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EDITORIAL:

by alasdair stuart & lee harris

The Year We Make Contact

Welcome to the third science fiction year of the millennium. We had 2000, 2001, the numerous different Judgment Days in The Terminator series and now, at last, 2010, the year we make contact according to Arthur C. Clarke and Peter Hyams. 2020's another one, 2013's one for old school Cyberpunk fans like me and then, of course, there's 2012. According to Roland Emmerich, unless you're in on the secret government plan to save civilisation or are related to John Cusack, that one apparently doesn't end well.

Regardless, and certainly until my name change to 'John Cusack' becomes legal, this is one of the years where we officially live in the future, one of the years where everything is possible. So that's what we're going to do; everything we possibly can.

2009 was a wild ride for Hub. As well as hitting our 100th issue, and reaching the magic number of 10,000 subscribers we welcomed aboard a new sponsor (Solaris and Abaddon, both imprints of Rebellion) and published approximately 160,000 words of fiction and 75,000 words of non-fiction, all of which we continued to present free of charge!

We also now have a Twitter account (how 21st Century are we?!) which you can find below, along with the Twitter accounts of the team.

This year you'll see our podcast serial launch, see new columns come on stream, new writers, new features and most of all, new stories. This is one of those years where the future can be forged and shaped and that's exactly what we're planning to do. This year we make Hub something bigger, better and stronger than ever before. This year we break new ground. This year we shine. This year we all shine.

Get ready.

Oh, and Happy New Year!

Not yet legally John Cusack,
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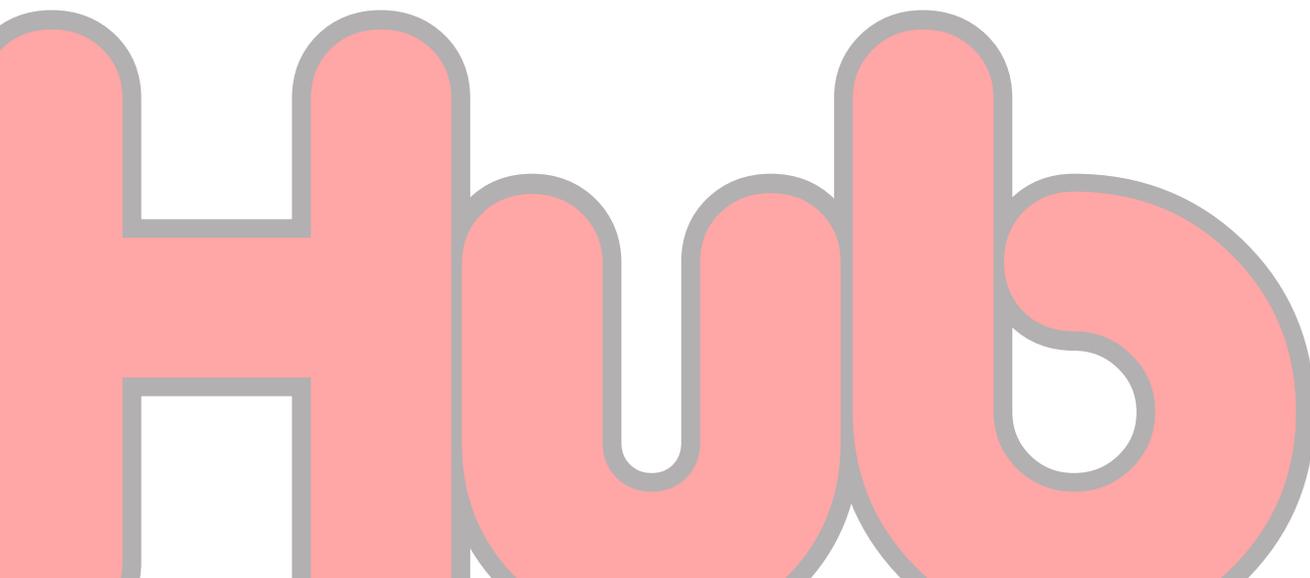
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FICTION

By Bargain and by Blood

by alette de bodard

The blood empath came when my niece was eight.

I should have suspected something like that--but my sister Aname had told me little about the begetting of her daughter, little beyond her certainty that everything would turn out right in the end. Her death in childbirth had left my questions forever unanswered.

