David Mathew is the author of three novels – O My Days, Creature Feature, and most recently Ventriloquists – and a volume of short stories entitled Paranoid Landscapes. His wide areas of interest include psychoanalysis, linguistics, distance learning, prisons and online anxiety. With approximately 600 published pieces to his name, including a novel based on his time working in the education department of a maximum security prison (O My Days), he has published widely in academic, journalistic and fiction outlets. In addition to his writing, he co-edits The Journal of Pedagogic Development (at the University of Bedfordshire, UK), teaches academic writing, and he particularly enjoys lecturing in foreign countries and learning about wine. He is a member of the Tavistock Society of Psychotherapists and Allied Professionals, Evidence Informed Policy and Practice in Education in Europe (EIPPEE), and the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing. He was also a member of The Health Technology Assessment programme (www.hta.ac.uk), as part of the NIHR Evaluation, Trials and Studies Coordinating Centre at the University of Southampton (2009-2013).

We met at his home in the south-east of England in November 2014 to discuss his approaches to writing and his new novel, Ventriloquists.

David Farrer: So David, tell me something about your writing background.

David Mathew: I started writing as early as I can remember, as a student, at school. I was encouraged to write when I was a kid and I did that for a long time.

DF: What inspired you?
DM: At the time, the Famous Five novels and as I got older I became interested in horror fiction and science fiction and the one book that changed my life I suppose in the sense that it inspired me was Stephen King’s *It* which I read when I was sixteen and it was a remarkable book.

DF: What did you find inspiring in it?

DM: It was, it is a massive book that took in so much of American history, it’s a book that’s set simultaneously in 1957 and the then contemporary time of 1984 and I thought ‘this is incredible’, it had everything in it, brilliant characters, brilliant writing, scary. It was everything I wanted at that point without knowing beforehand that that’s what I wanted to do. It took me some years to figure out how to but at that point I thought ‘this is great, this is what I want to do, I want to write a book.’

So I wrote a manuscript when I was eighteen, it never got published of course but it was a starting point, I thought I had at least started the process, no more than that, but at least I’ve started. It was some years after that that I got something down on paper that I thought would at least be useful and readable but that particular starting point was very important to me.

DF: So how has your writing evolved over the years since then? Has it evolved just around novels or in other areas of writing?

DM: I’ve always had a parallel career I suppose, writing journalism and writing fiction, both of them I hope have grown tighter I hope so I don’t waste any words, I think more structured and more complete to make it more concise and that’s what I aim to do all the time now.

DF: Who would you say have been influences since? If you say Stephen King has been an influence in terms of story development, who do you think has influenced you in terms of your writing style?

DM: Probably Martin Amis. Amis’ *London Fields* was a massive influence when I was a student. I didn’t realise you could have an entertaining thriller and comedy in one breath and also beautifully written. A fantastic novel. I didn’t think it was something I could write, that would have been presumptuous, but Amis has been a big influence and will remain so.

DF: So has he influenced how you write prose, dialogue, how you structure the work ...

DM: Not so much structure but definitely the prose style. The style of presenting a character through dialogue is the key thing and I try to do something similar and the characters I create are similar in that I don’t go into details about their appearance or physique, I describe them through the language they use, and they’ve all got a different voice and that’s the way I prefer it. I’m not particularly keen on reading let alone writing characters that start with ‘He was six foot two ...’. I think there are more inventive ways to describe a character. I think a
character can be much better described by the things he says and the context in which he says them than physical dimensions. I’ve always stood by that and Amis is the same. That for me is important.

DF: Have you always written the same genre or have you varied your output over the years?

DM: Very much varied. It’s varied but I keep returning to the field that I write about most often. I have done other things and enjoyed writing other things, but they always end up, the ones that are any good, end up being influenced by, not necessarily horror fiction, but surreal fiction. That’s much closer to what I think I do anyway.

