

TLC Showcase

LIAM BROWN

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Introduction to Real Monsters

R*éal Monsters* is the story of two young lovers with a war wedged between them. Told in a series of letters and diary entries to their infant son, it is a dark, unsettling and deeply moving tale; a surreal and ferociously recognisable allegory for our war-torn times.

Reeling from the terrorist attack that killed her father, Lorna lurches through an inebriated adolescence until she finds redemption in a young soldier called Danny. However, her dream of a stable life is shattered when Danny is called to serve overseas.

Meanwhile, Danny is lost in the desert. Most of his unit is dead – victims, it would seem, of a brutal ambush. With their equipment destroyed and food running out, the small band of men stumble through the sand and shadows, desperate to find salvation. As their hope fades, the novel builds towards a devastating climax, with it becoming clear that only the truly monstrous will survive...

In 2014 I was fortunate enough to benefit from the TLC Free Read scheme – it couldn't have come at a better time. I was emerging from a period of depression, and found myself flat broke with two young children to look after and a manuscript that was threatening to suck me under.

My reader, Doug Johnstone, offered me the fresh perspective and insight I needed to lick my novel into the best possible shape. While the report didn't call for a radical overhaul, it helped refocus my attention on polishing the little details that really bring a novel to life. More than that though, Doug's support and encouragement helped boost my self-belief, both that I could actually write, and that *Real Monsters* was a story that demanded to be told. For a man on the verge of drowning, it was exactly what I needed: a hard, fast headrush of fresh air, enough to keep me struggling against the tide until my boat came in.

Real Monsters, by Liam Brown

One

This ain't no fuckin beach. Nah. Sure there's sand. Sand like you wouldn't believe – and different types too. It's like they say about the eskimos havin all them different words for snow. Only with sand. I've become quite the expert. You got the fine powdery sort. That's the shit that gets lifted by the wind and whips in your eyes and mouth so that you end up grinding the grit between your back teeth. Like you're chewin on a bone or somethin. Then there's the thick, sticky stuff. The shit that'll suck off your boot and sock as you're tryna climb a dune. Like glue it is. Take your whole leg if you're not lucky – I've seen it. I swear that shit's magnetically charged. Clumps together and covers your skin like a layer of bad paint. A white man'll come out black after a bad enough storm. Or vice-a-versa I guess, ha.

That's another thing no one tells ya. The colours. There's more variation than you'd think. First off you got your whites. Like salt or sugar it is, the light bouncing back so bright it burns your eyes – whites so white it ain't no colour at all, more like a billion bits of crushed up crystal. Like you're yompin over glass or somethin. Course there's your off-whites too. Them's more common. Your creams, greys, all the way down to your blacks. The dirty lookin business like soiled, week-old snow. Hate it, I do. Sods law says that's the shit you end up hackin up from the back of your throat after you get caught out in a bad'un. I swear the first few times you think you're coughin up a tumour ha. Then you got your browns – wheat, rye, millet, oat – a whole fuckin spectrum of cereals, like you're walkin through breakfast.

And then there're your reds. Them's my favourite, the reds. Rarest too. Days are you walk for hours and see nothing but shitty greys and tarry blacks. Then all of a sudden you come over a hill and there it is – an endless stretch of the stuff, shimmering in the sun like a whole fuckin ocean of blood. It takes your breath away, it really does.

Anyways, the reason I was writin was I got your picture and I wanted to say thanks. I got it taped to the inside of my tent, so it's the first thing I see when I open my eyes each morning and the last thing I see before I go to sleep each night. That's how much I like it. You're writin your name now I see? Well good on ya. That's all a man needs to sign his life away ha. But really it's good. I was twice your age when I learnt to write my name, so you keep it up. Like I said before, you're man of the house now.

It's important you keep up the learnin. Don't have your head in the books too much, mind. Ain't no matter how smart you are when some little whatsit pulls a knife on you and tries to slit your gullet open. Think you're gonna spell your way out of it?

What I'm trying to say is that it's all about balance. You need to be rounded. Sure you can read your books, but kick a ball now and then. And do a few push-ups while you're at it. No one wants to be the skinny kid. They're always the first to get their teeth smashed in.