Nevertheless, when Aname told me about her child to come, she spoke of a bargain struck. And thus I should have known someone would come to honour it--that someone would walk through the rice paddies and the forests until he reached our jati, our small community isolated from the affairs of the world.

But, just as you know about death but do not think about it, so I did not think about him.

A mistake. Perhaps I would have been better prepared, had I thought of his coming.

It was the Night of Mourning in the jati: the night when the spirits of the dead descended from heaven to commune with us. I'd just finished painting the *tilak*, the sacred tear-drop mark, on my niece Pamati's forehead, when she spoke.

"Auntie?"

"Yes," I said, knowing what was coming: the same question Pamati asked every year on the Night of Mourning. I turned briefly, to wash my hands clean of the red paste.

"Will Mommy be here?"

"I don't know," I said, truthfully. Shanti, the priestess of the Destroyer, had said that Aname would be in the heavens, that she'd descend to earth with the other dead. But although in eight years many dead had possessed Shanti during the ceremony, none of them had been my sister. Perhaps--my stomach felt hollow--she was already reborn, not knowing me or Pamati.

"You said she loved me," Pamati said, her face twisting in the beginning of a sulk.

"Yes," I said. "She loved you so much she let Bhane, the god of Death, take her instead of you." I remembered the birth; remembered Aname's face, distorted by pain; remembered the fear that filled her as she realised it was going wrong and that nothing would help her; remembered praying, desperately praying to all the small gods of the jati, praying she would be spared.

The gods have their own ways, which are not ours: Aname died, but Pamati was spared.

Pamati leapt to her feet, in a gesture too reminiscent of Aname as a child. "She'll come. She'll have to, Auntie. She just can't leave me." The hope on her face made me look away, for I suspected she'd be disappointed again tonight.

"She may come," I said at last, not wanting to add to her enthusiasm.

"You don't think she will," Pamati said.

"I don't know."

"You never know anything," she said, tears pooling in her eyes.

"No," I said, finally. I couldn't make promises I wouldn't keep.

Sometimes I hated Aname. Sometimes I hated her for striking her strange bargain, for becoming pregnant without a husband or even a serious suitor, for dying and leaving Pamati to me, forcing me to turn my back on the priesthood--for the Protector is not a god who can be served with a divided heart.

My bleak moods never lasted, but they came more and more often those days, when I saw what Pamati was reduced to.

"There's still some time before the sun sets," I told her. "Why don't you go play outside?"

Pamati shrugged. "What for? The others won't talk to me."

As a child without a father, Pamati was an outcast in our community: her mother's transgression had left its mark on her. I lived outcast from the jati, eking out a living for both of us. "I know, sweetheart," I said, even as my heart twisted. "But you're young; you shouldn't be cooped up."

"Can't I stay here and help you cook flatbread?"

"There won't be any flatbread tonight," I said. "Remember? I have to light a strong fire in the hearth, so that the dead can find their way home."

Pamati's face fell. Even at eight, she knew that flatbreads required smouldering embers. To cheer her up, I handed her the boxes of paste, and said, "You can finish the good luck drawing in the courtyard, if you promise you'll stick to the pattern."

She snatched the boxes from me, annoyed. "I *always* stick to the pattern."

I watched her run out into the courtyard, and kneel by the abstract design I'd started in the afternoon: two circles crossed by a straight line, and then teardrop-shapes blossoming around the core, until the drawing seemed like two hibiscus flowers entwined forever.

Aname had loved hibiscus flowers.

Alone in the room, I stripped away my mud-soiled sari, which still smelled of rice and spices, and went looking for my festival clothes. I had a sari made of the finest cotton, bartered long ago from an itinerant merchant on a year of good harvest.

I couldn't find the sari. I knelt by the clothing chest, rummaging through Pamati's scant things, through my other saris, and finally through Aname's things, until my hands met soft cloth. Odd. I must have taken out Aname's clothes to show Pamati since the last Night of Mourning.

There was no warning--no scuffle of feet, no other noise. But, as I rose with the sari in my hands, I slowly became aware that someone was watching me.

"Pamati?" I asked, but even as I did so, I knew that Pamati was never that silent.

I stood, naked, save for a flimsy blouse that hid nothing. I was alone and defenceless--as was the custom in the jati, neighbours lived far away, out of respect for one another's privacy.

