



# THE CROWS

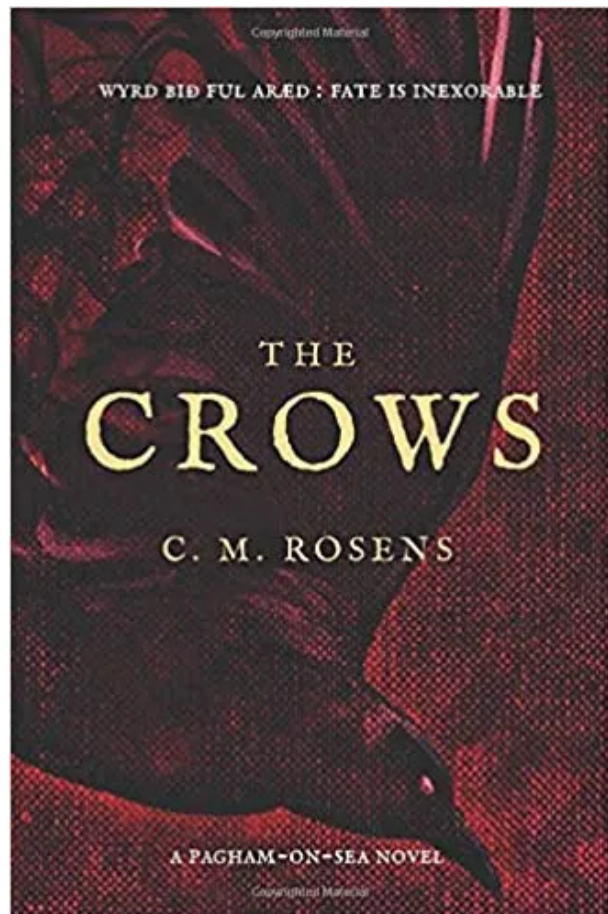
William J. Brown reviews C. M. Rosens' 'mind-boggling and surprising' *The Crows*, the first novel in the Pagham-on-Sea series.

**I**s there more life – or death, as the case may be – to be breathed into the haunted house genre? Hasn't it already had its heyday? It certainly has its indisputable masterpieces: *The Turn of the Screw* (Henry James), *The Haunting of Hill House* (Shirley Jackson), *Burnt Offerings* (Robert Marasco), *Hell House* (Richard Matheson). Are these not The Last Word, the genre's perfect expressions, making all further additions about as fruitless as Dick Halloran's mission to get up to The Overlook Hotel in Kubrick's 1980 *The Shining*?

C. M. Rosens' *The Crows* – the first book in the Pagham-on-Sea series, the sequel to which appeared in April 2021 – is a resounding, mind-boggling, and unfeasibly romantic counter-argument to such claims. It assimilates werewolves, uncanny architecture, Lovecraftian monstrosities, ghosts, witchcraft... heck, there might even be a demonic kitchen sink thrown in there somewhere. And yet it never feels like a mere hyperactive hotchpotch of those ingredients. From the very get-go, when the opening chapter's subheading tells us that the novel's protagonist Carrie Rickard has 33 days left to live, Rosens' authorial control has a clockwork finesse to it, whilst her prose is exquisitely organic and vibrant.

It's a familiar enough set-up. Carrie Rickard has purchased Fairwood, a dilapidated mansion in the seaside town of Pagham-on-Sea. She's recovering – and fleeing – from an abusive relationship, the trauma of which Rosens conveys with unsentimental potency:

'She fiddled with her ponytail, teasing out the silver streaks in amongst the blonde, wondering if she should try dying it again. Phil had flown into a rage the last time, accused her of cheating on him, said it was like lipstick on a pig, kicked a hole in the bathroom door. After their final split it had taken a month or so to walk past hair dye boxes in a shop without her chest constricting in cold panic, let alone buy another one.'



