who have enjoyed it almost as much as me... But "a fair few" isn't enough. I want to get Simon one whole shitload of new readers. (Forgive my scientific language...)

1.Elvis!

2.Dan Rhodes says: "This is one of the most abnormal books of all time, and also one of the best. Eagle-eyed readers will spot that Rhodes has blurbed the paperback edition. However, as he is one of Britain's least popular writers his endorsement has failed to send My Elvis Blackout into the bestseller lists. No home is complete without this magnificent book."

3.John Self says it's the "oddest" book he's read all year. And that it: "ends up seeming like the most eloquent (and violent) expression of the psychopathology of fame since the best of Gordon Burn."

4.It isn't free, unlike most of the other books you're going to be uploading onto your ereader today. By spending money on it, you're going to help a real living writer

continue his work.

5.£4 is still a lot cheaper than most of the other stuff you're going to buy in the sales today.

6.£4 is cheaper than your lunch too. Which isn't bad for a book you will NEVER FORGET.

7.Simon Crump is a nice man. Obviously, as a filthy capitalist publisher, I'd like to tell you that he's going to DIE soon and BUYING THIS BOOK is the only way you'll save him. But luckily, that isn't true. Even so, having a bestseller would still be good for him. He currently drinks really cheap beer from horrible orange cans when he's editing his novels. Is that what you want on your conscience?

8.Here's a review of My Elvis Blackout from a German Elvis fansite: "We do not know who is this Simon Crump, but he is not welcome in our town."

9.Meanwhile, The Guardian says: "Like an episode of South Park, where just as you get into the story something goes splat, Crump's contorted imagination is alarmingly enjoyable."

10.And Chris De Burgh says: "If I was born with a name like Simon Crump, I would spend the rest of my life trying to get all that anger and resentment out of me by being very rude about other people. It doesn't bother me in the slightest. Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me. Or something like that. No, I wouldn't even give this a passing thought. When you are a famous person, you are there; you are up for grabs for people to have a go at. I know there are comedians who make fun of me. But, you know, I look at my beautiful family, I look at the house I live in and I look at my fans all over the world, and I look at my career and I think,

well it's all based on jealousy and envy and really I don't give a toss."

11. In the book, Chris De Burgh is humiliated, killed, and then killed again.

12. In the book, Elvis drops frozen blood onto a Led Zeppelin concert.

13. In the book, Simon Crump weaves strange magic that will make you laugh, cry and feel empty and joyous inside all at the same time.

14. It's got a great cover.

15. It's short. You'll finish it by the end of the day. Far better than watching all that rubbish TV. And even though it's short, as I've already said, it will stay with you forever.

16. It's brimming over with the rebellious spirit of rock and roll. And when you read it, surrounded by relatives, and they don't know what the hell you're cackling about, you'll feel well cool.

17. TNT magazine described it as: "Primary school prose and a plot out of a cokehead's arse, this book is a waste of paper."

18. TNT magazine is shit.

19. The Yorkshire Post says: "In this macabre fantasy based on the life and troubled times of Elvis Presley, Crump takes the reader on a disturbingly funny journey inside the mind of his central character. Frequently inspired, often darkly witty, Crump is a writer with an imagination the size of a house. There are elements here of Irvine Welsh, but the cinematic style of writing also suggests a bizarre coupling of Pulp fiction and The Waltons. Clever, twisted, you have to admire the sheer verve and audacity."

20. The Yorkshire Post is great.

21. FHM says the book is “superb” and that “Crump writes with such a lack of fear that it’s both hilariously refreshing and destined to gloriously offend any fans who prefer to forget his amphetamine-stuffed cheeseburger death.”

22. Okay, FHM is shit too, but even they can be right sometimes.

23. Here’s an audio sample of someone reading from the book. Yep, it’s that good.

24. Here’s another.

25. This band liked the book so much they named themselves after it and based their whole career upon it.

26. Jon McGregor – Jon McGregor! – one of the finest and finest writers writing today, describes it as one of the “best” books: “which should have made Simon Crump famous in his own right when this book was first published in 2000, and which I’m delighted to know are being thrust into the hands of unsuspecting readers all over again.”

27. Those words from Jon McGregor come from the introduction he wrote for this new ebook edition. And that introduction is brilliant.

28. The all new introduction also contains a very disturbing story about Jimmy Savile. But you’ll have to read it to find out...

29. The all new ebook edition also contains a mighty fine postscript written by Simon Crump himself, containing a very funny story about someone called Jurgen.

30. You’ll have to buy the book to read that story too.

31. Did I mention that the ebook only costs £4? Okay, I did. But did I also mention that the original hardback edition will cost you at least £40 on ebay?

32. Here's another review of My Elvis Blackout from The Guardian.

33. Yes, yes, I wrote that review. But the point is that I love the book and have done for years. It's one of the best things I've ever read. And I review books for a living. And so I have read quite a few.

34. In fact, I love My Elvis Blackout so much that I'm sitting here on Boxing Day morning, typing this list.

35. And even though it's Boxing Day and most people are still asleep and nursing hangovers, and I really should be feeling bitter about sitting here in front of the screen and working, I'm not. Because I love this book and writing about it is always fun.

36. But not as much fun as reading it, which you could do, if only you bought it.

37. You can download it as a PDF too, and on your phone, so don't give me any of this "I don't own an ereader" shit.

38. Look at Simon Crump's face!

39. Look at Elvis's face!

40. Look at Chris De Burgh's face!

41. Simon and Elvis kill Chris De Burgh.

42. Bookmunch say that Simon Crump is the dog's danglers.

43. Here's a quote from My Elvis Blackout: "I take a proper look at Elvis's face,

catch a glint of metal through the blood, figure out what he's done. The crazy fuck's stapled his eyelids together to keep from doing the washing up."

44. Here's another: "When he was a foetus, Elvis used to wait till his mom was asleep, carefully remove his umbilical cord, sneak out of her insides and head off into town."

45. And another: "He was the unborn King of Rock 'n' Roll and if he wanted to go out naked except for a ridiculous tartan coat, he bastard well would."

46. And, okay, one more: "Keep your fucking canoe," said Elvis, "I want to eat men."

47. Those quotes don't even begin to do justice to the twisted genius of this book.

48. I do not use the word "genius" lightly.

49. You've read almost all the way to the end of this very long list, so either there's something about the book that interests you, or you're really, really bored. Either way, buying the book and reading it will sort you out. Go on! Go on, go on! Go on, Go on, go on!

50. I think that's enough reasons. Buy it and love it!

wordsofmercury - Book reviews and thoughts

<http://wordsofmercury.wordpress.com/2013/01/07/my-elvis-blackout-simon-crump/>

My Elvis Blackout – Simon Crump - Posted on January 7, 2013

‘Anyway, so I twisted Chris’s weedy arm up behind his back and marched him round the side of the trailer. I jammed the muzzle of my .38 in his much and blammo! that little fucker wouldn’t be dancing with the lady in Red anymore.’

The problem that My Elvis Blackout causes the aspiring book reviewer is that it tends to render one entirely speechless. It is for neither the squeamish nor the unadventurous. In the first two pages Elvis kills Barbara Cartland and commits suicide. Quite. These stories were originally released in 2000 and have been reissued by Galley Beggar Press with an introduction by Jon McGregor in which he analyses them as a kind of luxuriation in the absurd development of the Elvis Presley cult of personality. I think that this is about right; and the sheer delirium that powers one on through each story is remarkable. I read it in one sitting.

‘Keep your fucking canoe,’ said Elvis, ‘I want to eat men.’

My Elvis Blackout is funny, macabre, funny and macabre. How profound it is I’m not sure. There is a certain extension of the representation of thought and behaviour beyond which profundity becomes difficult to attain. Of course, that may be a failure on my part to move beyond the extreme violence; and my complete lack of interest in Elvis probably doesn’t help. The writing is punchy, the stories are inventive, Chris De Burgh is shot in the head. If it sounds like your sort of thing, you should give it a go. It’s one of those books you have to experience for yourself; I can only wave my hands oddly in its general direction. At the very least, it’s an experience you will probably remember. (For an excellent and much fuller review, read John Self’s post at Asylum).