It could have been a merchant or an itinerant priest, but they would have warned of their coming.

I turned as fast as I could, a hollow deepening in the pit of my stomach. I held the sari against myself to hide my nakedness.

A man stood just outside of the back door, watching me. His face was utterly expressionless, his eyes two pits of darkness.

The last rays of the sun glinted on both his arms: he wore bracelets of burnished copper, and I knew they would be engraved with leaping tigers.

A blood empath. An enforcer of the king's justice. A man who could destroy me with a word, if the fancy took him.

"What do you want?" I asked. Blood empaths lived in their solitary holdings, only venturing out to arrest the traitors who rebelled against the Pahate Dynasty.

"Aname."

My heart started beating faster. "You're joking," I said.

"I never joke," he said. Not a muscle of his face moved. Blood empaths were well-known for having no feelings whatsoever--every human thought had been burnt out of them during their training. "Where is Aname?"

Something snapped in me. That he should speak of her as if she were still alive--that he should come here unannounced and watch me as he'd watch an insect--that, deep, deep down, I knew, or suspected what he had come for, for Aname's unfulfilled bargain--

"Do you think you can barge here?" I asked. "Tell me your name first."

He smiled, a bare tightening of the lips. "Tyreas. You may dress if you wish."

I bit back an angry reply, not knowing how long I could test his patience. I wrapped the sari around me as fast as I could.

He watched me all the while. When I was finished, I met his gaze, and although I was now clothed, I still felt laid bare.

"Tyreas," I said. "I'm Daya. Aname's sister."

"She spoke of you," Tyreas said, in the same flat tone--he sounded almost bored, but I knew he wasn't, couldn't be.

I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the feeling the past had risen to haunt me. "Aname is dead," I said. "She has been dead those past eight years."

I watched him. I gathered it was news to him, although with his aloof nature it was hard to be sure. His eyes flicked a bit; he remained silent for a while. But when he spoke again, his voice was the same. "A shame," he said.

His eyes moved, focused on the courtyard where Pamati, her face creased in thought, was drawing a red diamond on the ground. "I would have thought you would know about me," he said.

I looked at Pamati, and back again at him. "You're the one Aname..."

"Slept with," he said. He did not sound embarrassed in the least. "The eight years have passed. I have come to end our bargain."

My heart sank. Aname had told me almost nothing about Pamati's father, and now I knew why.

A blood empath. She'd slept with a blood empath.

I couldn't imagine this man ever loving anyone--couldn't imagine this man ever feeling passionate about anything. I wondered what that night had been--all cold, mechanical precision on his part, while Aname panted and moaned beneath him?

It was obscene.

"How do I know you're the one?" I asked.

"You think me a liar?"

I said nothing, merely stood my ground.

He spoke quietly, as if reciting facts from a list. "I am a stranger to this jati, and yet I know your house, and your name, and your sister's name. I know the child is not yours, but your sister's, and I know how long ago she was conceived. And I know a bargain was struck--do not tell me Aname spoke of *that* to everyone."

I knew, deep down, that he was telling me the truth--blood empaths were cold and callous, but they never lied. "No, she didn't speak of your pact. Except to me, but she never told me the terms," I said.

"I suspect you know all there is to know, Daya." He sounded amused this time. "The child is mine."

No. No. He couldn't-- "You--" I said, groping for words. "It's not possible. You can't take her."

"You think to tell me what I can and cannot do?" And, although Tyreas had not moved, he seemed taller, exuding a sense of menace that filled my small house.

I knew blood empaths could do nothing to you without your living blood. I knew they were bound by law.

I knew Tyreas didn't care about any of that.

"I wasn't part of your bargain," I said, forcing the words through lips that had turned to stone.

"But you are still bound by it."

"I raised her as my own child," I said, trying to imagine my house without Pamati--trying to imagine Tyreas leaving the jati with a small hand tucked in his own.

No.

"Aname is dead," I said. "Your bargain is void. You never gave her anything."

I had a feeling--I had a feeling everyone of my words vanished in his dark eyes, and that he dismissed them immediately.

"Her death changes nothing," he said. He paused for a while. "If you wish, I will give you what should have gone to her. You did raise the child in her place."

"Pamati," I said, as calmly as I could. "Her name is Pamati. And I don't want whatever Aname was foolish enough to accept."