There was one other thing about your picture. And I'm not havin a go. Like I said, I've got it taped up and everythin. I even shown a couple of the lads. But there's somethin been buggin me about it. I couldn't put my finger on it at first, and then it hit me. It's that big lick of blue you got down the one side. I mean, at first I thought it was the wind or somethin, that maybe you were tryna be a little abstract. But then I looked a little closer and there's no mistakin it. You can even see the little splashes of white, like the crests of waves rollin and breakin on the shore. It's the sea. And then I started lookin even harder and I saw you'd done the sand in yellow. Not white or brown, but yellow. Golden even, with a row of little bumps that look a whole lot like sandcastles from where I'm sittin. Christ, you've even got a fuckin palm tree on there.

Now I don't know what your mother's told ya, but there ain't no palm trees out here, son. There ain't no sea and there certainly ain't no sandcastles. All that's here is sand. Dirty, stinkin sand. I'm not on holiday, if that's what you've heard. I ain't off on some jolly with the boys while you and your mother sit twiddlin your thumbs at home. I'm out here doin a job – a job that means you can carry on sittin readin your fuckin books all day without worrying about havin bits of you splashed all over the pavement.

Anyway, what I'm askin – and maybe you could give this letter to your mother when you're through readin it so she understands this too – is that you do me a little favour. Take your paint set and dig out the blue and the yellow, then snap 'em in half and chuck 'em away. Same goes for your crayons and pencils. You don't need 'em. And before you say anything about colourin in the sky, you can do it black. I'm up half the night at the moment anyway, so at least it'll be fuckin accurate.

We're movin out again in the mornin so I'm not sure when I'll get a chance to post this. Hopefully before I receive your next picture ha. Take care of yourself, son. Don't forget the push-ups.

* * *

They're coming for me.

At first I thought I was being paranoid – the cars parked opposite the house for weeks on end, the strangers standing a touch too close in lifts and public spaces. The CCTV cameras that seem to stir and twitch each time I walk into range. No, I would tell myself. It was nothing but a string of unlikely coincidences, an unholy trick of the light. One too many trashy thrillers perhaps, mixed with a lifelong flair for the theatrical. There are no bogeymen in the closet, no monsters under the bed.

And yet.

The strangers do stand too close. The cameras do seem to shrug and whir a little too enthusiastically each time I wait for the bus or cut through the park, craning their robotic necks to trace and record my every move:

Smile! You're on film.

And even now, as I sit and write this, a dark blue Volvo sits parked across the road, its headlights dimmed, the driver hidden behind heavily tinted windows. Its engine softly murmuring, even though it's been stationary for days. And I know – I know – that soon, very soon, they will grow tired of watching. And then a nondescript man in a nondescript office in another time zone somewhere will nod his head and tick a box and will pick up the telephone and simply say:

Now.

And that three-letter word will echo around the world, relaying from tower to satellite, across the ocean and through the sky, until finally – instantly – it will be heard in the earpiece of another nondescript man in a nondescript car across the road from my home.

And on hearing that word he will put down his binoculars and kill the engine and make the short journey across the road and up two flights of stairs to my apartment. He will knock on my front door. And he will put a single, silenced bullet in the middle of my head. And then I will be just another box that's been ticked.

Permanently.

Not that you should feel too sorry for me. We must all of us live our lives knowing that our door will eventually knock, be it by po-faced doctor or professional hit man. Most

of us don't even get the luxury of a prior warning. My grandmother was making pasta al forno when her front door knocked, my brother-in-law driving his BMW.

No matter who you are – rich, poor, young, old – there's an unwelcome caller out there somewhere who just won't take 'no' for an answer, who will hammer on your door until they finally get an answer. But what are you going to do? There's no sense in sitting and wishing your whole life away while you wait for the wrap of knuckles unknown.

And so I refuse.

Instead I sit and I look around my sad little home, my memories nailed to the wall, faded but robust. In my bedroom above my writing desk I still have the flag from the first rally I attended, the lettering smudged but the message still as bold as it ever was:

Not in My Name.

It seems a long time ago now.

Yet even with the passage of time, with so much spilt sand – and blood – I can picture myself tossing aside the pins and unfurling it from the window. At least then the killer across the street would have something worth spying on for once. At least then he might stop, just for a second, and think of me not as a problem that needs solving, as a reaction that needs neutralising. As a steak that needs filleting. But as a living, breathing woman.

Wife.

Mother.

And, most importantly, somebody who is prepared to stand up and say:

No.

Whatever the consequences.

