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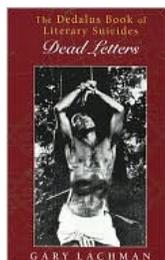
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Occult of Personality

by Jill_Dearman



Gary Lachman penned the Blondie hit "I'm Always Touched by Your Presence, Dear" and played bass for the iconic band back in the '70s; he was also the guitarist for Iggy Pop. But in recent years he's reinvented himself as a prolific and eclectic author. His books include *New York Rocker: My Life in the Blank Generation*, *The Dedalus Book of Literary Suicide: Dead Letters*, and several well-researched and highly literary books about the occult including *In Search of PD Ouspensky* and *Turn Off Your Mind: The Mystic Sixties and the Dark Side of the Age of Aquarius*.

Below, my interview with the London-based writer.

JD: You are the author of many well-researched and fascinating books about occult leaders and philosophers. How did you come to this subject? And for those who may not know your alter-ego, you were a founding member and bassist for Blondie. Fascinating mix!

GL: I first became interested in the occult in 1975, when I was playing bass in Blondie. Chris Stein, the guitarist, had a kitschy interest in voodoo, black magic and so on, and an artist who shared a loft with us on the Bowery was a fan of Aleister Crowley. I was always a great reader of weird and horror fiction - H.P. Lovecraft and so on - and looking through Chris' books I found one that attracted me. It was Colin Wilson's huge history, *The Occult*. Wilson took a philosophical approach to it, and dropped names like Nietzsche and Sartre and wrote about different states of consciousness and our hidden powers, and related it all to art and creativity. I had been reading existentialism since my teens and found it all fascinating, and went on to read all of Wilson's other books, and when I read *The Outsider* knew I had found my canon, as it were. So from being a naive enthusiast over the years I've turned into a more sober critic. I was always writing, but didn't write anything anyone else would enjoy reading until my late 30s. I hesitate to use the word 'historian' as academic historians would do doubt take argument with this. I should also point out that 'the occult' is really an unfortunate term, as for most people it implies satanists and black magic. It is really about the unseen, non-physical realities, that modern consciousness ignores but that earlier ages had a firmer grasp on. Newton, for example, wrote more about alchemy than he did about gravity, and gravity itself is a fairly occult idea. I mean, who's seen it?

JD: I read a recent Parabola article about Gurdjieff and The Fourth Way. In researching Gurdjieff, who seemed like a real cult-leader, I saw your name in association with your book about Ouspensky, and then discovered some of your other books. You really made Ouspensky's story quite moving. What is it about him that moves YOU, and that most people may not know about him?

GL: Well, first off I wouldn't call Gurdjieff a cult-leader. He's really one of the most important psychologists of the last century, certainly up there with Freud and Jung, and in many ways beyond both. But, like everyone else, he had his blind sides, something many of his followers seem to ignore. I read Ouspensky's books *Tertium Organum* and *A New Model of the*

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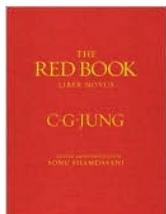
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Universe when I was first getting interested in esotericism and 'higher consciousness' and found them thrilling, and went on to read his novel *Strange Life of Ivan Osokin* and his account of his time with Gurdjieff, *In Search of the Miraculous*. I was attracted to Gurdjieff's work but over the years came to feel it was limited in many ways, and I became increasingly troubled by the way Gurdjieff treated Ouspensky. Ouspensky had been a well known writer and journalist in pre-Bolshevik Russia, and his writings on his experiments with consciousness and his travels in search of lost knowledge had a poetry and passion that I found gripping. But as I became more involved in the Gurdjieff 'work' I felt that he really didn't understand Ouspensky, and that Ouspensky himself had more or less abandoned his earlier, poetic, adventurous self, in order to dedicate his life to Gurdjieff's ideas. This, I felt, was a mistake, and I think Ouspensky's life shows that I was right: sadly, he died a broken man. In his last days, he abandoned the work and told his followers to think for themselves, a difficult task at any time. In my book I wanted to tell his story, show that he was an important thinker in his own right, and illustrate some of the dangers in the guru - chela, or teacher - student relationship. That all this this place against the backdrop of WWI, the Russian Revolution, and 1920s Europe made it even more fascinating. I'm interested in how this 'secret history' of esotericism connects with the more well known history we're taught in schools - or used to be taught, in any case.

JD: Your most recent book is about politics and the occult. Could you tell us a little about how you do your research? You are able to weave so many disparate threads together. Do you use post-its or do your sons (whom you always thank so warmly in your acknowledgements) act as your secretaries ... or bouncers?