"More wealth than she could dream of," Tyreas said. Somehow he made my sister sound like a grasping woman, selling the fruit of her womb in exchange for mere gold and jewels.

"She wasn't like that," I said.

"Then you obviously didn't know her."

"And you did?" I asked, scathing. "One night of--" I paused, deliberately "--love with her makes you an expert?"

He said nothing.

"You leave for eight years," I said, pressing my point. I knew it was sheer foolishness to provoke him, but I couldn't stop--I couldn't let him take Pamati away. "You come back, not even taking the trouble to inform yourself. You want a child you've never known, born to a mother you never knew either."

"All you say may be right," Tyreas said. "But it does not change the one fact you have been avoiding: that the child--Pamati--belongs to me. By bargain and by blood."

He was so sure of himself I felt disarmed--for a moment only, but a moment might be all he needed.

"Auntie, Auntie! They're starting the dance. Why aren't we going?" Pamati said. She ran into the house, and then paused when she saw Tyreas.

He in turn was watching her, his face expressionless. "Triad's greeting, Pamati."

Pamati was looking from me to Tyreas, and back again. Her gaze froze on the copper bracelets on Tyreas's wrists--even children knew about blood empathths. "Auntie? Are you in trouble?"

She thought Tyreas had come for me, to arrest me. I gave a short, bitter laugh. "No. I'm not in trouble."

Pamati turned to Tyreas, puzzled, but did not speak--at least I'd managed to teach her respect of the blood empathths, though she did not appear to fear him in the least.

Tyreas must have sensed something was expected of him. "I have come to visit your aunt," he said. "I knew your mother, once."

Pamati's face lit up. "You did? Did Mommy send you?"

Tyreas said, "You could say she brought me here."

"Oh? And does she have a message for me?"

I was about to tell Tyreas to stop spinning his stories, but he must have sensed he was going too far. "No," he said. "I have not seen her in many years."

Pamati looked disappointed, but she soon rallied. "Where do you come from?"

"Near a great city," Tyreas said. "A city with white cobbled streets, and great markets where you can find many things from sea-shells to beautiful stones. I brought you one. Your mother would have been pleased to see you wear it." And there, on the palm of his hand, was a green, translucent stone that seemed to have a light of its own.

An emerald? Was that what he had offered Aname? I imagined fistfuls of stones, diamonds, emeralds, topazes--no wonder poor Aname's head had been turned.

Pamati reached out, hesitantly, and took the stone. It was set within metal, so that it could be worn as a pendant; the silver chain that held it shone in the gloom. Her face was carefully set in a frown. I knew she feared he'd take his gift back, as the children of the jati had once done, putting a wooden crown on her brow and proclaiming her queen, only to jeer at her afterwards.

Only when it rested on her chest did Pamati's frown disappear. "Thank you," she said.

"Thank your mother," Tyreas said--and he said it with a sideways glance at me, so I couldn't be mistaken as to whom he was speaking to.

"It must be expensive," Pamati said, fearfully--used to a lifetime of measuring rice at each meal.

Tyreas shook his head. "No. In the city people trade them for little, and every woman wears one on her chest. It stands for protection."

"Are people nice, in the city?"

Tyreas smiled, but the smile never reached his eyes--there was no feeling whatsoever behind it. "People are people."

"Yes," Pamati said, impatiently. "But are they nice to you? Do they say mean things about you?"

"No one would dare say mean things about me," Tyreas said. "Or anyone with me."

I disliked the way Pamati had taken to Tyreas so quickly--and, again, he had been quick to see his advantage and seize it. "We're going to miss the festival," I said, clearing my throat conspicuously.

Tyreas looked at me, sharply.

"We can all go together," Pamati said, and I knew I'd already lost that battle.

I made Pamati leave the stone under her sleeping mat, suspecting the other children would only be too quick to tear it from her.

As we left the house, she ran into the courtyard to put a last touch to her design, and I found myself alone with Tyreas, for a brief moment.

"Why not tell her?" I asked.

He shrugged--an uncharacteristically human gesture. "Too much for her to take in at once. Do not think her knowing or not knowing changes anything."

I bit my lip. I'd exhausted my small supply of arguments. I wanted Aname to be here, so she'd realise what a foolish bargain she had struck, so she'd explain to me why she'd struck it, why she'd let her head be turned by the promise of riches, ignoring the consequences of having a child without a father. I kept hoping there had been a reason, not merely greed and fear.

