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English lecturer longlisted for top literary prize

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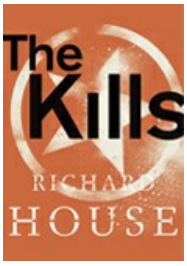

University of Birmingham English lecturer Dr Richard House has been longlisted for the Man Booker Prize with his novel The Kills. The Kills is a digital first - a novel in four parts, all released at first as enhanced e-books which contain rich audio, visual and web content created by Dr House to support and extend the text- based narrative. The physical book was released in July 2013.

Here, Dr House tells us his thoughts on being longlisted.

How do you feel about being longlisted for the Booker?
I'm very happy about the longlist. First, it's a great list, and second, because there was a committed team at Picador who invested in the project early on, so it's mightily satisfying that this has happened. It might look like four books, but there's something like forty other short pieces which go alongside the project - getting that together has meant a phenomenal amount of work from the publisher, practical and creative. So it's deeply satisfying.

Why do you think your book was selected?
I can't say, it's such a healthy and diverse list so it's hard to pick out a type or reason - which shows, I think, the close attention paid to the books. All of the books are engaging, immersive, so maybe that's what is being responded to. They're writers thinking hard about the world, about writing, about subject and craft - as a reader I want to be swallowed by a book, both intellectually and emotionally, maybe even challenged, and a good number of the books on the list do this.

Can you summarise the plot for us?
(From the publisher's blurb)
Camp Liberty is an unmanned staging-post in Amrah province, Iraq; the place where the detritus of the war is buried, incinerated, removed from memory. Until, suddenly, plans are announced to transform it into the largest military base in the country, codenamed the Massive, with a post-war strategy to convert the site for civilian use.

Contracted by HOSCO, the insidious company responsible for overseeing the Massive, Rem Gunnerson finds himself unwittingly commanding a disparate group of economic mercenaries at Camp Liberty when the mysterious Stephen Lawrence Sutler arrives. As the men are played against each other by HOSCO the situation grows increasingly tense. And then everything changes. An explosion. An attack on a regional government office. When the dust settles it emerges that Sutler has disappeared, and over fifty million dollars of reconstruction funds are missing.

Sutler finds himself accused and on the run. Gunnerson and his men want revenge for months of abuse and misinformation. Out of the chaos a man named Paul Geezler rises to restore order, a man more involved than he's willing to admit.

And then there's the vicious murder of an American student in Italy. A murder that replicates exactly the details of a well-known novel.

A novel that seems to have a strange bearing upon a number of horrible things that are happening in the real world.

Tell us a bit about the special nature of The Kills, a digital first?
It's clear that it's the words that are being taken into account. The digital side is important, publishing is going to move further into this as an area, so I think there's some healthy interest in anyone working digitally - and that's good to see.

The books were released digitally first, starting in February, one a month. They each have short videos and audio attached, and in one book you can reorganise the material. These short pieces give you some information about the characters, but generally don't develop the plot (so you can read the books without worrying that you are missing out on anything). The films and audio are an opportunity to leak the book out into the world a little more, and hopefully, most of them work independently as well. In some of them the characters open up about a relationship or an event, in others the film might simply be an animated map. I was also able to play with presentation, so each of the chapters has a small digital 'heading', which helps to set a tone, in most cases it's a landscape. They still look like books, and are really very handsome. In one book you can choose to read the material either character by character, or day by day - it's the same material reorganised, and it's surprising how different it is.

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