

Three years after its publication the novel was made into the film *Willard*, directed by Daniel Mann. Despite giving the story an American setting, it remains largely true to the novel. The chief difference is that Ratman (renamed Willard Stiles) is a far more sympathetic character. It emphasises the social themes, Willard cannot measure up to the pressure of his mother's social ambition, or the macho world of work. He belongs to a gentler but lost world, represented by the grand decaying house. His dead father looms symbolically as the impossible and failed model for Willard.

Boasting a cast including Elsa Lancaster and Ernest Borgnine, the film became a surprise hit, despite its low budget, and still remains a cult classic. In retrospect its success is not that surprising, the themes of disillusion with the "rat race", the failure of earlier values to provide an alternative and a turning to dark, psychopathic means of resolution must have struck a strong chord in the early 70s. *Willard* was remade in 2003 by Glen Morgan and starred Crispin Glover.

Ben

Of more interest is the 1972 follow up film *Ben*. It is difficult to fathom whether the director, Phil Karlson, was a complete genius or so inept that he accidentally made a very entertaining film. Without Willard the rats go on the rampage against the humans under the leadership of bad rat Ben. The audience is treated to some of the worst clichéd dialogue and characters ever committed to screen; the hard bitten reporter ("I get paid to write about heroes, I don't have to be one."), the stressed out cop ("Look mister, you're not giving orders, you're taking 'em.") and the final battle of the sewers ("They're eating us alive down there. There's millions of them!"). Ben casing the locations of his upcoming outrages is particularly hilarious, especially the raid on a cheese shop called 'The Wedge'.

Underlying the awfulness of the characters and dialogue is the theme, following on from Willard, of the fragility of the modern world. The attack on the supermarket, rats ripping open the cereal packages, is a very subversive image. Far darker is the relationship between Ben and Danny. Notwithstanding Ben's appetite for and aversion to humans he befriends this terminally ill boy. Echoing Willard and the original novel, Danny is friendless and fatherless. He has retreated into a make-believe world of puppet theatres, toys and music. Into this world Ben arrives to provide a very sinister brand of love and friendship - Danny shares his bed with Ben, entertains him in the playroom, but is aware of Ben's true capabilities. He tells Ben "You're bad, I mean real bad. You can tell me. I don't care." A nice boy embracing the sworn enemy of society and family must in 1972, have played on America's nightmares of drugs, crime and Manson style cults. The film however remains morally ambiguous about Danny and Ben's friendship.

It perhaps represents something of a dark poetic circle that a novel written as a reaction to Reid's novels of boyhood yearning and magic should ultimately become the launch pad for Neverland's most infamous resident. In the final scene a bloodied Ben returns to Danny. As he tends Ben's wounds and Michael Jackson sings in the background he hauntingly says, "You'll get well, I'll get well, we'll get well Ben...I love you Ben."

The Reid/Gilbert archives were acquired by Queen's University with the assistance of the Heritage Lottery Fund. A formal launch and exhibition will take place later this year.

RAW Talent



With shows in production for RTE, BBC and MTV and an upcoming trip to L.A. this year, Lisa McGee has come a long way from her student days at Queen's University. The young playwright talks with Gemma Doherty about her snowballing success and her Jump! from stage to screen.

After years of study, and the post graduate search for work, Lisa McGee has firmly got her foot on the ladder of success. Now writing for the BBC and RTE creating scripts - from the gritty and realistic, to surreal dream worlds - Lisa describes her work as her 'passion'.

Lisa's laid back and bubbly personality is reflected in some of her more contemporary work. She admits, 'I'm not one for sitting at a computer all day. That would be counterproductive. I need to be out there talking with people and socialising. That's where I get my ideas.'

A graduate of Queen's University, Lisa has been nominated for the prestigious Irish Times Theatre Award for her play *Girls & Dolls*, which was produced at Tinderbox Theatre. She has several published writings and is currently working on a screen drama for RTE. Modest Lisa says, 'I didn't stand out at Queen's, not at all. I wasn't the best actor. When I graduated I started doing a lot of writing. It just went from there.'