*Ventriloquists* isn’t particularly a horror novel, you could argue that it is, but it’s about control and the corruption of power, and is more a surreal novel than a horror novel. I think and I’m attracted to that side of things definitely but it is much more a case of turning on the tap and seeing what comes out. It’s not so much that I choose to write a particular genre, it’s more I’ve got a particular story to tell, and let’s see what genre it attaches itself to. I’ve certainly written mainstream fiction. I tried a couple of times to write science fiction but it didn’t work, but at least I tried. I wrote one cowboy novel believe it or not, towards the end of the nineties, I can’t believe I ever did that, but I did. I try to vary things.

DF: How have your life experiences influenced your writing?

DM: Life experiences certainly influenced a previous book, *O, My Days*, which was influenced directly by my time working in a maximum security prison, a young offenders’ prison. The experience led directly to that particular manuscript which was very well received. That was, in comparison, a very easy book to write, because basically I was writing up my diary, more or less. It wasn’t quite the diary, but it wasn’t any more difficult than writing diary entries. So life experience in that sense, working in a difficult environment led to a book I’m very pleased with.

As far as *Ventriloquists* is concerned there is no specific life experience that led to it directly, but living in the area in which it is set is a kind of life experience and its very much the case that the environment informed the book rather than one experience in particular. Just living in this multicultural 20-mile-radius area led me to explore these various clashes.

DF: Do you ever go back to previous ideas that you have had and evolve or has each piece that you have developed been unique?

DM: Once it’s published, I think of it as finished. Anything that hasn’t been published is still a work in progress so I’ve got things that are 20 years old that one day I hope I might revive. It might just be a character’s name, it might not be an idea even, and once in a blue moon I’ll go back to those files and I’ll see something that I think deserves another go. It might still come to nothing but it’s worth a try. I might go back to what I wrote when I was 18 and while it might not be good enough to be a book, there are ideas in it that I think might just be
something. It might be a name or a location and that may generate further ideas. It’s not so much that the book’s good, because it isn’t, but it might be that the individual parts build up into something bigger and therefore have value. So from time to time I go back. More importantly, the things that are really good never really leave you anyway. I still have ideas dating back over 20 years, maybe just a title. Perhaps in the future I’ll have time to develop them.

DF: When you develop a story, do you lay it out with a specific structure or do you let the plot develop as you are going along? How do you develop plot?

DM: It’s very much the latter. It’s very much let the plot develop. I’ve got very clear signposts and plot points that need to be reached. I’ll have an A and a Z and there will be a range of points in between but how the journey moves from one point to another depends on how the story developed previously. It will also depend on how the characters have developed and their interactions may have changed aspects that I hadn’t previously considered. I have a very clear idea of what needs to be done but it’s not planned in the sense of a rigid idea that can’t be modified. If I change my mind about how a character would behave then that has an impact on future events. If I decide that the character is doing something that doesn’t make sense then I would change that aspect to make the character more believable.

DF: Moving on to Ventriloquists, what was the initial idea that set you off on the path to the writing and the completion of the book?

DM: There were two initial ideas. One was two burglars who had never met before, going into the wrong house. That was one and the other one was this idea I had about a local clash of cultures and races actually. I had an idea of an Asian man, or boy originally, and he would encounter a traveller’s community and one of the travellers had stolen a child and he was going to rescue the child. So I had to think ‘how could this possibly happen?’ So there were two simultaneous strands and I didn’t know for a little while how I would put those two things together. But I knew they were together somehow. Sometimes you work on these ideas and clearly they are never going to meet but on this occasion I realised that they would meet because they are both local and because of that it’s quite conceivable that they would meet in one way or another.

I happened to be sitting outside Dorman’s Chemist in Dunstable, and needing a character name I chose Dorman. I don’t know where Connors came from but Dorman and Connors were very important in that they had to be in a house and be in the wrong house and one of them had to be bitten by a dog. It came very much in a flash and one of them, in
this case Dorman, said he would go back to deal with the dog. By doing that he set his own fate. Because if he hadn’t gone back, if he had left it, nothing would have happened that led to later events.

DF: Definitely a plot driver then?

