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An Interview With Robert Louis Stevenson (Zembla – Spring/Summer 2004)

Meeting your heroes isn't always a good idea. I remember the first time I encountered old Bill Burroughs. He was sober and so outraged at my altered state I had to part his hair with a bullet before he'd quit the sermon. Something like a priest right enough. El macho hombre Hemingway rolled over and cried for his mommy when I Giant Haystacked him during a wrestling match. And as for the Aberdonian boy Lord George Byron, well let's just say he tired before I did.

So it's with a degree of trepidation that I agree to meet the writer's writer Robert Louis (pronounced Lewis) Stevenson, author of *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as well a wealth of poems, short stories and articles. An itchy footed traveller of high seas and uncharted outbacks. The man who explored Edinburgh's lower depths before Irvine learnt to say choo choo.

We've arranged to meet in *Deacon Brodie's*, on Edinburgh's High Street. Stevenson enters the ancient hostelry, brought forth through the magic of literature, brushing the last of the Samoan grave dust from his travelling cloak. A few heads turn at his approach, but Scotland's capital is used to stranger sights than ghosts, and the drinkers merely nod, as if to a face they recognise but can't quite place.

I buy him a malt, then we take a seat at a corner table away from the flashing lights of the fruit machine. Louis is rack-thin, his moustache droops and his left eye shifts in its socket. His hair is long and I remember reading, he could never abide being barbered when he was ill. I slide the tobacco and Rizlas I bought in preparation for his manifestation across the table, wait for him to roll the first of the many smokes he draws into himself over the afternoon, then ask begin my questions.

LW So Robert, how do you feel?

RLS Pretty good for a dead man.

LW I must say, you've shone up well for a guy who's spent a hundred years in the ground.

RLS A hundred and ten years to be precise, but it's good to see flesh on the old bones again. In Samoa we had a battle with corruption the staunchest missionary could never hope to quell. Things rotted even as you made them. My body started to decay before my friends had felled the trees from the path to my mountain tomb. By the time they carried me to the summit, I was edging towards putrefaction and when they lowered me into my grave, I was already half way towards being one with the earth.

LW Gross.

RLS Aye, I won't pretend it was pleasant.

LW If you don't mind me saying so, you've a reputation for being a bit morbid.

RLS Can you blame me? Take a look at the city of my birth. It's pissing down, there's a constant mistral from the sea driving everyone half

daft. You daren't look at anyone sideways for fear of getting your face smashed and the population have either signed the pledge or hit the bottle. It's depressing. I've not been in this pub in a long while but there's the same faces propped at the bar. (*Robert nods to a couple of drinkers who nod back*) Then there's the religion . . .

LW We'll get onto religion later. But you must admit you're on the gloomy flank of the fantastical. One of my favourite stories, 'The Body Snatchers' is about two medical students digging up a dead body for dissection.

RLS That proves my point. It was based on fact. Williams Burke and Hare had a cottage industry supplying exceedingly fresh cadavers to Dr Robert Knox, one of Edinburgh's leading anatomists. They murdered sixteen people before their racket was uncovered.

LW And did the good doctor know?

RLS Of course he knew. Edinburgh was a wee town and suddenly all these fresh corpses start turning up, some of them with big eggs on their heads where they'd been lamped. Of the lot of them only Burke was hung, but Dr Knox was as guilty as Howard Shipman. The only difference was he never got the jail.

LW Good to see you keeping abreast of current affairs. Did you go to the hanging?

RLS And you call me morbid. No, this all happened in the 1820's, thirty years before I was born. I'm old but I'm not decrepit.

LW You do seem a bit obsessed with vivisection though. Dr Jekyll's laboratory is an old dissecting theatre.

RLS Nice touch, eh?

LW Masterly.

RLS Edinburgh was a medical city and I was good friends with young Simpson, whose father invented chloroform. Simpson experimented first on himself. He stood up in front of the great and good of the Royal College of Surgeons, announced, 'This will revolutionise medical science!' Inhaled a big blast and fell down in a fugue on the floor. But it was great stuff. Chloroform tea parties were quite the rage for a while and it transformed childbirth. Of course the church was against it, said labour pains were women's punishment for original sin . . .