Demons take her. Had she not thought ahead?

As we walked towards the banyan tree at the heart of the jati, Pamati said, "Tell me about Mommy."

Tyreas stood straight. Night had fallen, and I could no longer make out his expression--though what was I thinking of? He would have no expression no matter what happened.

"She loved life," he said. "I saw her dance once, at the Feast of the Moon, as if every gesture was infinitely precious."

"Did she dance well?" Pamati asked.

"She was the best," Tyreas said.

"But she's not here any more."

"No," Tyreas said.

Pamati looked up at him. There was a disturbing shrewdness in her tone, as if some of Tyreas's acumen had rubbed off on her. "Auntie says that the dead come back tonight."

"They do," Tyreas said. "Maybe she will, too. But the dead act as it pleases them."

"Wouldn't she be pleased to see me?" Pamati asked. There was such pain in her tone that I took a step forward with my arms extended--knowing that I could do nothing to comfort her.

Tyreas did not answer.

We reached the heart of the jati. Under the banyan tree that encompassed our temple to the Triad, the crowd had already assembled in the wavering light of the torches. The scent of incense wafted in the air. In the centre, near the altar, a scene had been erected on bamboo trestles; and Shanti, our priestess of the Destroyer, was singing the sacred hymns of the Triad and of the minor gods, beseeching their protection from the returned dead.

Children and adults did not sit together on the Night of Mourning, for it would have been inappropriate. Pamati, who had been running ahead of both of us, made for the small group of children standing to one side of the scene.

And, like every year, the people of the jati cast disparaging glances at her. Chandi the councillor nudged his wife Yani out of the way, while Arune the smith and Bodhi the weaver merely sneered at Pamati's passing--in such a way that could not be ignored. Pamati ran on, no doubt hoping to lose herself among the children.

But the children also moved away from her. Even over Shanti's hymns, I could hear the faint sniggers, the endless mockeries.

Fatherless...

Your mother was a whore...

Knowing what I now did of Aname's bargain, this last struck far too close for comfort.

"Children can be among the cruelest of us," a voice said behind me, and I realised it was Tyreas. I'd forgotten he had ever been there. "Every year the same..."

"How would you know?" I snapped.

"I was a child once," Tyreas said.

"You?" I could not help it. The words were out of my mouth before I could think.

"Even I." He ought to have sounded ironic, or amused at the least. But he didn't.

We moved to the edge of the crowd--they made way for both of us, I guessed because some of them

had caught a glimpse of Tyreas's bracelets. Someone I could not see pushed me in the darkness; Tyreas's hand effortlessly held me.

I waited until we reached a quiet place to ask, "Why?"

"Why what?" he asked. "Why come back now?"

"No," I said. "Why did you offer that to Aname?"

He was silent for a while. On the stage, Shanti had finished the entreaties to the gods, and was now moving to the slow rhythm of the Summoning, her hands slowly bending and turning to emphasise every one of her poses.

"Blood empath's do not marry," Tyreas said. "They do not raise children."

"I know that," I said. And privately thought he'd be incapable of raising a small child. You had to feel love, which he didn't.

"We take children," Tyreas said. "Every year, we find the orphans and the abandoned, and share blood with them."

"You make them into--" I asked, and stopped. Into monsters like you, I wanted to say, but knew better than to push my luck.

"Yes," Tyreas said, as if nothing were amiss. "It is a simple process."

"It's--"

"The way of things," Tyreas said. "To have children, we would need spouses. Spouses need care. Spouses need love. So do children. Do you believe we could give them that?" For the first time, there was a hint of emotion in his voice, barely audible. Bitterness?

"No," I said. "But that still doesn't explain--"

"You are a slow thinker, Daya," Tyreas said. His voice was flat again. "I wanted a child of my blood. I wanted an heir."

"Why?" An unfair question, yet I had to ask it.

Tyreas was looking away from me, toward the stage, and did not immediately answer. "To leave something behind me. Something I had shaped, and not taken apart. I wanted an heir to what I had not destroyed."

"You'll destroy her when you share blood," I said. "You'll destroy her when she is trained. Isn't that how it works?"

