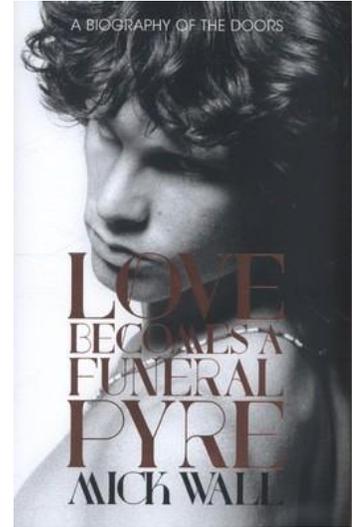


## Love Becomes a Funeral Pyre - by Mick Wall

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*Review by Dr. Ian Clarke*

Another biography of the Doors came out a few years ago (2015). I didn't read it until last month. It's called Love Become a Funeral Pyre. It's written by Mick Wall – who the dust cover describes as “England's best-known rock writer. The founder of Classic Rock Magazine and a contributor to Mojo, Rolling Stone, Playboy, and others. His books include definitive biographies of Led Zeppelin, Axl Rose, Metallica, Prince, and Lemmy.”



Sounds like Mr. Wall is a busy lad and knows his stuff.

So – conservatively, there are about 200 plus books on the Doors. Why do we possibly need another one? By the way, ask yourself the same question you see any new book on the Beatles, Stones, Queen, Guns n Roses, Bob Dylan and the Beach Boys. Why Sweet Jesus oh why?

Ok – so you're a rock writer, actually, England *best-known rock writer*, and you're pitching a book to a publisher. “Have you uncovered something new about the Doors?” he or she asks the author. “No” he or she replies. “Then why the hell would someone buy your book about Jim Morrison and the Doors?” “Because,” the author replies with a bemused smile, “because I'm going to really explode all the mythology surrounding the group, really drill down to the marrow, to the point where it will occasionally appear that I don't like the Doors as people and can barely tolerate them as a group. “I see” says the publisher, a light smile starting to spread across his or her face. “So you're going to load this with attitude.” “Right,” the author replies, “and if that means sarcasm, if that means often assuming a world-weary, condescending assessment of personalities and events reserved for those privileged with retrospect, if that means passing judgement on sexual preferences and behavior, then so be it.” And then the deal is signed.

Your Honour, let me submit my opening statement in the trial of Mick Wall's Love Become a Funeral Pyre. Hell, let's just jump procedure Your Honour, and let me enter into evidence the first paragraph in the book. “This is the end. Jim, alone, not in a bathtub but on the toilet, head down, trousers around his knees, found just like his hero, Elvis, would be six years later, arms dangling lifelessly by his sides, brains fried.”

Your honour, I submit that there is no proof whatsoever that Jim Morrison died on a toilet in a Paris nightclub. Conjecture, hearsay, unsubstantiated rumour. What the author has done Your Honour, is establish an editorial tone – in this case, that he isn't going to be muscled by the Morrison-worshipping acolytes. Not him. In fact, in the opening scene he places their hero on a toilet, just like their hero's idol, Elvis, would die in six years, as if that was in any way relevant – but at least it keeps everything in the crapper.

Let me continue your Honour. In the same paragraph he uses a literary technique termed stream-of-consciousness or interior monologue. "He'd been predicting his own death for months, of course. Janis had gone the previous October, Jimi just two weeks before that. "You're drinking with the next one," Jim would only half-jokingly tell friends. Except that Jim didn't really have any friends. Certainly not Pamela, with her hell-red hair and her smack and her new boyfriend, the Count...or Ray, with his Jim-just-for-me shit to your face...or John, that asshole, always with the long hard looks and the judgmental eyes...and even far-out Robby, his mind blown by the acid and the permanent midnight, all mumbled passive-aggressive bullshit. Robby the secret businessman."

Therefore, the author is, in effect, placing his own opinions in the head of... who? - a healthy Jim Morrison? A dying-on-the-toilet Jim Morrison? A dead Jim Morrison? And above that, these are sophomoric, fictional appraisals of his band mates – all negatives assumptions of three men he referred to as his brothers, even though, as normal grown-ups, they had differences. Brothers do rumble.

Your Honour, we're still on the first page of an almost 400-page book. The jury might want to take a long, long bio break...but please, nobody die on the toilet and get brain fried.

Yes, we're tired of these drug-infested, mentally unbalanced rock stars revered like bargain-basement messiahs. To most people, most celebrities seem dumb. We live in a tell-all age empowered by emotionally remote algorithms and a generally bored populace hungry for dumb-down, news – which is fake to the extent that some poor, underpaid editor has to file 200 words on any crap ready to go for an 11 PM cut-off for the morning edition. Jim Morrison is not an untouchable god, a sacrosanct dead celebrity without faults. By now, anyone interested in the Doors pretty much knows Morrison was a complicated beast. Where's the news?

Author Mick Wall didn't have especially malicious intentions – that won't carry you for 400 pages. He just needed an adult editor, as opinionated as himself, to say, "Lighten up on the hate gig Mick, go easy son. We're all driving to the same town." But that didn't happen – and that's the core reason why we have in our hands a good book and not close to a great one. And it is a good book. Wall collates interesting incidents, especially as they highlight Morrison's pre-Doors life. Here, Wall is less judgmental, and sometimes, surprisingly, seems to let the events speak for themselves. It's refreshing.

