

The 'Endland' stories: some background information

Since the '90s, 'Endland' has made multiple appearances in Etchells' stories; a country that – according to the author – both does and does not exist. He mixes references to real people and locations with names sprouted in his own imagination, uses Old English vocabulary alongside deliberately misspelled words. He posits that it's precisely this kind of grotesque storytelling that can tell us something about the 'strange and bitter times' in which we live.

The author explains the origins of his Endland stories in more detail:

In the 1980's, I had written a novel called *Helen © & her Daughters*. The book was messy and borderline incoherent; its landscape and tone very dark, brutal and cartoon-like. The story itself was crazy, set in the world that was a kind of hybrid of Thatcher-era North of England (i.e. selected lowlights of what I could see out of the window) mixed with all manner of other things and places, times and landscapes – some real, others invented. The language was also rough, cut-up, hybridised, slang. I was writing a lot of stuff for performance with the group Forced Entertainment at the same time and working on various short fiction things and film ideas and random projects and bits of writing.

My friend Tony White asked me to contribute to a publication series he had started, called *Piece of Paper Press*. The idea was to make a little book from a single sheet of A4 paper, cut and folded in a simple way, then produced as a photocopied edition. Some were by writers, others by artists; some were texts, others comprised sequences of drawings or diagrams. The idea appealed to me and I wrote a blunt, comical narrative called *About Lisa*. One tiny chapter per page. The sense of humour was very dark and a lot of the drive in the narrative came from stretching the world of the story really thin and making the world 'be' horrible to the characters. At the time I was reading *1001 Nights*, William Burroughs, Russell Hoban, Kathy Acker, Donald Barthelme, Alan Moore and RAW comics. In the background were Mike Moorcock, J.G. Ballard, M. John Harrison, Charles Dickens, David Lynch, Tarkovsky, Philip K. Dick and a million other things. I was listening to The Fall, whose lyricist/singer M. E. Smith was probably the biggest single influence on what I wanted to write and how I wanted to write it. The great thing about *Piece of Paper Press* for me was how its formal framework and restrictions forced my writing to become much more stripped down and economical. I remember I used to tell people that it felt like taking the world, tone and language of my (unpublished) novel *Helen ©* and boiling it. *About Lisa* and the other stories that followed in the following year or two – which would eventually become *Endland Stories* – were the result of that process of reduction. I plundered the novel for landscape, characters and gags and atmospheres, hanging them on sharp, brutal, compacted little narratives – postcards from hell.

Years before I'd done an interview with William Gibson for *Performance Magazine* where my friend Steve Rogers was the editor. Gibson said that the world of his book *Neuromancer* was only one molecule thick – that (in effect) any reality sensed in it by the reader was just a temporary effect – a momentary production in the language. I liked that idea – it made sense to me in terms of other stuff that I respected as writing. In the *Endland Stories*, I was trying to play with how thin and

dense the world in it could be at the same time, how disposable I could make that world and the characters populating it, how violently contradictory, while still somehow keeping an engagement with the reader. It meant creating characters and narratives in the ruins of something larger, whose shape, purpose and extent could only be guessed at. This seemed to me a productive tension. The stories came pretty fast, one after another. Elaine Palmer at Pulp Books included *German Fokker* in an anthology on pop culture, titled *Allnighter*, and soon afterwards agreed to do the whole collection as a book. After *Endland Stories: Or Bad Lives* came out in 1999, I wrote a few more stories (*Taxi Driver/Antagonistes* for that year's Sceptre *Brit Pulp* anthology and much later *Cellar Story*, published in *14 Hills*) that pretty much existed in the same world / landscape / language, but apart from that my fiction writing post-*Endland Stories* took off in quite other directions.

Years later, in 2006, I got another out-of-the-blue invitation, this time to participate in an extraordinary on-going project by Australian artist Barbara Campbell, *1001 nights cast*. In response and without really planning to do so, I found myself back in what could be called Endland territory, wandering (and plundering) a related terrain ten years later, but with different intentions.

All Endland stories share an interest in creating a place/space which hybridises different geographies and fictions and which is dominated by dark humour, absurdist puns and general air of malevolence. Shifting in time and apparent location, mixing the high tech and the decayed/archaic, colliding the realistic and the impossible, Endland was always a messy place: at once a capitalist free-for-all, an anarchistic bedlam, a post-apocalypse retro-medieval nightmare, a Central European civil war zone and a heavily trade unionised pre-yuppie-fiction military junta Housing Estate in Rotherham or Doncaster. In the more recent stories, there is also somehow more America in Endland, perhaps since I've spent more time in America. There's also more Iraq and Afghanistan in it, too – not surprising I guess – as the war wagons of geo-politics and atrocity have moved on in that direction. In addition, the fictional modes of fairy tale, pub anecdote, parable and condensed movie plot have been boosted by a thick residue of digital culture. As a result, the reality of the newer stories is now prone to error-messages, pixilation, artefacting and other compression faults, as well as to the jump-cuts, sarcastic punch lines, graffiti, exaggerations and pseudo-moralising that abound in the earlier set of stories.

Endland exists and does not exist. It is not locatable on maps and no doubt its relation to any 'England' described in newspaper accounts or in realist fiction of the last 30 years is highly tangential. My hope is that these grotesque tales out of Endland – ontologically, geographically and temporally confused as they are – might get closer to the heart of things than might be possible by other narrative means – fictional or otherwise. I hope that as work, these stories come closer to the bone – closer to the essence of the strange and bitter times we are living in. It is my belief at least, that the psychological, political and cultural landscapes we've been walking in these days – from Thatcher to Google, with IFOR, ICANN, *Big Brother* and Bin Laden in between - need strange fucking tools to navigate them.