DM: Yes, definitely. And I had Yasser going onto the traveller’s camp, looking for the child, not realising that he was being elaborately set up, it’s a massive scam.

DF: In Ventriloquists there is the situation where the story covers the here and now but also deals with the character’s inner fears and ideas as the story develops. How did the ideas around that evolve?

DM: The dream sequences were really quite straightforward in the sense that they (the characters) don’t know, or specifically Connors doesn’t know, where he is or why he is there. I could pretend that it was just a fantasy novel so he’s become part of another world in a similar vein to Stephen King or Clive Barker or Piers Anthony (for example) where you move from the world we consider real into a fantasy world. It was easy enough because in the imagination sense but not the writing sense they don’t have a perception of real or unreal so everything to them is fresh and new. It’s like my puppy having new experiences, in a park for example. Everything is new, exciting and vibrant. For the characters it’s more frightening because they have moved far away from their comfort zone and they are now in a scary new world.

DF: But it is a world they have created for themselves.

DM: Yes it is; without knowing so but that’s the case. They’ve created it and it’s only much later that they realise they’ve created it because they think it’s a new environment and in some cases they think they have died and it’s Heaven and in some cases they think they can redeem themselves by doing certain things. They have different ways of dealing with a new sense of what is real.

DF: Do all the characters have the same perception? How did you deal with that?

DM: Not everyone has the same perception because we all have different perceptions of real life. Most people who can deal with a variety of different stimuli will deal better with a falsely created stimulus, so some characters can’t cope at all and their dream lives are extremely shallow. Others have a really rich dream life because he’s got nothing else in his real life so he builds this incredibly ornate and complex dream state. Other people whose real lives are rich and complex have much more shallow dreams, like Phyllie, for example. The best she can think of is her school … at first, at least.
DF: So what it deals with then is the depth of perception and how people’s perceptions evolve to meet their own needs.

DM: Yes, exactly.

DF: Who you identify with most in the book?

DM: I suppose Tim Branston; he’s not a story teller but he’s the one who chronicles the story as far as that is possible. He is a simple bloke who wants to do a good job but he’s unhappy in that job. He dreams of being a film director but he knows that’s never going to happen so he wants to direct documentaries instead. He is given an opportunity to do that in the most unlikely of circumstances and he accepts it. He is the most interesting character from my personal perspective. I don’t feel any identity with any of the others particularly. But Branston represents honesty in an environment of dishonesty.

DF: What do you consider to be Benny’s motivation in the story? Why is he doing what he’s doing?

DM: Benny is a megalomaniac. He’s a deeply unpleasant and flawed and insubstantial man and he chooses violence and control to be his pathway out of what he thinks is a mundane existence.

DF: He has a criminal background?

DM: Very much so.

DF: How did he then move into a scientific environment and how did he develop his scientific ambitions?

DM: His ambitions are scientific but he’s not in a scientific world, although he wants to be. His dream is to be taken seriously but the scientific community but he never will be because his ideas are nonsense.

His last ditch attempt to be accepted by the scientific community is one of violence, control and coercion. He thinks this will give him an opportunity but he is deluded.

DF: There is a lot of sex in the story. How do you feel about writing it and how it is presented?

DM: The sex in *Ventriloquists* is very much connected with control, and I hope it isn’t perceived as erotic. Even in the scenes with Phyllie and Roger, who are married, there is a sense of them not understanding what the other wants, so they go through the motions of increasingly extreme acts. But it becomes a case of them not really understanding what the other one wants, but they are unable to admit this to each other. It isn’t meant to be attractive at all.
DF: So would you then say for example, and this comes back to the title of the book, is it a matter of what we think is a control element which in actual fact is not a control element and from the perspective of the book, who is controlling who? Is it a matter of the ventriloquist controlling the dummy or the dummy controlling the ventriloquist?

DM: Well that’s always been in my mind. There are cases of a puppeteer controlling one or more characters and those characters then controlling others, so every character in the book in some way or another is controlled by another character. There are no free agents. Ventriloquists was always a metaphor for the atmosphere in which control can exist freely with no method of curbing it. The argument is that anyone can be controlled and in turn control others.