‘When he was a foetus, Elvis used to wait till his Mom was asleep, carefully remove his umbilical cord, sneak out of her insides and head off into town. He usually wore the little tartan coat which Alfredo, their disgusting toy poodle, wore for his walks with Mommy on cold winter mornings. Elvis looked a complete tosser in this outfit, what with the blood and the dog hairs, but what the fuck did he care? He was the unborn King of Rock’n’Roll and if he wanted to go out naked except for a ridiculous coat, he bastard well would.’

GOODREADS

http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1517650.My_Elvis_Blackout

My Elvis Blackout - by Simon Crump

3.73 of 5 stars 3.73 · rating details · 33 ratings · 7 reviews

“This is one of the most abnormal books of all time, and also one of the best...

No home is complete without this magnificent book." Dan Rhodes

Join the King of Rock and Roll as he wreaks crazy havoc with the Memphis Mafia, murders huge numbers of groupies, destroys televisions, sabotages Led Zeppelin gigs with great big bags of pigs' blood and somehow also breaks your heart. The best book you have never read - but really must.

Praise for my Elvis Blackout:

"Like an episode of South Park, where just as you get into the story something goes splat, Crump's contorted imagination is alarmingly enjoyable."

The Guardian

"If I was born with a name like Simon Crump, I would spend the rest of my life trying to get all that anger and resentment out of me by being very rude about other

people. It doesn't bother me in the slightest. Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me. Or something like that. No, I wouldn't even give this a passing thought. When you are a famous person, you are there; you are up for grabs for people to have a go at. I know there are comedians who make fun of me. But, you know, I look at my beautiful family, I look at the house I live in and I look at my fans all over the world, and I look at my career and I think, well it's all based on jealousy and envy and really I don't give a toss." Chris De Burgh

This ebook edition comes with a brand new introduction by Jon McGregor and a postscript by the author. It also contains the complete text of one of the best book's written in the past twenty years. First published in 2000, but shamefully overlooked ever since, *My Elvis Blackout* is a work of genius. Of particularly twisted and unsettling genius, but genius all the same. A book so strange, sick and strange again that you'll often wonder what on earth you're reading. But as you wonder, you'll also marvel.

In these 37 short stories, the King of Rock and Roll - "hero and model to teenagers the world over" - joins a choir in order to torture and murder Christians, labours under the delusion that he's a major rock-star (when really he's just an inmate in an asylum who's afraid of potatoes), and kills both Barbara Cartland and Chris De Burgh. And then he does some bad things too.

Needless to say, it's very funny - but *My Elvis Blackout* is more than just a laugh riot. This acerbic take on the cult of Elvis' personality tells plenty of uncomfortable truths about our relationship with celebrity, while Simon Crump writes with astonishing force and power about mortality, human cruelty and the horrors that man inflicts upon his fellow man. It's daft. But it's also profound.

And don't think that this is disrespectful to the King, either. Elvis remains a

strangely sympathetic (albeit psychotic) character throughout. It's one of the best tributes to his unique genius you can hope to read. Just don't buy it if you're a Chris De Burgh fan..

comments:

Paul -Aug 24, 2012 Paul rated it 3 of 5 stars

Recommends it for: Elvis fans (or not)

Shelves: i-laughed-how-i-laughed, novels

This novel - there's no other word, I suppose it's a novel - must have been written on a bet of some kind, like, I bet I can write something weirder and grosser than YOU can or something, nothing else would explain it.

It made me laugh, but I do not expect it would have the same effect on anyone else.

Especially Elvis fans.

Sp please, if you're an Elvis fan, look away now.

But it's not anti-Elvis. It's...er...mmm....it's....Words fail me.

To be read in one afternoon while drinking heavily.

Whiskeyb - Jul 16, 2007 Whiskeyb rated it 5 of 5 stars

I borrowed this book from the library in Belfast and it was so wild and strange and twisted! I will never think of Elvis in the same way. I read it out loud to my boyfriend and we laughed our holes out. Now I can't find it anywhere.

Scott Cook - Jul 23, 2013 Scott Cook rated it 5 of 5 stars

I thought I had read a few strange books- some Perce and other surrealists, Vonnegut, Ballard, and Genet etc and more recently Michael Dhillon but Simon

Crump has shown me that I have been languishing in Ordinary Town with nothing but a phone book to peruse. Having read 'My Elvis Blackout' I am now on board a groaning bus filled with a wide cross section of the population dressed in white spangled jumpsuits, enormous sunglasses and oily quiffs on an endless mystery tour. The thing that is leaving me more than a little perturbed is that I'm sure I recognise one or two of them.

Gary Marshall - Dec 18, 2012 Gary Marshall rated it 3 of 5 stars

One of the oddest things I've ever read. My Elvis Blackout is either really good, or really bad. I can't make up my mind which.

Rob Gouveia - Dec 21, 2013 Rob Gouveia rated it 3 of 5 stars

definitely something different. probably more fun to wow than to read.

B.c. - May 19, 2011 B.c. rated it 4 of 5 stars · review of another edition

Shelves: fiction, dark-humour, 2011-read-list

I'll never think of Elvis in the same way again ... honestly.

flajol - Mar 25, 2008 flajol rated it 4 of 5 stars

Shelves: funny

Pretty offensive and very funny.

<http://www.alibris.co.uk/reviews/book/4532785/My-Elvis-Blackout>

Reviews of My Elvis Blackout by Simon Crump

Customer rating: 4 out of 5 4 out of 5

rock in print, Aug 2, 2007

by oldscratch

"Just add bourbon and a drum kit. Mr. Crump lets loose our Elvis. There must have been some " why the hell not " going on, and thank Elvis for taking the author along. Certainly not for all readers yet the ones who will hate it need it the most. Great fun and unforgettable scenes abound, My Elvis blackout nails it."

The Sunday Guardian

<http://www.sunday-guardian.com/bookbeat/of-celebs-gone-rogue-elvis-and-led-zepp-amidst-aliens-zombies>

Of celebs gone rogue: Elvis and Led Zepp amidst aliens, zombies

As I read Simon Crump's My Elvis Blackout, the internet was venting its excitement and anger over some of the revelations thrown up by Lance Armstrong's interview with Oprah Winfrey. The outrage over Armstrong is an indicator of how disappointing we find it when the people we look up to and idolise turn out to have feet of clay.

So how do you write about celebrities who are probably really awful people in real life? Crump's solution – fictionalised accounts in which the celebrity in question commits crimes, acts of violence, and other grotesque acts. It's as good an answer as any.

My Elvis Blackout has had an odd publication history; as Crump notes in the

afterword, it has, since its creation in 1998, been "a chapbook, a hardback, a trade paperback, a tee-shirt, a short film, a CD and even a band". It was published in 2000, was out of print for many years, and has recently been reissued as an ebook by Galley Beggar Press. In the interim Crump published *Neverland*, a lurid, fictionalised account of Michael Jackson that, the author claims, was finished mere hours before the singer died and was probably a rather startling contrast to some of the fawning accounts of his life that followed.

In *My Elvis Blackout*, Crump gives us a series of short stories (some are less than a page long) in which Elvis Presley is reimagined in a number of startling ways. He murders other celebrities, including Dame Barbara Cartland and "Lady in Red" singer Chris de Burgh – though de Burgh comes back as a zombie to complain. He stands up his high school girlfriend on the night of a dance, only to confess to her later that he has murdered a classmate and become obsessed with human hair. We hear of his adventures as a foetus, when he would escape his mother's womb, dress in the poodle's tartan coat and go shoplifting. Of the time he was drugged on a cooking show with hilarious results – until all those associated with the show were fired. Many of these stories are told in a matter-of-fact tone that is completely at odds with their subject matter. "It was pretty soon after the time when Elvis had been abducted by aliens and he was still very touchy about the whole topic of intergalactic space travel." Or "convinced that Led Zeppelin had sabotaged his plane, Elvis was now on his way to teach them a lesson."

So how do you write about celebrities who are probably really awful people in real life? Crump's solution – fictionalised accounts in which the celebrity in question commits crimes, acts of violence.

Violence is a constant throughout the collection. Often it's casual; out of

nowhere a character's throat will be slit or giant ants will eat the flesh off her. It is even tender; Angie Crumbaker describes the boyfriend who has just committed murder as "so handsome that my aching heart began to bleed". Sometimes it is visceral, as when we read of cannibalistic rituals at Graceland, where "human entrails had formed a thick crust on the surface of the pool". It's never played for laughs, even when it could be. The abovementioned Led Zeppelin revenge plot goes terribly wrong, but it seems more to draw attention to its lack of humour than anything else.

