

HOLISTIC HORRORS

An interview with Dave Jeffery

Trigger Warning: This article addresses mental health

Today on Holistic Horrors I have the privilege to interview my HWA Wellness Committee co-chair, Dave Jeffery, about his short story, “A Latent Lament for Heather Menzies”, which appears in *Strange Tales of Terror* (editor Eugene Johnson from Independent Legions). In the story the protagonist suffers from late-stage dementia, including aphasia and immobility. It’s a tough topic, and one Dave treats with sensitivity and poignancy.

Thanks for joining us, Dave.

Lee Murray: Your story begins with the powerful statement: “I am in the shadow between worlds, a mote suspended by ethereal thread”. From my own experience of dementia (my dad suffered for fifteen years before he passed away in early 2020), this first line strikes me as a very keen observation about dementia, a real-life horror and possibly the cruellest sentence that can be passed down to a person and their family. What prompted you to write a story on this important topic, Dave? And why Heather Menzies as your metaphor of choice?

Dave Jeffery: There is a profound sense of nostalgia associated with this story that lends itself to the main conceit, that is the protagonist’s telling of a life lived, triggered by prescribed reminiscence therapy. The passing of Heather Menzies due to brain cancer in 2017 was certainly a catalyst for the story.

[*For those who are unfamiliar with her work, Canadian-born Heather Menzies was an acclaimed actress who delighted both mainstream and speculative audiences with her film and TV credits, among the best known being *The Sound of Music*, where she played Louisa Trapp, and *Logan’s Run* as Jessica 6.]

On hearing the news, I recalled how much of an influence her performances had on me as a child growing up in the 70s, and felt a genuine sense of loss. I sought out a biography online and was surprised to find relatively little information but did learn that Heather had dedicated her life to cancer charities after the death of her husband, actor Robert Ulrich. The concept of nostalgia and being forgotten, coupled with the impact of illness on the person and those who love them, had me thinking about writing a story that captured these elements in a subtle, nuanced narrative. When framing the story, I remembered my experiences of working with people who suffered with dementia and realised I had finally found the hook I’d been looking for. *Latent Lament for Heather Menzies* was written over four days. By the end of it, I had a sense that I had written something that not only captured the essence of those enduring a terrible disease, but also a fond farewell to someone who’d had a profound influence on my formative years as a creative.

Lee Murray: In your story, you’ve chosen to take the first-person perspective of the sufferer, who is, in this case, an unreliable narrator. Why did you make this decision?

Dave Jeffery: The first-person narrative is important as it is the recollections and lived experiences of the person enduring the disease that drives the story. Another aspect is the need for the protagonist to understand his place in the world in order to seek redemption and

move on to what lies beyond this life. The first-person approach allows the reader to make these discoveries alongside the character, giving insight as to how the protagonist connects with their past, their disease, and what they need in order to pass on.

Lee Murray: Memories are such an integral part of our persona, and our wellbeing, aren't they? They're a veritable well of emotion and connection. And a character's memories and backstory play the same roles in storytelling. Imagine if we didn't have memories in our writer's toolkit. How did you address this in your story?

Dave Jeffery: Indeed, they are essential aspects in grounding and creating characters that resonate with readers, making them real so that people invest emotionally, and ultimately care enough to go with them on their fictional journey. The protagonist in this story is trapped in a world of reflection, and I needed the reader to share his confinement and ultimate reparation with a lost past.

Lee Murray: Without giving away the plot, it is clear from your narrative that storytelling, art, and creativity have helped to anchor the protagonist's memories. Would you care to comment on the value of arts (both creation and consumption) in dealing with mental illness?

Dave Jeffery: I think it is safe to say that I consider good mental health and the arts inexorably linked. In my previous life as a mental health practitioner, the people I had the privilege of caring for took so much comfort from creativity, be that as a creator or a recipient. The clinical evidence base for the arts as an important aspect to mental health recovery is significant but will come as no real surprise to those members reading this piece today. As an outlet, creativity gives voice to our inner fears, as a recipient we can take comfort from the fact we are not alone in a seemingly isolated battle against mental illness. There is hope in art, and it is through the HWA Mental Health Initiative that we can champion such tenets.

Lee Murray: In the story, you use the term "synaptic sanctuary". Can you explain what you mean by this?

Dave Jeffery: Evidence suggests that with Alzheimer's, a protein known as amyloid leaves residual plaque in between neurones in the brain. This build-up impacts upon the brain's capacity to elicit effective cognitive function as synapses become impeded. The term 'synaptic sanctuary' is the protagonist's understanding that the reminiscence therapy he receives helps to create some kind of connection to his past. He does not comprehend its function, but accepts its results, as it gives him some respite—a sanctuary of sorts—from periods of confusion and fear.

Lee Murray: There is a poignant moment in the story when the protagonist doesn't recognise his own wife, although, on another occasion, he remembers her scent and experiences an inexplicable surge of love. My dad didn't remember my name for several years before he passed, but I know he knew me, that he knew he loved me, and I suspect many loved ones of dementia sufferers will feel the universal truth in your observation albeit a source of horror. However, there is some comfort in reading about that moment and the knowledge that I'm not alone in this. Given the stigma surrounding mental illness, and dementia in particular, and I wonder if you considered this aspect when writing so openly about the issue?

Dave Jeffery: When I was plotting the story, I was clear that it needed to explore all aspects of Alzheimer's and its impact on both the person and their family. The narrative is written in such a way that we are unsure what is happening at the time, creating a dislocated construct that is meant to reflect what it is like to live in confusion. The link is the concept of smell, in this instance the perfume of the protagonist's wife. Using this aspect of reminiscence therapy meant that in an instant both our protagonist and the reader connect, and I thought that is a powerful dynamic, made even more so if the reader has lived with someone who has suffered with Alzheimer's. That you have personally connected with this story in such a way is a humbling endorsement of what I set out to achieve. Thank you, Lee.

Thanks so much for chatting with me, Dave.

Dave Jeffery: An absolute honour, Lee. Thank you for all of the incredible work you do with the HWA Wellness Committee.

Dave Jeffery is the author of 18 novels and novellas, two collections, and numerous short stories. His *Necropolis Rising* series and yeti adventure *Frostbite* have both featured on the Amazon #1 bestseller list. His YA work features the Beatrice Beecham supernatural adventures. Jeffery is also the creator of the *A Quiet Apocalypse* series which has received worldwide critical acclaim.