"She will want for nothing," Tyreas said. And fell silent, for Shanti's voice was rising again, summoning those of the dead who had returned to the earth.

A shudder passed through Shanti; her features went slack in the light of the torches. "Ranya?" she asked, in a small, bewildered voice. "It is I, Manu."

Manu, keeper of the lore, dead for five years. Ranya detached herself from the crowd, and ascended the steps, to commune with her dead husband.

After Manu it was Rakhte, and after Rakhte Aayani, and after Aayani Meshnu--and so on until the night wore itself out, and the torches burnt low, and the grey light of dawn slowly reminded us that we were still among the living.

Pamati ran back to us as the members of the jati dispersed. "She didn't come," she said. She sounded crestfallen.

I opened my arms to her and she ran into them, snuggling against me. Each of her sobs echoed in my chest as if they'd been my own. My eyes would not stop stinging.

As the sun rose, we walked back to my house in silence. The streets of the jati were deserted, save for a few haggard people, but those few still gave us a wide berth.

Tyreas was by my side, and he said nothing. I was beginning to understand that he did not speak unless he had to; that he did not venture any information unless compelled to it.

In my house, I brewed some cardamom tea for Tyreas and myself. Pamati had curled before the hearth and gone to sleep. I hoped that she'd forget her disappointment when she woke again.

No. I knew she wouldn't. Some wounds ran too deep.

Tyreas sipped his tea in silence, and said, finally, "When she wakes--"

"No," I said. "I won't let you."

"You'd stand against me?" he sounded amused.

"I gave up everything for her," I said, all the words I had not spoken in years suddenly pouring from me. "My future. The life I could have had as a priestess of the Protector, and not merely an outcast peasant bound to the monsoon and the harvest. You have nothing that I want."

"Think," Tyreas said. He straightened, his dark eyes focusing on me. "Think twice, Daya." He rose, unfolding himself until he seemed some dark thing, hovering over me. "I will go walking. That should give you time."

He slipped through the open door and was gone.

I stared at Pamati. She'd gone to sleep curled around her emerald as if it was something of infinite worth--and why shouldn't it be, seeming to come from her mother? Her mother, who was dead.

Child of my heart, I thought, trying to hold onto something, onto anything.

There were bruises under her eyes, where the tears had run.

Tyreas's words rose in my mind: *She will want for nothing.*

I rose, and stood on the threshold, staring at the splayed pattern on the ground: our hibiscus flower design, to bring good luck into our home. Someone, perhaps one of the neighbours' children, had already defaced it.

Think twice, Daya.

I stared at the intricate design, realising at last that Aname was dead and that nothing would bring her back. That, whatever Tyreas might say, Pamati was my child, as surely as if she'd slept in my womb.

I had exhausted my arguments; all I had left was the deep anger in my heart--a mother's anger at the thought her child might be, not only torn from her, but made utterly alien.

Tyreas was coming back, walking slowly on the dusty street. His gaze rested on me, and I held it, praying to the gods for the courage I could not find anywhere within myself.

"You have been thinking," he said, when he passed the threshold.

"Yes," I said. And, once again, "I will not let you take her."

Something crossed his eyes then: a cold, frightening emotion that was not human. "You are determined to stand against me? That is not wise, Daya."

"It's not about wisdom," I said, slowly, keeping my distance from him. "Or reason."

"Call it fear, then," Tyreas said. One of his hands had moved towards his belt; before I knew it, his fingers held a small dagger. The back of his hand was bleeding, too: in bringing the dagger up he had succeeded in wounding himself.

For Tyreas's kind, blood is the supreme weapon. I knew that if he could shed my blood and mingle it with his, I too would be lost--no, worse than lost, utterly destroyed.

There was a hollow in my stomach, but I paid it no heed. Slowly, carefully, I spoke the only words that would come, "You said you wanted to leave something behind. Something you had not destroyed."

He stood, silent, watching me, the blood from his wound slowly dripping onto his hand. I could still feel the coiled, cold anger in his stance.

"If you take her," I said, ignoring the fear that choked me, "if you turn her, she will be like you. She will destroy. She will not love, or leave anything of hers behind."

"She will find a child of her own," Tyreas said.

"And is this how you want the future to be?" I asked. The words were coming fast on the heels of one another now, eager to be spoken--I had to be fast, to forget who I was speaking to, and the consequences if I failed. "A chain of children without a heart, who'll take others' happiness and find none of their own?"