DF: You have a background of studying psychoanalysis. Has that influenced the way the story has evolved? How has that contributed to it?

DM: I don’t think anything I studied regarding psychoanalysis has fed directly into this book but there is a character called Roger Billie and while he isn’t a psychoanalyst he is someone who has studied a bit of Freud, a bit of Bion and a bit of Foulkes. He’s someone who’s interested in the field. He thinks he can change his environment and the environment of those around him by applying different theories to those environments. He’s got an incredibly important job but it’s not as important as he wants it to be. He’s a social worker with a psychiatric background and he’s on a crisis assessment team and that brings him into contact with the environment in which Vig and Dorota now live in their mansion and he finds himself at odds with the bird-keeper Don Bridges and that overlaps. I don’t put his thoughts directly onto the characters around him but he’s certainly informed by them.

DF: Do you think the book touches on a theme of inner conflict and the resolution of inner conflict through the state of coma? And are they able to deal with issues outside of the physical allowing them to confront their inner fears or perceptions more easily than when they are not in a physical state?

DM: I think so.

DF: Was that at the forefront of your mind as you wrote it?

DM: Not really. That developed. Originally I didn’t have such a well-developed sense of the fantastic world, but I thought, ‘how am I going to describe what these characters are doing without actually describing their actions?’ I thought it would be easier to describe the dream that is occurring and that seemed to me to be a much more interesting narrative and as I said earlier I focussed on Conners because he was otherwise shallow, he had nothing else in his life so I gave him that.
DF: So it’s people developing a depth away from their physical being in a different plane or dimension?

DM: Yes, to a large extent.

DF: The matter of the coming together in the end within a combined dream state. How did you envisage that?

DM: First, there had to be a resolution. There had to be a way that those particular characters on a decreasing island met. I could have had them walking around together and never meeting.

DF: So did they all go to the island?

DM: Well, that’s never clear because it doesn’t have to be. The fact is they are all in the same geographical physical environment.

DF: So you could say then that there is a connection between the physical and the mental?

DM: Yes, definitely. By being together physically in the chambers, they have created a world without knowing each other in which they all exist and as time passes that world shrinks so much that they end up together at the climax. Everyone from the other dream worlds coalesce towards it because they have nothing else to do. They are in one or another trapped in the chambers and they have no way of tethering their ambitions to anything. So what they do is follow other people’s ambitions, which is a statement about religion in the manner of people following each other. They have become followers following a new ventriloquist.

DF: Is it a case of the controlled becoming the controller?

DM: Yes, frequently. Most characters go through a shift between being controlled to controlling.

DF: Can this be seen as a book with a very positive view of life?

DM: I hope so. It’s meant to be. It doesn’t take much to change a way of thinking; the smallest turn of the dial can create massive change in a life no matter in what form. It is a dark book though. I’d be surprised if anyone found it humorous. Ultimately though good triumphs over evil which is what any book pitting good against evil should achieve.

DF: Do you think that your experience of growing up in this part of Britain is reflected in the story?
DM: In the sense that it’s become a multi-cultural part of the UK, yes, but it’s not meant to be a social documentary. We have all the groups mentioned in the book in this area but it doesn’t aim to comment on the relationships between the groups in real life. When you take into account the cultural history of those groups and bring them together there is a potential for conflict and that is what I was dealing with.

David Farrer is a Curriculum Manager in a London College of Further Education. He has worked in education for the last 20 years, having succeeded in a previous career in marketing. He is interested in anything related to engineering, abstract sculpture and alternative views of life. A keen reader and film-watcher, he enjoys the work of a wide range of authors and film makers.

Books by David Mathew are available as follows:

Ventriloquists: http://tinyurl.com/q38evzm

Creature Feature: http://tinyurl.com/nmpvgbq

O My Days: http://tinyurl.com/pdbfkdp

Paranoid Landscapes: http://tinyurl.com/nx3yqpc