As someone with only a mild interest in the musician, I often found names and associations that seemed vaguely familiar; such as a reference to Presley's having to shave off his sideburns to enter the US army. This feels in some ways like a pre-internet book, pieced together from what scraps we do know about a celebrity. Crump says it was written in the mid-1990s, before the internet was quite as big a part of our lives as it is today.

But much of this, particularly what it obliquely says about celebrity culture, feels new and fresh. In his introduction to the book, Jon McGregor tells an anecdote about another of this year's "fallen" celebrities, Jimmy Savile, and his sexual harassment of a young woman who was subsequently fired for retaliating. "We used to think this was a funny story" he says, after a beat.

Book Riot

<http://bookriot.com/2013/06/05/genre-kryptonite-elvis-literature/>

Genre Kryptonite: Elvis Literature

By Sean Bell - Jun 5, 2013

He was and is the quintessential American icon, the scope of whose meaning

remains as panoramic and contradictory as the nation itself. As such, it is curious that Elvis Presley never found himself the subject of some weighty, would-be ‘Great American Novel.’

Though his legacy has long been a publishing phenomenon, yielding mountains of nonfiction ranging from the scholarly to the sensationalist, the practitioners of non-factual literature have always been strangely reticent when it comes to the King... albeit with some exceptions.

Perhaps – no fat jokes, please – Elvis is simply too big a subject for most writers to handle. The story of Elvis is, depending on your perspective, also the story of rock and roll, racial politics, Southern culture, drug addiction, the power of celebrity, the rise and fall of greatness, and the evolving nature of American identity in the 20th century. Despite the richness of such material, not many novelists have the stamina to tackle all that in one go.

One might also argue that no fabrication could ever out-do the reality. A lot of clichés began with Elvis – ‘stranger than fiction’ might as well be one of them. Even the wildest imaginations of speculative literature failed to see Elvis coming, snake-hipped and gold-suited; now, almost 36 years after his death, the uniqueness of that character remains as embedded in the world’s consciousness as Adolf Hitler or Jesus Christ. Not bad for a guitar-strumming hillbilly.

As diligent readers may have noticed, I have a certain regard for Mr. Presley, otherwise known as the only King to whom I would ever bow. That regard extends to my bookshelf, where most of my fascinations live, so for anyone considering a literary exploration of Elvis, I am happy to offer the following selection.

...

My Elvis Blackout by Simon Crump

Simon Crump's collection of Elvis-themed short stories highlights the weird, semi-religious ethereality of Elvis's place in pop culture, then sets that image ablaze with iconoclastic glee. Here we have Elvis the saint, Elvis the mental patient and Elvis the mass murderer, paranoid, psychotic and drenched in the blood of his enemies, more than a match for anything the world can throw at him.

A thrillingly disturbing little book, My Elvis Blackout is a study in contrasts and amalgamations, with stories that dance between fact and fiction, the surrealism of Crump's prose melding with the surrealism of Elvis's life, the tone skipping between blackest humour and disconcerting seriousness.

[http://www.openingthebook.com/whichbook/book.aspx?t=My+Elvis+Blackout
&by=Simon+Crump&id=11017](http://www.openingthebook.com/whichbook/book.aspx?t=My+Elvis+Blackout&by=Simon+Crump&id=11017)

Like a blast of air these stories or brief episodes of an alternate, parallel Elvis Presley are sure to freshen up your reading. Laced with humour, blackly comic and fun they are often strange, twisted and riotous and make for a very different, exuberant read.

Published by Sam Jordison on 23rd January 2013

<http://kitwhitfield.blogspot.co.uk/2007/04/negativity.html>

article about negativity in fiction

comments:

Yes, sustainability is definitely an issue. Simon Crump released a short story collection called 'My Elvis Blackout' which was a series of increasingly surreal vignettes about Elvis with in some places quite a nasty undercurrent, but the brevity

and surrealism redeemed it. On the basis of this I bought 'Monkey's Birthday', which comprised two novellas of such dispiriting nastiness that I'm looking forward to forgetting them in my declining years. Of course, that may have been the point.

posted by Blogger Joel : 2:34 pm

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<http://zolaandme.wordpress.com/myelvisblackout/the>

Sunday Times

From this surreal collection of vignettes emerges a deliciously obscene and blackly comic vision of the king. Crump's Elvis Presley is an object of fantasy, fear and fun. He is a gun-toting murderer, a paranoid drug addict and a foetus. He is the killer of Barbara Cartland, the decapitator of Chris de Burgh and the bank robbing partner-in-crime of Roy Orbison. Think Quentin Tarrantino on acid in Graceland. Extraordinary.

The Guardian

In counterpoint to the world's predilection for Elvis-as-hero and back-from-the-dead fantasies, philosopher Simon Crump has concocted the surreal and often grotesque My Elvis Blackout. In an unnervingly bizarre series of vignettes, Elvis and his friends [and a monkey called Scatter] go on the rampage, exterminating fans and enemies alike with a range of lethal weapons. Like an episode of South Park, where just as you get into the story something goes splat, Crump's contorted imagination is alarmingly enjoyable.

The Big Issue

Here's a book to really make you laugh, providing you have tough constitution. A twisted take on an iconic subject, this unusual work features Elvis as a serial-killing preacher who listens to his hairdresser's advice to get in touch with other cultures. But instead of taking up yoga Elvis gets into cannibalism. Each chapter is written almost as a short story; best is Lady In Red, where Chris de Burgh meets with the King's scorn, and fails to get out alive.

FHM

Elvis regularly ate deep-fried squirrels; Elvis faked his death to work undercover for the CIA; when Elvis died, the shit in his constipated bowels was denser than concrete: There's just no stopping the mythology surrounding the Pelvis. Simon Crump's superb debut, however, takes this to extremes – whether painting him as a Yorkshire hitman buying electricity tokens, or mutilating a crowd of Led Zeppelin fans by bombing them with frozen pig excrement. Consequently, this is less a coherent novel than a series of surreal, perverse images. But Crump writes with such a lack of fear that it's both hilariously refreshing and destined to gloriously offend any fans who prefer to forget his amphetamine-stuffed cheeseburger death.

TNT magazine

Primary school prose and a plot out of a cokehead's arse, this book is a waste of paper.

Yorkshire Post

In this macabre fantasy based on the life and troubled times of Elvis Presley,

Crump takes the reader on a disturbingly funny journey inside the mind of his central character. Frequently inspired, often darkly witty, Crump is a writer with an imagination the size of a house. There are elements here of Irvine Welsh, but the cinematic style of writing also suggests a bizarre coupling of Pulp fiction and The Waltons. Clever, twisted, you have to admire the sheer verve and audacity.

B. Neverland

Not the Booker prize: Neverland by Simon Crump

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/sep/02/not-booker-neverland-simon-crump>

A very strange book that arrived on the shortlist by very strange means. Luckily, it's also very good.

Sam Jordison - Wednesday 2 September 2009 10.20 BST

It took Simon Crump three years to put together *Neverland*, a novel about "Michael Jackson and his loud mouth friend Uri" (read an extract). Three years during which, he said, Michael Jackson was "with me at home, at work and in my car. He shared my meals and even some of my dreams." Crump finished the book around 9pm BST on 25 June. The real Michael Jackson was dead less than four hours later. It can only be assumed that that coincidence took the author aback somewhat.

That shock, combined with the strange feeling of dislocation that must always come upon finishing a book, must only have been compounded when Crump realised he was suddenly part of the process of, as he termed it, picking Michael's bones clean. *Neverland*, a strange, difficult and thoroughly anti-commercial commentary on celebrity was suddenly swirling around with all those other Michael Jackson tributes,

biographies and photo souvenir specials that were rushed to the printers before the police had even provided a definitive answer on the cause of the singer's death. Really, this book is the antidote to all that crap – but it was still pushed out through the same hole.

And as if all that wasn't unsettling enough for Crump we then came along with the Not The Booker prize. I nominated the book, having read a proof and loved it. At the shortlist stage it originally gained a bit of attention from avid Crump fans, but did as quietly as you might expect for a book that hardly anyone had read because it hadn't yet been released. Until an acquaintance of Crump's posted the following on a Leeds United message-board:

"My friend Simon has fallen most fortunate and has just released his novel about Michael Jackson. Rather than the sycophantic gloss currently available, these are the 70 odd short stories he's been writing for the past three years and provide a glimpse of Jacko in an alternative universe. Regardless, he needs your help. I need you to ... post the following: 'VOTE Neverland by Simon Crump' and then add a sentence such as 'great book' etc."