Now, Mick Hall is only hard on Morrison? Let's watch him take on Ray Manzarek, the keyboard player. Go for it Mick. "For Ray, who would rewrite the story again and again after Jim's death, it became not the end of a shattered career but the beginning of a new religion. Ray, who made the whole thing up, man...When I last spoke with Ray, just a few months before he died, toward the end of the conversation he said, "I wouldn't be surprised if I got a postcard or a phone call tomorrow from Jim, saying, 'Hey, man, I'm back!'" I had been prepared to put up with his Doors hagiography until then. It was a trip to hear Ray Manzarek of the Doors talk about the sacrament of LSD...But when he gave me the Jim-might-not-be-dead shtick I was surprised, then disappointed, then faintly disgusted. He was insulting my intelligence."

Alright, I always felt that Manzarek did have an irritating tendency to sell the Doors in an often coarse, self-reverential way, obviously exploiting media-fuelled myths while simultaneously parsing the Doors' history into beautifully-rendered slogans and sounds.

Mick Wall isn't out of line to infiltrate the puff pieces in order to glean the truth (which, as we know, is always subjective. Likely Paul McCartney could use some roughing up about his real-time, re-editing of Beatles myth). It's just Mick Wall breathes so much fire it tends to burn away those subtleties of a subject which makes it interesting in the first place. An example, "UCLA in the early sixties was *not* the place to go for anyone thinking of a *straight* career." Ray spoke in italics a lot – he was always so certain of what he was saying, or at least wished to give the appearance of being so."

Now that's an interesting observation of Ray's character and could extend into a discussion of his leadership abilities, but it seems to have come from one lurking in the shadows with a stiletto rather than a responsible journalist offering insights devoid of agendas and presuppositions.

I hope it doesn't seem like I am cherry-picking just the rough stuff. Let me emphasize that editorial tone, once established, is comparable to cinematography in a film: it's massively influential though not necessarily obvious. So even if Mick Hall introduces interesting viewpoints, they often seem more like a set-up for the upcoming slap-down. And it takes him down some dark paths.

He seems fixated on Morrison's sexual proclivities, in fact, passes judgement on his behaviour – which is odd for a biographer. For a point of contrast, read the best rock bio ever written – about Elvis – by Peter Guralnik. Most critics found it remarkable and refreshing that Guralnik passed no judgment on anything, let alone Elvis Presley, who always was an easy target.

As reported by Mick Wall, Jim Morrison punched women, raped at least one, was likely bi-sexual and was loaded with sexual diseases. Enough already. How much is just guesswork? How much conveniently fulfills an aggressive, strategic, editorial approach – whereby if you create a fact, you will find it?

I'm not a Morrison apologist. Pound for pound, most of his friends, across the twenty or so Doors' books I've read, strongly indicate he could be a very difficult person, but basically he was okay, maybe even extraordinary. The generally accepted view that he was bi-polar, alcoholic, and later a user of heroin, might provide more areas of character revelation than zeroing in on his erectile dysfunction.

Let's listen as author Mick Wall goes after Morrison's supposed ability at self promotion. Quote. "Less convenient to the myth but more true to reality was the fact that Jim grew up a nervous child who wet the bed, something his mother found intolerable and would repeatedly punish him for, forcing him to sleep in the wet sheets." That's a fact? Really? What's the source? Attorneys representing the Morrison family have categorically denied these incidents.

Oh I see, the author's extending a branch to all nascent Freudians. Yes, it's wonderfully bespoke for analysis. He goes on, "What can be agreed is that he felt abused...But that was Jim, from boy to man, always just a little different from the rest, always the one with the special excuses. Always with the lovelorn eyes." Jim Morrison had lovelorn eyes? Horseman, pass by.

Mick Wall doesn't have to try and kill Jim Morrison. Jim Morrison is already dead. At some point the narrative bleeds into character assassination – but of course, Wall's only doing it in the name of demystification, of integrity, of not worshipping at the altar of the Lizard King, not like those other Lizard-King-worshipping rock critics.

However, the study of character is the study of contrast. Any English lit major will tell you that. So if you destroy one side of the character with an unceasing barrage, then contrast is lost. The result: you get a narrative that limps to the finish line. Wall sabotages himself: the book slides into an inescapable screed, a rant from a writer confined, not liberated, by an agenda.

That truncated approach can only inspire throw-away lines, as when he mentions a book that he quotes from, written by Dennis Jakob, a film lecturer and Morrison pal. "Dennis concludes by insisting that he never saw Jim make a move toward him or any of their friends. He adds, "I only heard the rumors." Mick Wall just had to add that last tag sentence, even though the sentence itself includes the word 'rumors'. Pretty thin gruel.

It doesn't stop. Listen as the author describes Morrison in the studio. "...he also appeared heavier than most people still pictured him; his voice was thick with booze and smoke, and his tongue was swollen with self-medication and lies." Whoa, his tongue was swollen with lies and medication? Seems Mick Wall also has pre-med studies under his belt. Perhaps this is the moment Mick Wall cross over from being a rock scribe to a prosecuting attorney.

The author's tireless invective is unrestrained by a mature, moderated view – one that could help us understand who Jim Morrison was, and how he succeeded, with his three band mates, in conquering infinitesimal odds to become respected musicians and composers that still sell millions of records, fifty years after they broke up.

That's the real mystery – and one which, thankfully and gratefully – can never be abused or explained.