

Raven Man and Other Tales of Terror and Suspense is a collection of six stories guaranteed to cast a dark spell and disturb your sleep. Find answers to haunting questions, from how Poe died to how to sell your soul for fame.

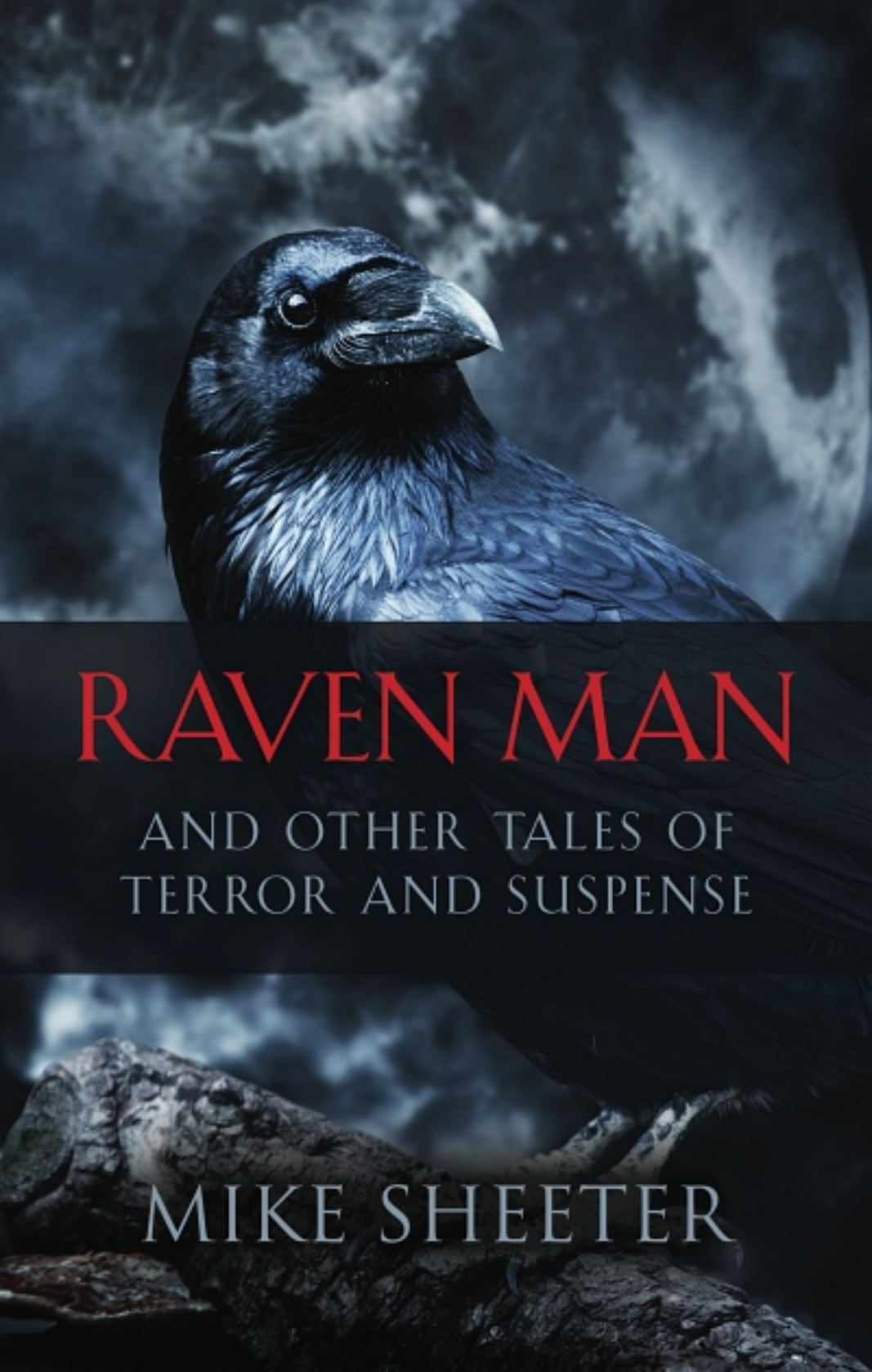
Raven Man: And Other Tales of Terror and Suspense

By Mike Sheeter

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RAVEN MAN

AND OTHER TALES OF
TERROR AND SUSPENSE

MIKE SHEETER

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Raven Man

The Raven Man paced backstage in his threadbare black suit and gray satin cravat. His nerve endings thrummed, and as he waited to go on, his senses seemed hyper-acute.

He heard the clatter of folding chairs as the Lyceum Hall's ushers put out extra seats and the ducats for tonight's recital being torn in half at the box office.

Beneath the growing murmur of voices as the lecture room filled, he recognized the swishing of bombazine and watered silk gowns, the rustle of starched petticoats. His nostrils twitched at the cloying scent of attar of roses and at the primal and intimate bouquet it was meant to disguise. He peered through a gap in the curtain, squinting past the double row of tallow candles anchored in sandbags that lined the stage apron.

The house was packed. Even on such a chilly October evening, with a blustery offshore wind buffeting the windowpanes, the ladies had turned out in high style to see him. The men accompanying them were mere escorts, bored, and not troubling themselves to conceal it.

The cigar smoke and rye whiskey tang they had tracked into the hall called his favorite tavern to mind. He decided to indulge himself with a woman after tonight's turn on the boards. As a public figure of sorts, he now enjoyed the attentions of women from a more elevated social class than his own, women he had never dared to approach before. He was enjoying quite a vogue among silly, well-to-do young matrons like these.