Quite a few people did as he suggested and the book was catapulted into this round. I've been told that Crump himself found the whole thing excruciatingly embarrassing – and not just because so many posters started grumbling about vote-rigging and subjecting him to the peculiarly lacerating form of wit that often marks out Guardian comment boards.

It's all quite sad. But then again, there is a certain aptness to Neverland's uncomfortable journey into the limelight. It seems somehow fitting that such an odd book should have made such an unusual entrance. Like its subject, this book doesn't fit easily in this world. It's peculiar, more than a little sick and – as I hope to convey –

one hell of a performer.

It also pretty much defies description. We follow a thoroughly unreliable narrator Lamar (a former member of the Memphis mafia who has now been employed by Michael Jackson) as he loses his wife, drinks drugged coffee and sleeps for years at a time, gets shot and dies – an event that only seems to incapacitate him in so far as he can no longer smoke his favourite brand of mini-cigars. His employer, meanwhile, takes part in the last great gold rush of 1898, tries to buy a unicorn from Ebay, starts fights in shopping malls with Uri Geller, forces Lisa Marie Presley to play with his lego and attacks a horse.

It's very funny – with countless fast one-liners, plenty of fine and inventive swearing and several slow-building, repetitive jokes that detonate wonderfully whenever they appear. It's also quite profound. It doesn't make that much sense in a conventional, linear-rational way, but it does all add up to ... something. It's all about the steady creation of atmosphere. An overwhelming sense of the tawdriness of life in Neverland, of ugliness, of failure, degradation and absurdity. At the same time, we also get a surprisingly sympathetic insight into Michael Jackson himself, someone who is always longing for something better in spite of his own sickness and the cynicism of those around him. He keeps on saying things are "simply ... magical" when really it's clear they're nasty and dispiriting. The unicorn he buys, for instance, turns out to be a dead hamster with a golf tee stuck to its forehead, but Michael still insists on its magic. The one time something genuinely supernatural happens – Uri Geller correctly guesses the question Michael was about to ask him – Geller pops his balloon by telling Jackson he was able to pull the trick off: "Because I'm a fucking psychic."

This fictional Michael Jackson rang truer for me than the shadowy

approximation in those ambulance-chasing biographies. Here he is as he existed for most of us. Not that poor skeletal flesh and blood man, but a luridly mad creature of the imagination. A dangerous, bad, little boy gifted with a talent on stage that makes "Elvis look like some fat guy dancin at a weddin." I even started to quite like the freak.

[+ 34 comments]

The Guardian home

Culture > Books > Biography

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/sep/19/neverland-unreal-michael-jackson>

Neverland: The Unreal Michael Jackson Story by Simon Crump - Jeremy Dyson on the King of Pop - The Guardian, Saturday 19 September 2009

In the profusion of Michael Jackson-related titles published since his death there can be none more singular and diverting than Simon Crump's fourth book, Neverland. Begun in 2006 and completed with eerie synchronicity just four hours before the singer's demise, Neverland is a series of interconnected (very) short stories about the troubled superstar. It's unexpectedly funny, as easy to read as a child's language primer, but somehow a great and elegiac profundity lurks beneath its spare prose and outrageous absurdity.

Don't pick up Neverland expecting a conventional portrait of the King of Pop. This Michael Jackson, as well as wandering the lonely and desperate environs of the

book's titular home, is also encountered in Sheffield's Meadowhall shopping centre, on a roof in Doncaster, and during the 1898 gold rush along the Stikine river. Crump's first book, *My Elvis Blackout*, did a similar thing with the King of Rock'n'Roll, so clearly he is stamping out his own distinctive territory here. Maybe some will consider it a cheap stunt, and his choices of subject matter are so huge and obvious that you may think it would negate his purpose - what's left to say about these figures whose lives have been already pored over and examined to the nth degree? - but Crump's transfiguring trick is what sets his work apart. Something about the stretch between what we all cannot fail to know about these icons and what he actually depicts sets off a little bomb in the imagination that tells us something about them and, more importantly, something new about our own need to reify, with its attendant need to destroy. Neverland should be given to all X Factor contestants as they leave the audition room.

The 70-odd fragments of story that make up the book are bound together by an uber-narrative concerning Lamar - an ex-minder of Elvis who is drugged and falls asleep, Rip van Winkle-like, for 16 years, only to wake up and immediately be offered a job looking after Jackson at Neverland. Lamar is brilliantly drawn with the kind of economical strokes any screenwriter would be proud of. There is a great poignancy to him - lost and lonely after Elvis's death - and we empathise straightaway. In fact, our concern for him is what keeps us turning the pages. Through Lamar we meet Jackson, and are also treated to a series of gnomic dialogues with the singer and Uri Geller.

These encounters are interspersed with other, less accountable, intrusions - fragments of self-contained, seemingly unrelated stories that ultimately define the book. They evoke a sense of ghostly mystery that makes the experience of reading

Neverland linger in the mind. If you want to know how good a writer Crump is, turn straight to page 58 and read the story entitled "Chris". In fewer than 100 words he creates a believable character in a heart-rending situation. It makes you think of Raymond Carver. That such beauty should be hidden beneath layers of absurdity and lunacy is surely the perfect epitaph for Jackson himself.

Amazon reviews

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Neverland-unreal-Michael-Jackson-stories/dp/1905847378>

Blame it on ... Mr Crump!!, 1 Oct 2009 - By Kevin Reid

Don't blame it on sunshine,

Don't blame it on moonlight,

Don't blame on good times,

Blame it on Simon Crump,

for penning one of the top books for 2009!

This lucid collection of short stories is attractively absurd, lingeringly laughable, mysterious and full of mad Michael-isms!

Despite it's 'unreal' title, it's as real, if not more, as any tabloid article on MJ.

Michael in Sheffield, Michael the labourer, Michael the ...

'Neverland' cleverly conveys the "king of pop" as an "Everyman" for the 21st Century!

If there's one book you want to be remembered for giving, make it this one! It's unforgettable!!

NOT about MJ, 23 Feb 2010 - By Heather "Heather"

This is an unusual book to say the least, I just kept reading until I had finished it, not really because of any unputdownable quality it has, more like just because it is big print and not much of it on each page, it took me 2 1/2 hrs including a break to make lunch for the kids and to sweep the floor!! So anyway I kept going to see if it would make any sense at all and then just to get it over and done with really.

There is no need for it to even mention Michael Jackson BUT, as it does mention him, people will buy the book only to discover that it is nothing to do with Neverland or MJ and it's just a sad excuse to cash in on the famous name.

If one were to grasp at describing the plot perhaps you could say: An obnoxious man takes the post of head of security at Neverland and a series of disjointed scenes follows, some relevant to his job some not. Who knows what some of it was about?

Some "fun" is poked at MJ's disabled fans and MJ himself, but not bad enough to get really upset about. I had to laugh tho' at the part where the protagonist meets MJ for the first time. That bit was funny.

This book has to be one of the best examples I have seen of using Michael Jackson's name to sell something, I am amazed the author gets away with it. Anyway I'm glad I only paid a couple of quid for it.

A surprising and touching book, 20 Sep 2009 - By Tido

This book, a novel (I think) is constructed from 70-odd

fragments...some of them very odd indeed.

Neverland is a mysterious and intriguing book and long after finishing it, it still lingers in the mind. It is simultaneously absurd, lunatic, touching and beautiful. Neverland is less like a novel and more like a perfect little piece of conceptual art. There are links here to Crump's first book 'My Elvis Blackout' but don't expect a sequel, in fact don't ever rely upon Crump to do anything predictable!

A wonderful book and highly recommended.

An alternative to the tripe, 26 Aug 2009 - By Brutal Truth

If you're a fan of *My Elvis Blackout*, *Twilight Time* or Simon Crump's writing in general then you will not be disappointed. I would strongly suggest you take stock of this book immediately.

3 years in waiting and it's clear that Simon has matured as a writer, but without losing any of his immediacy in delivery or irreverency in style. This is another collection of interlinked short stories, interwoven against the constant presence of a certain Mr. Michael Jackson. Is it the Jackson that you automatically think of? That's clearly for you to decide.