LW We'll discuss religion later. Your association with medicine informed your fiction?

RLS Och you ken how it is, you use the materials available to you, I mean look at your recurring second-hand book theme.

LW I didn't know you'd read any of my stuff.

RLS I've to go through old Nick, because he's the only one in permanent communion with librarians, but I couldn't manage eternity without regular reading matter.

LW *(Waits for a wee compliment on latest novel)*

RLS Aye well, I got to know a bit about medical processes and it came in handy for the fiction.

LW Oscar Wilde said *Jekyll and Hyde* read like a case from *The Lancet*.

RLS Ach he was just having a laugh, but in a way the whole book was inspired by drugs. You know my health was never good?

LW You were at death's door most of the time.

RLS Cheers for reminding me. Anyway, during a particularly bad bout , when I was confined to bed for fear movement might set of more haemorrhages, the doctor prescribed an excellent opium based

consolation which brought forth the finest bogey dream.

Unfortunately my wife was so disturbed by my screams she shook me awake and I almost coughed my lungs onto the bedclothes, but no matter, it was the start.

LW Jekyll writes, ‘The pleasures which I made haste to seek in my disguise were, as I have said, undignified . . . But in the hands of Edward Hyde, they soon began to turn toward the monstrous . . . I was often plunged into a kind of wonder at my vicarious depravity.’ I’ve got to ask, what were his sinful pleasures?

RLS Nothing in particular.

LW Something sexual?

RLS Whatever you make them.

LW But you must have had something mind.

RLS Jekyll’s error lay not in his sin but in his hypocrisy.

LW So he should have stopped swishing around in secret and come out?

RLS Ach you’re obsessed with sex.

LW You're the one writing dirty books Louis. Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* was published in the same year as J & H. Ebbing equates homosexuality with self love. Combine this with the legend of the doppelganger, that anyone meeting his double is doomed, and it seems to me you get a pretty close summary of your novel.

RLS Pish. Jekyll's not in love with Hyde and he doesn't even like himself. There is no harm in a sex; and none in what prurient fools call 'immorality.' The harm was in Jekyll, because he was a hypocrite. The hypocrite let out the beast Hyde. Read James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* it's all in there. It isn't the flawed and imperfect we should be wary of, it's the righteous. I wrote a poem about it. *Oh fine, religious, decent folk/ In virtues flaunting gold and scarlet,/ I sneer between two puffs of smoke,/ Give me the publican and the harlot.*

LW I knew it was something sexual.

RLS Well as Roland Barthes says, once the book is out there it becomes the property of the reader. Think what you want - I'm just the one who wrote it.

LW Thanks Louis. As a young guy you were quite a one for the ladies.

RLS Is that a question?

LW More an invitation to reminisce.

RLS What publication did you say this was for?

LW *Zembla*, literary, but that generally means a bit dirty.

RLS Well, (*Strokes his moustache*) I was a favourite with the women of the Royal Mile, they christened me Velvet Coat - I was a bit of a dandy in those days - and there were occasions when I didn't have to pay.

LW Most impressive. (*Purses lips*) Nothing against prostitution then?

RLS Everyone's got to make a living. Anyway, all the journalism I did, all those essays to pay the bills, I don't think I'm in any position to judge. How about you? Do a fair bit of this kind of interviewing?

LW Reasonable amount. (*Shuffles notes*) You settled down eventually though. Is it true that you crossed the Atlantic in search of Fanny?

RLS Would you like to rephrase that?