Her mother's relentless efforts to passive-aggressively micromanage Carrie's life compounds her sense of isolation. We want Fairwood to work out for her; we want her to prove her mother and her ex wrong. As such, that opening death sentence creates a sense of threat, an ever-looming caveat as compelling as it is poignant. It prevents the novel from falling (as it sometimes threatens to during the opening third) into a cosy, albeit thoroughly quirky, sitcom setup, in which demons et al. are rendered inert and the weirdness is ultimately as normative and stable as our own world.

Of course, Fairwood is haunted. "'Had a devil of a job getting locals to work on it," he admitted, scratching his head. "This stretch of road has... a bit of a reputation." ... "The Bermuda Triangle of Sussex, they call it," sayeth the builder. It isn't long before we're told of an old ghost story about a little girl who went missing in the local area and was eventually found stuffed up the chimney in Fairwood's kitchen, drained of blood as though part of a gruesome ritual.

But there's nothing conventional about this haunting. If Helen Oyeyemi's *White is for Witching* featured chapters narrated by a haunted house, then Rosens

goes one step further: Fairwood House has a habit of manifesting itself as a humanoid entity, a walking and talking character:

‘He’s engraved. Deep livid sores ate into the skin, etched across his cheeks in raw, indented teardrops, cutting down into his neck with pale forks of scar tissue. It was as if something had gouged chunks of his flesh away, dug out the fibres for sport.

“Who are you?” she heard herself whisper.

The apparition stared at her. “Fairwood, of course.”

She stared at him, taking in the deep gouges. The ones on his forearms had perfect corners, chiselled in wide lines like the steps of a staircase. They should have gone all the way down to the bone, but Carrie had the oddest feeling he didn’t have any.’

Beneath the white shirt, the triangle of torso on display was stippled and rough like the surface of brick tiles and natural slate, colours mottling and hard to see in the dark. She looked back up at his scarred face, where his eyes – bright, alive, and clear as water – stared patiently into her soul like windowpanes. In the corner of one iris, a jagged cobweb of blood-vessels had burst like smashed glass.’

Fairwood’s ‘avatar’ is a not-so-gentle giant, alternately a companion for Carrie and a protector of the house – its retaliation against one particular intruder is especially satisfying. In her personification of the house, as with many other parts of the novel, Rosens balances horror, heart, and humour perfectly: Fairwood, like the novel itself, is benevolent and violent, welcoming and inscrutable, by turns.

But Ricky Porter is the anti-hero par excellence. In terms of love interest, he’s about as far from Rochester as you can get. He’s spying on Carrie when we first meet him. Eager to get into Fairwood House, but unallowed to go inside until after Carrie’s death (both for reasons we don’t learn until much later), he

fantasises about ‘breaking the owner’s neck when it came to it, nice and easy, no need for a fuss.’ This is after we’ve learned that just a month or so earlier he ‘cut open some girl and spilled her steaming guts on the frost-hard ground to read his own future in the firelight’ – we don’t know what his motives are, we don’t know how dangerous he is, but we suspect from the beginning that he will be instrumental in Carrie’s impending fate.

Ricky has some kind of repulsive effigy in his coal cellar, a stuffed toy strapped to a gurney and filled with ‘a wriggling mess of maggots and putrefaction.’ He calls him ‘Gerald.’ It’s reminiscent of Iain Banks’s *The Wasp Factory*: we never quite know what Gerald is – or what Ricky is, for that matter. In tantalising flashes, we come to realise that the hoodie-clad miscreant isn’t quite human: there’s something hidden beneath the hood of his grey sweater, something simultaneously horrific and sensuous. Rosens’ body horror is sublime, and scenes are repulsive and gorgeous all at once. There’s a transcendence of physical and sexual boundaries that is exhilarating rather than flatly grotesque, and I found myself yearning for the mutability of such a world.

Rosens’ prose is also as funny as it is macabre. The humour grounds the weirdness, and vice versa. In addition to Ricky’s constant sarcasm, there’s the petulance of the ghost of Cathy Ross, the girl stuffed up the chimney, who demands that Carrie release her from the purgatory created by her unnatural death:

‘Something reached up from under her bed, a small, bony arm, pale and bloodless, hand buried under the bedclothes, groping over the top sheet for her ankle.