GL: Basically I read everything I can on the subject, making notes on index cards which I number and title on both sides, so that it is easier to find what I'm looking for later. I read until I can't absorb any more, then, in order not to go mad, I have to arrange it all into a neat order so that I can line it up on the page - or my computer screen - in a narrative. This becomes a necessity for psychic health. It's basically a process of bringing order to a jumble of related facts, and allowing myself moments of speculation and imaginative reconstruction, using the ideas as a connective tissue, linking disparate bits together until a pattern emerges. With any luck in the process I hit on some ideas that were latent in the material but hadn't yet come to the surface, and this is what is fun and exciting about this kind of work: making connections that I hadn't consciously thought of but which are there, and which need the material around them to be rearranged, as it were, in order for their contours to be seen. My sons, who are 9 and 11, force me to rise out of my reflective depths and do normal things, like kick a football or ride a bike. They provide oases of immediate life, which I leave refreshed, and able to sink back into that inner world fortified. It really is like entering another world, you need to inhabit it for long stretches, and I often leave the British Library, where I frequently write, feeling an uncomfortable dissonance, much as you feel after leaving a film.

JD: Right now you are working on a book about Jung. When does it come out and what is your particular angle? And what's your take on *The Red Book*?



GL: *Jung the Mystic* will be out in the US in June, published by Tarcher/Penguin. It's a short biography focusing on Jung's ambivalent relationship with the occult. He had a professional and a personal interest in it from his early days, but it wasn't until fairly late in his life that he came out of the closet about it. He wanted to protect his reputation and image as a scientist, so he often obscured his own involvement in various occult goings on, like seances. If Jung had a mantra, it was "I am a scientist," which he repeats to his readers enough times for us to paraphrase Shakespeare, and wonder if the mystic doth protest too much. He was

ambivalent about other aspects of his life and work as well, especially his relations with his women patients and students. This isn't to minimize his importance - I think Jung was one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century - but, as with many charismatic figures, there are quite a few hagiographies, as well as exposes, and I try to maintain a balance between both extremes. Jung had many important ideas but unfortunately he wasn't the clearest of writers - he is always trying to impress us with his vast erudition, and rightly, perhaps, as it is vast - and I try to focus on a few of what I feel are his most important insights and to bring some clarity to them. That the *Red Book* was finally published as I was writing the book is one of the synchronicities Jung tells us about. It is certainly an event in the Jungian world, although anyone familiar with Jung had some idea about it. Some of the paintings were published in other books, and if you've read Jung's strange work of what I call 'spiritual dictation', *The Seven Sermons to the Dead*, then you have an idea of what *The Red Book* is about. But as I say it is certainly an event and I devote a postscript to it.

JD: After reading so much of your nonfiction I'm curious, what kind of fiction do you like to read, and do you write any?

GL: I enjoy fiction that deals with ideas, and some of my favorite novelists are Robert Musil, Ernst Junger, Dostoyevsky, John Cowper Powys, Hermann Broch, and I still have nostalgic appreciation of Hermann Hesse, who I first read when I was 14. But as I mention above, I am

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a great lover of weird fiction, fiction that produces that frisson of 'otherness' and my youth was spent reading all the old Weird Tales writers, as well as Poe, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and that crew. One of my favorite books is David Lindsay's unclassifiable gnostic work *A Voyage to Arcturus*. Other favorites are Colin Wilson's existential sci-fi novels, like *The Mind Parasites* (to which I wrote a Foreword for a recent edition) and *The Philosopher's Stone*, which use genre fiction as a vehicle for philosophical speculation. In recent years I've laughed at some of Michel Houellebecq's dark fictions, and I've thoroughly enjoyed Frank Tallis' series of detective novels set in 1900's Vienna. He's very good at creating the atmosphere of early 20th century Vienna and I've always been interested in Viennese modernism, so reading his books is like taking a holiday - I'm enough of a fan to enjoy intelligent escapism, and good fiction should have that crackle and snap of reality. Not 'realism', which I find a cliché and dreary, but convincing. It should have the same effect as taking a walk on a crisp autumn morning. Good fiction is really a means of altering consciousness. One book that did some of that for me recently is Mikkel Birkegaard's *The Library of Shadows*, which is a metaphor on the power of the imagination, the decline of reading, as well as being a decent page turner. Many years ago I did write about 2/3 of an 'occult thriller', but it was really apprentice work. I do have some ideas for an historical philosophical detective novel, but I'd need not to have to take on another non-fiction commission to devote time to it. As I write a great deal of history, I'd like to use some of that and try my hand at an imaginative reconstruction - fiction, like consciousness, is about creating realities- and explore some of the ideas I write about in a fictional narrative. Having written this here, I'm inspired to go and do it. But first I have to finish my current book, which is about Hermetic philosophy.

Thanks to Gary for sharing so many insights and happy holidays to all!

For more on the craft of writing stop by my site <http://www.bangthekeys.com> or pick up the book *Bang the Keys*. See you again once more before the year is out!

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