An affectionate, surreal and comic depiction of a strange man. His life, his friends and the odd places that he visits as a result are all explored within this book and it's a world that, although you may not wish to inhabit, you feel happy to observe with a smile.

A welcome return from Simon and certainly one that matches, if not surpasses, his previous works. If you've not previously Crumped then you should moonwalk this way as soon as possible.

Stupid Bood, July 9, 2010 - By Mohini "Animal Lover"

That says it all. Stupid Book. Waste of money. Don't buy it.

The Enthusiast - Review: Neverland by Simon Crump

Tim Howard - February 22, 2010

[links are broken or site hacked]

<http://www.theenthusiast.com.au/archives/2010/review-neverland-by-simon-crump/#sthash.34PH8W4H.dpuf>

<http://www.theenthusiast.com.au/archives/2010/review-neverland-by-simon-crump/>

Michael Jackson is an almost unavoidable figure, thanks largely to 40 years of sometimes adulatory, often hostile, but always intrusive media attention. As is appropriate for the alleged last great icon of cultural consensus, you needn't have taken an active interest in the man's music to be cognisant of the major components of the MJ mythology: the abusive stage father; the prodigious song-and-dance skillz; the skin thing. Then there's Neverland Ranch; child abuse accusations; Lisa Marie; the chimp. If his were a more conventional story, Jackson's death would have been the final act. In the event it was merely the prelude to an ongoing, interminable saga. We will never, ever, hear the last of this guy.

Following Jackson's death the publishing arm of the MJ industry began churning out titles ranging from the unsympathetic to the hagiographic, most emitting the soiled-linen stench of the cash-in. Doubtless the MJ phenomenon will eventually attract more considered, intelligent voices, in the same way that over the years a

strand of quality Elvis commentary has emerged to counterbalance the reams of tripe dedicated to the King. For the moment, however, allow me to direct you to the irreverent, surreal and timely delights of Simon Crump's *Neverland*.

"Timely" is an understatement. Crump claims that after three years of work he finished writing *Neverland* just hours before Jackson died. Thus what would have been an unusual, potentially libellous take on a living legend was given an added patina of relevance, not to mention poignance. Can't have harmed the book's sales, either.

Neverland is a sequel of sorts to Crump's earlier *My Elvis Blackout*, a freewheeling collection of short prose pieces – "stories" is too limiting a term for the range of forms Crump employs – that is best described as a compendium of alternate-world Elvises: Elvis as serial killer, Elvis as celebrity chef, Elvis as subservient Yorkshire husband and scale-modelling enthusiast. In *MEB* Crump takes the broad outlines of the Elvis legend and does them over from several dozen angles. The book drips iconoclasm: this is not a book for the die-hard Elvis fan, unless said die-hard Elvis fan enjoys imagining Elvis slashing groupies with a swordstick or playing at bank robbers with Roy Orbison.

Neverland's primary narrative uses Elvis as a springboard. (Not literally, although that certainly wouldn't be out of place here.) Burly Texan Lamar, a member of Elvis's Memphis Mafia, falls into a Rip Van Winkle-esque sleep following Presley's death. Sixteen years later he wakes up and walks into a job as head of security for Elvis's grown-up daughter and her "magical" husband, Michael.

Lamar's anecdotes and observations provide a narrative arc (of sorts) that *My Elvis Blackout* eschewed. Life with the real Lisa and Michael was presumably different; down on the *Neverland* ranch things get really weird. Michael is depicted as

a tragic innocent, desperately attempting to cushion himself against reality. In one story Lamar helps Michael purchase a “Genuine California Unicorn” from eBay; when it arrives the unicorn turns out to be a dead hamster with a golf tee stuck to its head. Lamar reports: “The kid’s eyes fill with tears. He slips his arm into mine. ‘This is even better than I expected, Lamar,’ he sobs. ‘It’s simply... magical.’”

The Lamar stories are interspersed with an array of narratives, some less than a page in length. Some of this material explicitly concerns Michael Jackson, usually through a distortion of time and/or place. Other pieces are only tenuously connected to MJ, or not at all, at least not in any interpretation this reader came up with.

Crump refuses to ground the book with a consistent form or perspective or even prose style. He fires off jokes both good and bad, constructs dialogue using verbiage ripped wholesale from the anodyne wastelands of Wikipedia, stages elaborate linguistic gags that aren’t funny and were probably never intended to be. This is uncompromising writing, constantly shifting beneath the reader’s feet, refusing to permit cheap interpretation or even sometimes basic comprehension.

That said, Neverland is loaded with incidental pleasures and it can be great fun watching Crump lay siege to the edifice of modern celebrity. Jackson is a pathetic figure – in Neverland as he was in Neverland – and Crump perfectly captures the absurdity of the man’s existence and the cynicism of those who fed off his celebrity. Early in the book an unidentified narrator reflects on Jackson’s career arc with chilling indifference: “For a while there was gold, lots of it, and there were cartoons and songs and dance and lunar walking and Motown and I want you back. We fixed him though. Then we fucked him. And we took it all.” Point well made, Mr. Crump.

Asylum - John Self's Shelves

John Self - September 11, 2009

<http://theasylum.wordpress.com/2009/09/11/simon-crump-neverland/>

Simon Crump's book *Neverland* would probably have passed my (and many others') notice but for two small matters. First, it was shortlisted for the Guardian 'Not the Booker Prize Prize' as a result of an enthusiastic voting campaign by Leeds United fans. Second, this book which offers us several fictional presentations of Michael Jackson was published, coincidentally, shortly after Jackson's sudden death in June of this year. Indeed, Crump says that he finished writing the book a few hours before Jackson died.

I described *Neverland* simply as a 'book' above because it seems to straddle a line between novel and stories. The back cover refers to it as a "collection", yet it clearly has unity of purpose and, to some extent, character – though the extent of that unity of character is not always clear. There are 72 'chapters', many of which are stand-alone, flash fiction type stories, varying from a few lines to a few pages. Others are parts of longer narratives. One of these describes a very long conversation between Michael Jackson and Uri Geller, where Michael breaks biscuits in two ("his eyes grew a shade darker") accompanied only by the "muted hum of the Frigidaire" as he fails time and again to get around to asking Uri a question, and mispronounces the word 'electric'. It's a series of running jokes, and like most running jokes, all the broken biscuits and muted hums become funnier the first few times, reach a plateau, and then become annoying.

The book is full of gags like this, that are either very silly or don't quite work. This seems deliberate on Crump's part. He cripples his jokes, just as Stewart Lee does when he drives a gag into the ground through overlong repetition, which in itself

becomes funny, then not funny, then funny again. The fact that the joke is not funny is itself a joke. It might be taken as reflection of the mixture of horror and amusement that anyone watching Michael Jackson's life over the last couple of decades will have experienced.

The dumb kid had written Par Avian on the envelope instead of Par Avion, so the letter had been delivered by bird and as a result was almost six months late.

The main narrative in the book, broken up through its entire length, is related by Lamar ("250 lbs of fine lookin hombre"), a former assistant to Elvis who falls asleep for 16 years after the King's death, and wakes in 1993 to take up a post in Michael Jackson's entourage. ("There's Disney music coming out of the fiberglass rocks in the rosebeds...") Here, Michael is still married to Lisa Marie Presley, and Crump passes up no opportunities to make the reader squirm with the grotesquerie of life in Neverland ("I made love to Lisa in my Mickey Mouse pyjamas ... One day she's going to give me a little boy of my own"). Michael is innocent, demanding, deluded.

There are other strong stories, the best of which is 'Gold', and where Michael appears as a Klondike prospector. Yet here, as with other stand-alone items, the connection with Michael Jackson seemed tenuous at best, and I couldn't rid myself of the idea that these stories had been running around in Crump's mind independent of the Neverland project, and that he simply named a character Michael in each one to corral it into the pen. But then Crump positively encourages such misreading – you can see the glint in his eye from here – by having the Michael in Lamar's story speak in Wikipedia entries, or to have British pop culture references from Pulp to Cannon and Ball pepper the dialogue.

Yet as Crump wrote the book while Jackson was still alive, the predominant sense is of Michael as a figure of fun. There is no indication that the real Michael

Jackson had considerable talent (if long since squandered), or any appeal to people who are not (as a group of fans in the book is described) “spasticated.” Now that he has – temporarily – been rehabilitated, the tone of the book may seem out of touch and out of time; or it may seem like a refreshing antidote to hushed and over-respectful biographies. And anyway, the book is not without its own peculiarly expressed sympathy.