He was amused to see how many of them had whitened their faces and bosoms with arsenical preparations, trying to look pale and ethereal, like his lost love.

They had no idea who he was, or what he really liked.

He scanned the aisles, seeking a particular blonde with gray eyes and ringlets. She had been staring fixedly at him during his last three recitals.

As he drew the curtain closed, he accepted that his latest feminine admirer had chosen not to attend tonight's performance. Well, no matter, he thought. After I finish a plate of crab cakes and a down few brandy smashes, the first waterfront doxy I see can service me just as well.

"You'd better go on now, don't you think?"

The impresario, Monckton, was tugging at his sleeve.

"I'm counting the extra chairs," the Raven Man said. "Remember that when we settle up."

Monckton hurried off to introduce him. The Raven Man took a flask of laudanum from his pocket and drained it.

When he heard his cue, he stepped through the curtain and strode towards the lectern. The footlights accentuated his pomaded hair and deep-set black eyes.

They could not see him laughing as he bowed, acknowledging their respectful applause.

Striking a pose, he began to declaim the poem:

*"Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door..."*

The gas-lit streets were uncharacteristically lively when he emerged from the stage door alley onto Fort Armistead Street, some twenty-five dollars richer.

Massive brewer's wagons rumbled over the cobblestones. Thanks to the coming sheriff's election, everybody in Baltimore's fourth ward was drinking free tonight.

Ay-rab pushcart peddlers, whores, sail and spar makers, foreign sailors, and free men and women of color staggered along the inner waterfront's boardwalk.

A fife and drum band played patriotic airs from the band shell next to the Washington battle monument on Dock Road. The tincture of opium was making itself felt now. The Raven Man felt a surge of affection for his hometown and all its peculiarities.

He pulled his old army greatcoat snug against the fog rolling in off the Chesapeake Bay and watched a torchlight parade of drunks snake by.

He nodded to a police constable he knew, and turned down Cider street, passing rows of identical red brick houses with wrought-iron railings and marble stoops.

A gang of children recognized him and began following him at a safe distance.

“Raven Man, Raven Man!” they chanted.

He whirled on them, flapping the tails of his greatcoat like black wings, cawing at the top of his lungs. They shrieked and scattered.

His grin faltered when he saw a pale, outraged face glaring at him from a few feet away. The man blocking his path looked enough like him to pass for his brother.

The other’s brow was broader though, and his heavily pouched gray eyes conveyed a sense of immeasurable desolation. It was his lifelong nemesis, the scribbler, Edgar Allan Poe.

“Bully Graves, you scoundrel,” Poe said. “I might have known it would be you.”

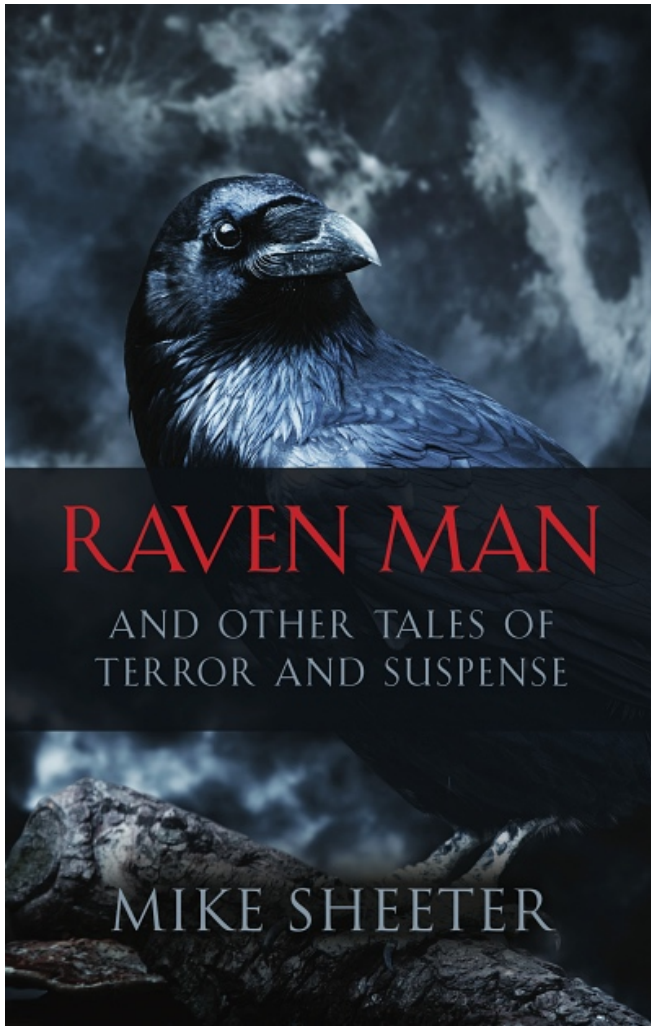
Samuel “Bully” Graves, until lately known as the Raven Man, struggled to regain his composure.

“Why bless my soul,” Graves said, “if it ain’t an old comrade of days gone by, Edgar A. Perry.”

Poe slapped Graves’ hand away, seizing the lapel of his greatcoat. “You needn’t be shy about addressing me by my real name, Graves,” He said, “Not after you’ve appropriated it for your own use. My sister, Mrs. Rosalie Poe Mackenzie, has witnessed you impersonating me on several occasions.”

About the Author

Mike Sheeter was a features writer, magazine editor, screenwriter and horror and noir enthusiast. The only wicked thing about him was his sense of humor. The world lost too many stories when he died in 2012. These are a few favorites.



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