Like all Arts graduates Lisa was faced with the difficulties students have when thrown into the world of work in Northern Ireland. That's when she started up her own theatre company 'Sneaky Productions'. Her plays *Jump!* and *The Young Man With the Cream Tarts* were staged at The Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival and Queen's Festival during this time.

The production company, which no longer exists, was the stepping stone Lisa needed to get her work noticed and she says, 'I would encourage drama and theatre students to set up their own productions. It was worthwhile

for me and it gave people the chance to see our work, including producers, who then introduced me to agents.'

Lisa's involvement in BBC 3's new drama season has led to her screen drama *The Things I Haven't Told You* being re-produced for an American version on MTV. She will travel to L.A. this year to work with producers and directors. Although Lisa travels a lot she says, 'I base myself in Derry because this is where I can write and feel comfortable writing. Maybe that's something psychological? My characters are inspired from people at home, my friends and my family. For television work I base my stories in places like London and Dublin. I get out and soak up the big cities to get inspiration and to familiarise myself with settings. I have used Derry as the setting for one play, but Derry is more of an inspiration, rather than an actual place to set my plays. It's where my family and friends are. It's my home,' she says.

Lisa is lead writer on the series *RAW* for RTE which is about the lives and loves of a group of 20-somethings, set in a kitchen in Dublin. The series consists of six episodes which will air this year. Lisa says, 'I think people will be able to relate to this drama. It's really fun and I'm really looking forward to it coming out. There's nothing better than seeing something you have written on paper brought to life on stage. The TV sets are so real. I have so much respect for actors. They have a difficult job. When your play comes to life it's so rewarding and a great feeling.'

Bodycount...

Crime fiction fan, Tammy Moore, went along to Belfast's 'No Alibis' bookshop this month for an audience with John Connolly and Declan Hughes.

David Torrans - owner of No Alibis - has to have the best little black book in the business. Who else could conjure up two of Ireland's finest crime-writers - not to mention a third, Colin Bateman, who was just there for the craic - for a Friday evening reading and chat? No Alibis was packed for the event. Most people already had their copies of both books; some hadn't been able to wait and were already reading the third chapters. Then the authors arrived and everyone sat up, ready to be enthralled. They weren't disappointed. John Connolly and Declan Hughes were witty, enthusiastic and, importantly, seemed to genuinely enjoy the event and their interaction with the fans.

off the stage and read from the floor. Instead of using *The Reapers* he'd brought an extract from the first draft of his new novel. His reading was more low-key than Declan's, but just as engrossing. At a tense moment in the story you could feel everyone in the room hold their breath. For a first draft it was amazingly polished and convincing. Connolly is often compared - because of the setting of his novels and the elegant blend of supernatural and suspense - with Stephen King. He certainly has a knack for finding the oddly creepy - something that seems almost innocuous but still sends a chill down your spine. After the reading they had a brief chat about



Declan Hughes went first, reading from his most recent novel *The Dying Breed* and had the audience in the palm of his hand from the first word. Partially down to his dramatic training - each character had a distinctly unique 'voice' - but mostly it was his writing: vivid, powerful and exquisitely realised. I never for a moment doubted the setting or characters. There was a rich vein of dark comedy in his work - especially evident in his reading from *The Wrong Kind of Blood*, featuring reedy-voiced psychopath Podge Halligan. Declan made the character funny without once diluting his menace.

Next it was John Connolly's turn to take the stage. Or, in his case, to hop down

their writing and invited questions from the audience, covering everything from character names to male friendship and city settings. Then they signed books, giving everyone who came up at least a few moments of their time. No one went away disappointed.

Earlier in the evening Connolly had read a news clipping about an Irish killer who'd denied he could have been seen at a crime scene since he'd 'had on a balaclava...' 'The Irish,' Connolly said, 'aren't good at crime.' Maybe so, but judging by this evening they are VERY good at writing about it.

Be sure to get your copy of Verbal next month to read Tammy's reviews of both novels...