Michael was born with gold in his mouth.

He left his mom without too much trouble. He shimmied out. The midwife held him in her white-gloved grip. She struck his face and a shining nugget plopped onto the soiled sheets of the birthing table. He sang and he danced. He bit off his cord. He slipped on a white glove of his own and signed a few autographs.

‘We love you Michael,’ they all said.

‘I love you more,’ he said back.

They called a priest. After all, a minute-old baby isn’t supposed to act that way.

‘Where is the gold?’ he cried. ‘Where is the gold??’

For a while there was gold, lots of it, and there were cartoons and songs and dance and lunar walking and Motown and I want you back.

We fixed him though. Then we fucked him. And we took it all.

Neverland seems like a work of conceptual art, reflecting what the reader brings to it; though the same point might be made of most books with a flash of originality to them. It is almost impossible to extract quotes from the book without misrepresenting its tone: funny, ridiculous, surreal, mesmerically repetitive. It is likely to madden as many people than it delights, and demands a fair amount of reader goodwill. Yet, as with Michael himself, I felt considerable affection for this mad, brilliant runt of the

litter.

[+ 19 comments]

Sam Jordison - September 11, 2009 at 9:04 am

Great review! Really glad you enjoyed the book. (My Elvis Blackout is being re-released soon too... If you liked Neverland, you'll love Elvis, etc)

"We fixed him though. Then we fucked him. And we took it all."

A sharp-intake-of-breath line if ever there was one...

deucekindred - September 11, 2009 at 6:48 pm

I've read Crump's My Elvis Blackout (basically Elvis slips out of his mother's womb and commits unspeakable acts) and My sentiments are exactly like yours John. It revolted me , it ran out of steam but it felt fresh and after reflecting on it. I liked it.

John Self - September 13, 2009 at 9:09 am

Thanks dk – I've now decided I liked Neverland so much that I've ordered copies of Crump's backlist, Monkey's Birthday and Twilight Time. I believe My Elvis Blackout is currently out of print but is being reissued by Old St Publishing (who publish Neverland) shortly.

Lee Monks - September 28, 2009 at 3:27 pm

I will visit other websites, but only occasionally. Anyway, cheers for the Crump heads-up. I'd no idea about the chap and he is a genuinely unique comic voice. Yes, reminiscent of many others such as Welsh,

Saunders et al but definitely has his own thing going there. It's always impressive when someone can set-up an array of such madness and make it work: difficult indeed. It has to generate an enormous amount of goodwill to succeed but Crump has you onside from the word go, because he's funny. Rare.

Julian Gough - April 29, 2011 at 10:18 pm

I should have commented on this review the first time round. Same as you, John, "...as with Michael himself, I felt considerable affection for this mad, brilliant runt of the litter."

It's a very difficult book to describe. It gets its effects indirectly. You're not quite laughing at the jokes, you're laughing at the idea of yourself laughing at the jokes. Or you're laughing at the hole where a joke should be. There's a kind of cumulative meta-effect, from the repetitions of jokes, situations and phrases, that's hypnotic, and attractive.

It's like crossing America in a car. You keep passing the same buildings (a McDonalds, a white clapboard church), but they have slightly different backgrounds each time. You feel you're going in a circle, going in a circle. Eventually you realize you're a thousand miles from home and it's getting dark.

I ended up liking Neverland very much indeed, but I still couldn't tell you precisely why.

The only recent book I can compare it too would be Momus's The Book of Jokes. Which, given that you liked Neverland, you should review sometime. Similar frustrations, and pleasures, though much colder. (But

The Book of Jokes' last lines melt a million tons of accumulated ice.)

Booktopia

<http://www.booktopia.com.au/neverland-simon-crump/prod9781905847372.html>

Books > Non-Fiction > Comedy & Humour

Praise for Simon Crump:

"Deliciously obscene and blackly comic. . . . Quentin Tarantino on acid in Graceland. Extraordinary."—The Sunday Times

"Like an episode of South Park, where just as you get into the story something goes splat, Crump's contorted imagination is alarmingly enjoyable."—Guardian

"Superb."—FHM

"There's a lot more to the book than you might think; an undercurrent of despair and depression that leads to an unexpected and thoroughly moving conclusion."The Independent

"Simon Crump is a vicious and endearing fellow."Todd McEwen

"Crump has a uniquely honest and unflinching vision and he has the talent to tear off the veneer and revel in the insalubrious reality beneath without being

gratuitous or heartless. If you have a dark side, Simon Crump will let you see it—but beware, you might not like what you find."—Time Out

"Wickedly funny."Uncut

"Crump is in total control of his material. His writing is plain, the humor a faded black, the dusting of pathos unobtrusive."Zembla

Neverland is Simon Crump's most daring collection yet—surreal, outrageous, and laugh-out-loud funny. Four years in the making (and delivered just hours before Michael Jackson's death), this is a superb piece of writing that transposes the King of Pop into a world of \$2,000,000 unicorns bought on eBay, giant whelks, rampaging bodyguards, violence, wonder, mystery, and golf.

Outrageous and hilarious, Neverland is nevertheless more than just satire: it is a profound—and profoundly entertaining—fictional exploration of celebrity.

Bookmunch - Neverland

‘One of those crappy stories you might read in a thin book by some dumb English kid with a big nose and a funny surname’ – Neverland by Simon Crump

<http://bookmunch.wordpress.com/2009/09/27/one-of-those-crappy-stories-you-might-read-in-a-thin-book-by-some-dumb-english-kid-with-a-big-nose-and->

[a-funny-surname-neverland-by-simon-crump/](#)

In my boyhood, there was a TV show, The Great Egg Race, in which (amongst other things) elaborate vehicles were created with which to transport the aforementioned ovum from point A to point B. There wasn't a lot of point to the getting from point A to point B but – The Great Egg Race seemed to howl in all of its existential eccentricity – when you take a good long look at things is there much in this life that you can actually, genuinely say has point? Is the search for a point quite possibly the greatest, most pointless waste of time? How much better to just be? Or something. I mention The Great Egg Race here to draw out an easily broken gossamer thread of connection between what those good people were doing and what Simon Crump has done with Neverland.

Neverland (some people will tell you) is about Michael Jackson. The cover of the book (we won't say 'novel' just yet, we'll hold that word in abeyance a short while longer) announces this to be THE UNREAL MICHAEL JACKSON STORY. Which, in a way, in part, it is. Without over-complicating things or getting ahead of ourselves, the book opens with Lamar (who seasoned Crump readers will recall first appeared in *My Elvis Blackout* as Elvis Presley's bodyguard – if I was getting ahead of myself, which I'm not, but if I was I'd say that the Elvis of *My Elvis Blackout* had about as much to do with Elvis as the Michael Jackson of Neverland has to do with Michael Jackson – but whoa! rein it in, rein it in – we'll get there in good time, doggy!). Following the funeral of Elvis, Lamar slept (so we are initially told) for 16 years, only waking to be offered a job by a dame known as the Broad working for a pop star Lamar has never heard of called Michael. Over the period of 170 or so pages,

we see a glimpse into the life of Lamar, Michael Jackson, Lisa Presley and the Broad in Neverland – but these scenes are but a small slice of the cornucopia Crump has on offer.

At times, for instance, we are treated to brief interludes in which Michael works a part-time job as a delivery boy for a Chinese restaurant in South Yorkshire. Despite being the best delivery diver (Crump abounds in typographical side-steps like Charlie Kaufman) for miles around, one day he thinks ‘Fuck it’ and ‘bought himself a train ticket to Motown, day return’. There are unicorns, shop dummies and assorted, hilarious interchanges with Uri Geller (that attain a sort of Pinter-esque obscurity but are always wry) – interchanges that culminate with Uri Geller being taken prisoner by staff from the World of Leather in Sheffield Meadowhall after Uri threatens to take over the world. What’s more, there are – I’m loathe to say flights of fancy but digressions or diversions in which Michael assumes the mantle of village witch doctor (dispensing advice to a couple, for example, that requires a sick man to fasten ‘a freshly killed owl to his forehead’ and ‘a pin case under one arm and a horseshoe under the other’ or apparently laughing and joking with tourists before almost throttling his favourite horse). All of which, taken together, could form at the very least a very entertaining novel, of sorts.