- LW** Sorry, the courtship between you and Fanny Osborne is one of the most beautiful in literary history.
- RLS** That's better.
- LW** She was a sturdy girl. There's a cartoonist, Robert Crum, whose physique is not unlike your own, and who enjoys drawing powerful buxom women.
- RLS** I think I'm a bit manlier than Mr Crum, but we have a similar vision of feminine beauty. Who wants some delicate violet when you could have a valiant thistle?
- LW** Isn't it hard to cuddle a thistle?
- RLS** You'd be amazed. (*Looks a bit misty eyed*) As my old uncle used to say, 'I married a bisum and never regretted it'.
- LW** And she became your shipmate when you started sailing the South Seas looking for a home. Your father, grandfather and uncle all designed lighthouses. Was it this tradition that drew you to maritime adventures?
- RLS** There were certainly grand stories came out of it. Once, when my father was still a young boy, he was accompanying my grandfather on

a routine lighthouse inspection when they were overtaken by fog in the Pentland Firth. They dropped anchor and laid up for the night. When they awoke in the morning they discovered that the boat had drifted close to the shore of the island of Swona and that should the current pull them closer they would be dashed upon the beach. Through the midst they could see a row of fishermen's cottages. All seemed to be abed so the captain took out his gun and fired a distress signal into the air. One, by one the inhabitants of the hamlet left their houses and gathered on the shore. There was no emotion, no animation, it scarce seemed any interest; not a hand was raised; but all callously awaited the harvest of the sea, and their children stood by their side and waited also.

LW Spooky. Did they escape?

RLS Of course, or I wouldn't be here. But the people of these Islands relied on shipwrecks for wood and the like. They thought it was up to God to decide what was wrecked where and that my grandfather was a terrible heathen to build lighthouses. Typical of Scottish religion . . .

LW Aye, we'll get to religion. The sea recurs in your fiction. *Treasure Island* is the first book I remember reading.

RLS (*Looks pleased*) Is that right?

- LW** Yes, it had a treasure map printed on the flyleaf with a big compass and a skeleton dancing on the treasure trove.
- RLS** I said to my pal Henley, If this don't fetch the kids, why they have gone rotten since my day! It had everything a youngster could wish. Treasure, a derelict ship, buccaneers, a parrot and a song (*Sings*)
Fifteen men on a dead man's chest - Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!
Drink and the devil have done for the rest - Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!
- LW** I always wondered what the tune to that was. Blind Pew and the black spot gave me nightmares. I think you missed a trick when you killed him off in the third chapter. Can't you imagine his stick tap-tap-tapping along the wooden deck of the ship?
- RLS** Maybe, but I couldn't have the whole vessel crewed by cripples. It was between him and the one legged sea cook, Long John Silver.
- LW** Louis, do you have anything against disabled people? There's Blind Pew, Long John Silver, poor stroke afflicted Thrawn Janet, and the wee monkey man Mr Hyde who's the distillation of evil. I mean you do have an awful tendency to associate physical deformity with badness, and that's before we get onto your representations of the devil as a black man.

RLS Aye well, I hope that I'm a better man than I was a child, but I admit to being haunted by nightmares about an old hunchback druggist I saw once at Bridge of Allan, and the bearded lady who did our washing terrified me.

LW What kind of a beard did she have?

RLS *(Lighting yet another roll-up)* Pardon?

LW Nothing. Louis, you're on your twentieth cigarette of our conversation, did you never think quitting might help your health?

RLS I'm dead. Anyway, smoking's good for the tubes. Without my smokes I cough like the devil.

LW The frieze of you in St Giles Cathedral has been altered so you're sitting up in bed with a pen in your hand, rather than a cigarette.

RLS That's just typical of the church . . .

LW Aye we'll get to them soon. Alberto Manguel has pointed out the poetic irony that the last words of the author of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* were, 'Does my face look strange?'

RLS Well I'm glad someone finds it poetic. I found it bloody painful. Painful and frustrating. Sudden darkness and *Weir of Hermiston*, the novel that should have been my masterpiece, half finished on my desk.

LW There's been quite a few attempts by writers to finish it.

RLS Over my dead body.

LW Yes, I think that's the idea.

RLS Are we almost done?

LW Near enough. Want to talk about religion before we finish up?

RLS Aye we could but . . .

LW But?

RLS I can feel the start of the ebb tide that'll pull me back to the grave, and cosy though it is mingling my bones with the wife's, I thought I might take a turn down the High Street . . .

LW And drop by the cathedral?

RLS

No, see if the ghosts of the girls I knew are still on patrol.