There's that flair for the theatrical I mentioned – though I promise you it's hard not to be a little hammy when you're facing the last few hours of your life. Especially when hanging on every wall and propped on every cabinet, sprinkled over bookshelves and piled on top of kitchen surfaces, there are little reminders of my time here on

Earth. Artefacts that prove I existed, if only for a little while. A scale-model of the Eiffel Tower I picked up on a school trip to Europe, the ancient metallic paint flaking around the Champ de Mars; a not-so-amusing fridge magnet designed to look exactly like a slice of Swiss cheese, a punch line, I think, to a long-forgotten joke.

And of course there are the photos. Everywhere the photos. Mum and Dad on their ten year wedding anniversary; next to it a shot of Mum a few short years later, older, greyer. Infinitely sadder. There are photos of friends from so far back I hardly remember their names anymore, pictures of uncles and aunties at weddings and parties, my sister and my nieces grinning under mouse ears and ponchos, graduation photos, birthday photos... the milestones that together make up a life, frozen and framed, perma-sealed in perpetuity.

And then there are the photos I can't bear to look at. The ones whose absences are marked only by the lighter patches on my tired living room walls. A handsome young man in full military uniform; a bride wearing a smile even whiter and wider than her ridiculous puffball dress – images burnt so deeply on my heart that no amount of hiding will ever allow me to forget them. And yet I do hide them. Out of sight out of mind, as my poor Mummy used to say, before she went irretrievably out of her own. Oh yes, I tuck them away and seal them up in boxes, these pictures I can't stand to see but am terrified of losing, along with all the others that I never quite got round to printing, lurking on hard drives and memory sticks in the darkest corners of my apartment, silicon ghosts rattling at the bottom of long-locked drawers.

Yet of all these not-really-forgotten memories, there is one that stands out above the rest. It is a picture of a baby, curled fetal, his black and white smile preserved in nothing but sound.

It is a picture of a promise.

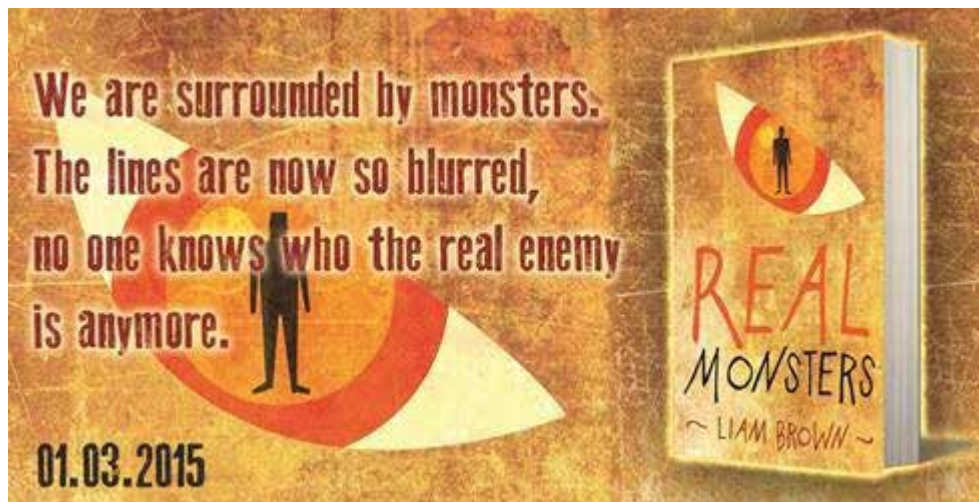
And for some reason, this is the picture I have dredged up from the depths of my secret boxes and propped before me on the desk tonight. And as I settle down to stare at it, this grainy copy I haven't looked at in half a year yet whose every pixel I know better than my own face, I suddenly begin to understand the reason why I have kept everything for so long.

It is because I have a story to tell.

And I must tell it tonight.

So that is why, even as death sits idling outside in a medium-sized family saloon, I am sat calmly at my desk with my boxes of exiled photos open around my feet and my laptop ready and loaded. Because just as I have been watched, I have been watching. I have been listening. Taking notes. Planning my story. And now, in lieu of anyone else who could conceivably save me, I'd like to tell it to you.

My son.



About the Writer

After leaving school, Liam Brown spent five years working a series of increasingly dead-end jobs, including burger flipper, helium balloon pedlar and a two month stint manning the shooting alley at a travelling fairground. After 18 months travelling and working in the Philippines, he returned to the UK and began writing stories. Liam is the lead singer and guitarist in the band *Freelance Mourners*. He lives in Birmingham with his wife and two children.

Liam is on Twitter [@LiamBrownWriter](https://twitter.com/LiamBrownWriter) and has a website here: liambrownwriter.com

Real Monsters is published by Legend Press and is available to order [here](#).