What derails the novel idea (but not strangely the satisfaction to be had from reading the book, curate’s egg that it is) is the insertion of a good few random (or apparently random) shorts or observations or flash fictions that don’t (perhaps – I’m willing to admit perhaps – there may be connections I’m not seeing) seem to relate to the whole Michael Jackson / Neverland farrago. We have someone’s (maybe Crump

himself's) thoughts on Zola and a wee ponder about the flack Zola's translator (Leonard Tancock) may have come in for at school. There is a sweet little aside about the price of fruit. We are introduced to Andrew, Chris, Harold and Smart Dave – none of whom, I think, bear much relation to Michael Jackson. That's not all. Although this isn't – it really isn't – the first place you would look if you were interested in any kind of Michael Jackson story, there is a very real and strange sense that you are being offered a glimpse of the real Michael Jackson. At one point, for instance, Michael gets together with the three bears and eventually (well, after two and a half pages – Crump likes his short chapters) he roars 'Enough of your fucking questions!' and kills all the bears. Now, no-one would say 'this is an intimate glimpse into life behind closed doors' – but there is an uncanny sense that fantastical horrors lurk in the 'real' MJ story so – fantastical horrors have a particular resonance.

Crump enjoys his fantastical-ness much like, say, Joe Stretch. Unlike Joe Stretch, though, Crump doesn't really attempt to bed his world down somewhere realistic before shooting off into the fantastical stratosphere. From the get-go, what the reader is offered is offered up disarmingly: open your arms, the book says, let me in, I'll try not to disappoint. Obviously there are readers in the world who would regard such an invitation askance. Why do you want me to open my arms? such readers might say.

Perhaps Neverland – which requires the suspension of a modicum of disbelief – is not for you. I would recommend a sense of humour. Also a keen ear for melancholy (behind the furious, frenzied craziness of some parts of Neverland, there is a heart and – I think – some small hurt too: this is a neglected writer writing with all of his

knowing heart). But most of all, for those of you who dig Dan Rhodes or Daren King, there is a writer who you may want to investigate if you haven't investigated already.

Any Cop?: Neverland refutes such idea as Cop. To answer this truthfully, I'd have to say something abstract (like 'fishpaste trousers' or 'armchair trumpet') that left you pondering and chuckling. Such a point of entry to Neverland would serve you well...

111 Books - Sunday, 1 July 2012 - 93/111 - Neverland by Simon Crump

<http://eleventyonebooks.blogspot.co.uk/2012/07/93111-neverland-by-simon-crump.html>

This is another one of the books I started reading on holiday, however I hadn't really enjoyed it that much while I was out there so I decided I'd try to give it another go before giving up. I still didn't like it, and ultimately couldn't be bothered to finish it.

The book's tagline is 'the unreal Michael Jackson story', and so I had assumed it would be some sort of satirical take on his life, or maybe even at least have some sort of narrative structure. Unfortunately not. The book seems to consist of a patchwork of fragments, and I've no idea whether they are supposed to be linked in any way. Some of them do appear to be linked, for example a series of snippets between Michael Jackson and Uri Geller (who I take it were friends while MJ was still alive).

They weren't unenjoyable as such, there was just absolutely nothing which compelled me to carry on reading them. The book and the writing stirred up a sort of

feeling in me which I can remember a little from reading something like Light Boxes by Shane Jones, or Sarah by JT Leroy. Only less good. This was fairly dull and didn't evoke any feeling in me whatsoever, and ultimately I gave up reading because if the author can't be bothered to engage me with the writing, then I can't be bothered to use my time reading it. Done!

<http://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Neverland.html?id=O-jWPwAACAAJ>

<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6698166-neverland>

Richard - A wonderfully strange book. Very funny, very moving, very well-written and very much a classic Crump!

User Review - Vincent Eaton - Goodreads

Expertly executed occasionally enjoyable fluff.

User Review - Kat Sommers - Goodreads

Weirder than Michael himself.

Palimpsest > Reviews > Book Reviews

<http://palimpsest.org.uk/forum/showthread.php?t=4204>

John Self - Administrator - 14th Oct 2009

Simon Crump's book Neverland would probably have passed my (and many others') notice but for two small matters. First, it was shortlisted for the Guardian 'Not the Booker Prize Prize' as a result of an enthusiastic voting campaign by Leeds United fans. Second, this book which offers us several fictional presentations of Michael Jackson was published, coincidentally, shortly after Jackson's sudden death in June of

this year. Indeed, Crump says that he finished writing the book a few hours before Jackson died.

I described Neverland simply as a 'book' above because it seems to straddle a line between novel and stories. The back cover refers to it as a 'collection' , yet it clearly has unity of purpose and, to some extent, character ,“ though the extent of that unity of character is not always clear. There are 72 'chapters', many of which are stand-alone, flash fiction type stories, varying from a few lines to a few pages. Others are parts of longer narratives. One of these describes a very long conversation between Michael Jackson and Uri Geller, where Michael breaks biscuits in two ('his eyes grew a shade darker') accompanied only by the 'muted hum of the Frigidaire' as he fails time and again to get around to asking Uri a question, and mispronounces the word 'electric'. It's a series of running jokes, and like most running jokes, all the broken biscuits and muted hums become funnier the first few times, reach a plateau, and then become annoying.

The book is full of gags like this, that are either very silly or don't quite work. This seems deliberate on Crump's part. He cripples his jokes, just as Stewart Lee does when he drives a gag into the ground through overlong repetition, which in itself becomes funny, then not funny, then funny again. The fact that the joke is not funny is itself a joke. It might be taken as reflection of the mixture of horror and amusement that anyone watching Michael Jackson's life over the last couple of decades will have experienced.

Quote:

The dumb kid had written Par Avian on the envelope instead of Par Avion, so the letter had been delivered by bird and as a result was almost six months late.

The main narrative in the book, broken up through its entire length, is related by

Lamar ('250 lbs of fine lookin hombre'), a former assistant to Elvis who falls asleep for 16 years after the King's death, and wakes in 1993 to take up a post in Michael Jackson's entourage. ('There's Disney music coming out of the fiberglass rocks in the rosebeds') Here, Michael is still married to Lisa Marie Presley, and Crump passes up no opportunities to make the reader squirm with the grotesquerie of life in Neverland ('I made love to Lisa in my Mickey Mouse pyjamas 'One day she's going to give me a little boy of my own'). Michael is innocent, demanding, deluded.

There are other strong stories, the best of which is 'Gold', and where Michael appears as a Klondike prospector. Yet here, as with other stand-alone items, the connection with Michael Jackson seemed tenuous at best, and I couldn't rid myself of the idea that these stories had been running around in Crump's mind independent of the Neverland project, and that he simply named a character Michael in each one to corral it into the pen. But then Crump positively encourages such misreading' you can see the glint in his eye from here', by having the Michael in Lamar's story speak in Wikipedia entries, or to have British pop culture references from Pulp to Cannon & Ball pepper the dialogue.

Yet as Crump wrote the book while Jackson was still alive, the predominant sense is of Michael as a figure of fun. There is no indication that the real Michael Jackson had considerable talent (if long since squandered), or any appeal to people who are not (as a group of fans in the book is described) 'spasticated'. Now that he has 'temporarily' been rehabilitated, the tone of the book may seem out of touch and out of time; or it may seem like a refreshing antidote to hushed and over-respectful biographies. And anyway, the book is not without its own peculiarly expressed sympathy.

Quote:

Michael was born with gold in his mouth.

He left his mom without too much trouble. He shimmied out. The midwife held him in her white-gloved grip. She struck his face and a shining nugget plopped onto the soiled sheets of the birthing table. He sang and he danced. He bit off his cord. He slipped on a white glove of his own and signed a few autographs.

'We love you Michael,' they all said.

'I love you more,' he said back.

They called a priest. After all, a minute-old baby isn't supposed to act that way.

'Where is the gold?' he cried. 'Where is the gold??'

For a while there was gold, lots of it, and there were cartoons and songs and dance and lunar walking and Motown and I want you back.

We fixed him though. Then we fucked him. And we took it all.

Neverland seems like a work of conceptual art, reflecting what the reader brings to it; though the same point might be made of most books with a flash of originality to them. It is almost impossible to extract quotes from the book without misrepresenting its tone: funny, ridiculous, surreal, mesmerically repetitive. It is likely to madden as many people than it delights, and demands a fair amount of reader goodwill. Yet, as with Michael himself, I felt considerable affection for this mad, brilliant runt of the litter.