Carrie jerked her knees up under her chin, throwing the duvet off.

There was nothing there.

“Cut that out,” she ordered, trembling.

“It’s three in the morning, stop it.”

There was a heavy, pregnant silence. It was not the silence of an empty room.

"I'm not looking under the bed," Carrie said. "Forget it. Go haunt the attic or something." She thought she heard a small sigh, a childish pout, and felt a tug at the corner of her under-sheet.

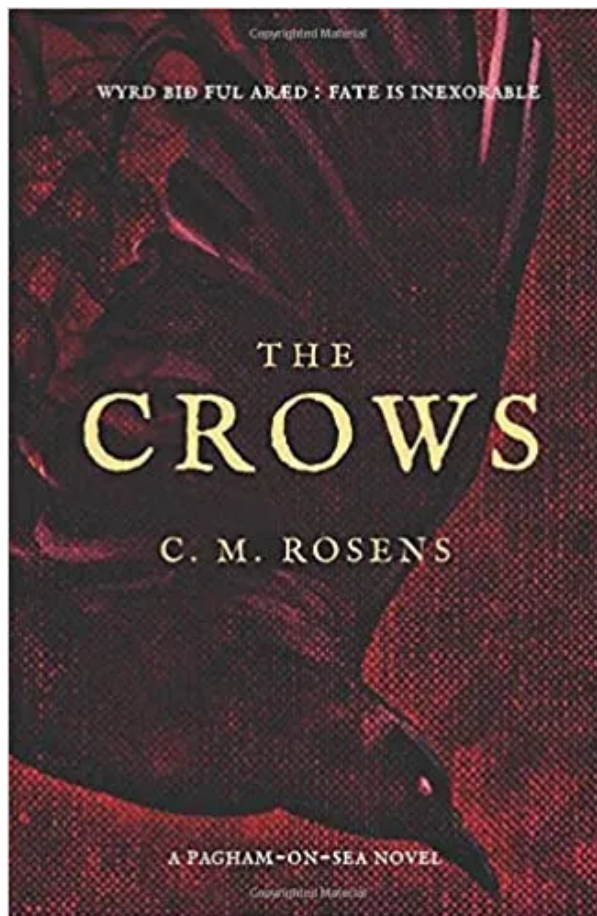
"No! Stop it! Alright, look, I'm trying okay. I'm looking for your tongue, I'm making progress, I promise..."

Here again, sitcommy familiarity – the danger of the uncanniness being rendered mundane, even silly – is averted by the surety of Rosens' artistic vision. I don't want to go into the book's plot in too much detail – I want you to experience its constant mercuriality and invention for yourself.

There is a 'companion book' to *The Crows*, incidentally. *Folklore of Pagham-on-Sea*, named after the fictionalised setting of the novel, is a short collection of folk stories and urban legends from the area, ostensibly collected by Reverend J. D. Allardyce together with extracts from Harold Bishop's *Fairwood House: A History*. Except, of course, that Harold Bishop is that bloke off *Neighbours*, and you won't find much if you do a Google search for the reverend. The book is, in fact, the work of Rosens, and serves as a scintillating testament to her dedication to worldbuilding and the fantasy-horror genre. Rosens' author bio on Amazon explains that she has an 'academic alter-ego': she is a Doctor of Medieval Welsh History, and that passion and intelligence shine throughout *The Crows*. She conjures a sense of worlds and histories beyond the page, of myriad nooks and crannies to be explored in future instalments of the series, of yet more secrets and revelations to come to light.

From start to finish, *The Crows* kept surprising me. It shifts form as frequently as the avatar for Fairwood House, never settling into a groove, never resting on its laurels. The macabre imagery keeps coming, and so does the novel's eldritch (to borrow Rosens' favourite word) romance, its unlikely and yet entirely palpable heart. The climax manages to be simultaneously harrowing and satisfying, and sets up the imminent sequel very temptingly indeed.

Purchase a copy of *The Crows* by clicking the image below...



## William Brown

William Brown has an MA in English Literature or some such. He's presently researching British fairy lore and glutting on Christmas horror movies.



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