One of my favourite reviews for My Elvis Blackout was on a German Elvis fansite: 'We do not know who is this Simon Crump, but he is not welcome in our town.'

Islington Tribune - Publications by New Journal Enterprises

http://www.thecnj.com/islington/2009/071009/inews071009_18.html

Islington Tribune - by GERALD ISAAMAN - Published: 10 July 2009

Jackson book delivered hours before death

A BOOK about Michael Jackson, commissioned three years ago, was submitted to Finsbury-based independent publisher Old Street hours before the singer died, the company has revealed.

Neverland by Simon Crump is due out on August 11, after the publication date of at least two commemorative books commissioned by other publishers since Jackson's death.

But Old Street managing director and publisher Ben Yarde-Buller is confident his book will still find customer demand, describing it as "an antidote to the glut of rushed hack jobs".

The paperback will be priced £7.99. Old Street holds the world rights and is currently looking for an American publisher to take on the territorial rights.

Mr Yarde-Buller told The Bookseller magazine: "It's amazing serendipity. It's very nice when something happens that makes it a bit easier to get a great writer on people's radars."

Old Street Publishing

<http://www.oldstreetpublishing.co.uk/neverland.html>

"Crump's contorted imagination is alarmingly enjoyable" Guardian

Neverland: The Unreal Michael Jackson Stories / Simon Crump

Paperback / £7.99 / August 09 / 978-1-905847-37-2 / World

Commissioned in early 2007 and completed with uncanny timing a mere four

hours before Jacko's death, NEVERLAND is Simon Crump's funniest, most daring collection yet. A follow-up to the acclaimed MY ELVIS BLACKOUT, it features 70 linked stories, all starring the late King of Pop. They range from the comic (c.f. the one where Jackson and his bodyguard buy a unicorn on Ebay for \$2,000,000) to the grotesque, via the macabre, the twisted and the weird. The product of a deep and wild imagination, this will be the Michael Jackson book of 2009 for the intelligent reader: a blistering, hilarious yet compassionate study of the pitfalls of fame and fortune.

<http://edinburghfestival.list.co.uk/event/10006543-simon-crump-and-ewan-morrison/>

Simon Crump's Neverland features seventy two standalone yet unifying chapters which present various aspects of Michael Jackson's life. Spookily, the book was completed just four hours before its subject passed away. Modern life isn't so much rubbish as just a little odd

<http://www.abebooks.co.uk/Neverland-Paperback-Simon-Crump-Old-Street/11203899994/bd>

Description:

Brand New Book. Praise for Simon Crump:

Deliciously obscene and blackly comic. . . . Quentin Tarantino on acid in Graceland. Extraordinary. --The Sunday Times Like an episode of South Park, where just as you get into the story something goes splat, Crump's contorted imagination is

alarmingly enjoyable. -- Guardian Superb. -- FHM There s a lot more to the book than you might think; an undercurrent of despair and depression that leads to an unexpected and thoroughly moving conclusion. The Independent Simon Crump is a vicious and endearing fellow. Todd McEwen Crump has a uniquely honest and unflinching vision and he has the talent to tear off the veneer and revel in the insalubrious reality beneath without being gratuitous or heartless. If you have a dark side, Simon Crump will let you see it -- but beware, you might not like what you find. -- Time Out Wickedly funny. Uncut Crump is in total control of his material. His writing is plain, the humor a faded black, the dusting of pathos unobtrusive. Zembra Neverland is Simon Crump s most daring collection yet -- surreal, outrageous, and laugh-out-loud funny. Four years in the making (and delivered just hours before Michael Jackson s death), this is a superb piece of writing that transposes the King of Pop into a world of \$2,000,000 unicorns bought on eBay, giant whelks, rampaging bodyguards, violence, wonder, mystery, and golf. Outrageous and hilarious, Neverland is nevertheless more than just satire: it is a profound -- and profoundly entertaining -- fictional exploration of celebrity. Bookseller Inventory # AA29781905847372

That's Books

<http://thatsbooks.blogspot.co.uk/2011/05/simon-crump-novelist-like-no-other.html>

Tuesday, 3 May 2011 - Posted by Martin S at 23:06

Simon Crump. A novelist like no other

My wife read it and said: "You should read this book (Neverland) by Simon Crump, it's got a very black sense of humour. You'll enjoy it."

I did. It was. I did.

Neverland by Simon Crump. It's a very novel Novel. Is it like a collection of interlinked short stories, as some people believe? Yes. Well, no. Not, quite. It's more a collection of interlinked ideas, instead.

By the way, the dead hamster unicorn featured in the novel? I'm not entirely certain it was. Dead, that is.

Simon Crump takes several different ideas and places them in a very unique and out of place context. You can imagine Michael Jackson and Uri Geller together. (They are or rather, were friends in real life) You can imagine them being together in a shopping mall. You can imagine them having an argument. But then place them and their argument (and the stunning consequences thereof) in the Meadowhall shopping mall in Sheffield and it's as if your favourite aunt has taken your jumper, unpicked the stitches and turned it into a really funky Dr. Who Scarf. But not quite like that, perhaps.

Simon Crump decided to write a novel about Michael Jackson. It took him three years to complete. And -apparently this is true- four hours after he had finished writing it, Michael Jackson was dead.

Simon Crump's writing style is laconic, yet even so, there is a moving, other-worldly poetic feel to his writing.

He writes with a refreshing sympathy for all of his characters, Michael Jackson, Lamar who was Jackson's assistant and former Elvis bodyguard, The Broad, The Broad's lunatic husband and Michael Jackson's grandmother, to name but a few.

Simon Crump's subject matter is sometimes unpleasant, but it is of a realistic unpleasantness, and there is nothing gratuitous in his writing. Weird, odd, bizarre enough to make the Fortean Times look like a Haynes Car Manual, yes. But never

gratuitous.

Other novels by Simon Crump are My Elvis Blackout and Twilight Time. Which have received rave or raving reviews, depending on the point of view of the reader.

(EDITOR: A different version of this review was published at Ciao)

Daytime Insomniac - Posted 7th November 2009 by Steve Finbow

<http://theglasshombre.blogspot.co.uk/2009/11/i-laughed-out-loud-and-i-never-laugh.html>

I Laughed Out Loud and I Never Laugh Out Loud

Title of blog from a blurb by Chuck Palahniuk for Sam Lipsyte - who is very funny. Not many authors make me laugh out loud - Martin Amis, David Sedaris, Mark Twain, PG Wodehouse, Kurt Vonnegut - but the funniest book I've read since Mark Leyner's Et Tu, Babe is Simon Crump's Neverland... inspired... a snippet follows beneath:

While over on Beat the Dust, Melissa Mann has John Dorsey, David Blaine, Jack Henry, Ford Dagenham, Jeff Aubert's keyword interviews with Dan Fante and Mark SaFranko and an exclusive extract from Balzac of the Badlands... The Dust on Uppers...

From Simon Crump's Neverland... Classic...

'One time, you know, Lamar, a woman had her son brought to me on a stretcher. They laid the stretcher down on the ground in front of me, and drew back the blanket, and there was an ear. Just a single ear lying there on the pillow. His mother told me that the ear was all that was left of her son after his tricycle strayed

onto a driving range.'

'Oh Sweet Jesus, Michael,' I say, 'Golf is so shit.'

'Yes I know, Lamar,' the kid says with no real feelin.'

'So what happened, Mike? To the ear I mean?'

'Well, I didn't want to hurt the woman's feelings, so I knelt by the pillow and whispered "I love you" into the ear.'

'Gee Boss, that must have been a magical moment.'

'Actually, Lamar, it was not,' the kid says all sniffy like. 'As I bent down and whispered those magical words, the words that every single human person yearns to hear, the woman began to scream and cry out in anger. She began beating on me and between the punches and the kicks and the tears and the abuse, she told me that her son was deaf.'

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Perhaps no postmodernist writer has subverted the conventions of the historical novel more than Susan Sontag. In *The Volcano Lover* (1992) she transforms the story of Admiral Nelson and Sir William Hamilton and his wife, Emma—the stuff of romantic fiction—into an inquiry about the nature of heroism, art collecting, and imperialism, and about a narrator who speaks in a voice close to Sontag's own. This method of narration provokes an exploration of the way narrative itself subsumes the content (the history) on which the narrator meditates.