He said, "I came to give her a future."

"But it's not a life you offer her."

Tyreas said, "But you offer her nothing either, Daya. Nothing beyond your vaunted mother's love. Love cannot compensate everything. Will love silence the jeers of children, or put an end to the jati's contempt? Tell me, what future will she have here?"

"What I can give," I said, quickly, before I could dwell on his words.

"No," Tyreas said, shaking his head. "It does not suffice."

I knew that he was right. "I raised her," I said, raising a futile shield against him.

"And I," he said, "am her father." It was the first time I heard him speak the word "father".

I shook my head. "I'm not Aname. I won't sell my daughter away." Only after he had spoken did I realise Pamati was not my daughter, but my niece.

But Tyreas did not appear to notice my lapse. He was shaking his head as if to frighten away a persistent mosquito. I watched shadows move back and forth across his face, in the utter silence. At length he spoke. "And if I take her, and leave her as she is?"

"Leave her--"

"Do not share blood."

Taken aback, I said, "You wouldn't do it. She wouldn't be of any use to you."

"Do not presume to tell me what I will and will not do," Tyreas said, calmly, softly. "Did you think blood empathy was the only thing I could pass on?" The cold rage was back in his eyes, and in every feature of his face. "She is heir to my holdings and to my knowledge, and I will see neither go to waste."

I stood, silently. No words would come to me. I had not thought he was capable of bending.

He was still watching me. "Well?" he asked. "It is not an offer I will make twice."

"You would keep your word?" I asked, and saw the subtle way his eyes hardened. "I'm sorry," I said, more frightened now than I had been while he held the dagger in his hand. "Blood empathes don't lie."

Tyreas moved a fraction, and the sense of menace slowly abated. "Some do," he said. "I do not. Nor do I make promises I do not intend to keep."

It was a subtle way to remind me why he was here, but it did not affect me.

"I misjudged you," I said, at last, all I could bring myself to put forward in the way of an apology.

He was himself again, cold, aloof. "Some do."

I stared at him, weighing in my mind all the paths of Pamati's future, and came to a decision. "I'll let you take her," I said, feeling as if I were stepping off the edge of a cliff. "On one condition. Let me come with her."

Tyreas did not move for a while, staring at me. I was afraid he would read this as lack of trust, but at length he shrugged. "I care little about your presence. If you wish, as long as you promise not to run away with her, or to betray me in any other way. Do we have a bargain, then?"

I was falling, endlessly falling, and it did not matter any more. "Yes," I said. "We have a bargain." I did not say, as Aname did. But I thought it, all the same.

Pamati woke up some time after that, and found both of us standing by her bed. She rubbed at her eyes, yawning, and asked, "Auntie? Is something wrong?"

"No," I said, gently. "But it's time to leave. For both of us."

Eagerness filled her voice. "Has Mommy come?"

Tyreas moved, and came to kneel by her side, looking into her eyes. His face, once again, was expressionless. "No," he said. "But she made a bargain with me, once. I have come to take you and your aunt to a better life."

Pamati's face was set in a frown--the usual frown, for fear that the gift would be taken from her. Her eyes flicked to me, and I nodded.

Tyreas started talking to her in a low voice--I could not hear what he said, but Pamati was listening, entranced, no doubt of a place where the other children would not jeer, or throw stones at her.

I stood by the side of the pallet, silent. I thought of the three of us, walking away from the jati towards Tyreas's holdings, exchanging one kind of exclusion for another, trading the mockeries of the jati for the silent fear and loathing of Tyreas's servants. I thought of Aname, and of bargains, trying to convince myself I had made the only possible choice.

I prayed that, at the last, its fruit would not be too bitter, nor its weight too much to bear.

Aliette was shortlisted for the John W Campbell Award for Best Newcomer at the Hugos last year, and her short fiction continues to attract accolades the world over. Her first novel - *Servant of the Underworld* - is published this month by Angry Robot in the UK and Australia and later in the year in the US and Canada.

The Road

reviewed by richard whittaker



Directed by John Hillcoat, written by Cormac McCarthy and Joe Penhall

Starring: Viggo Mortensen, Kodi Smit-McPhee, Charlize Theron, Michael K. Williams, Robert Duvall

It's a little trite to say that such-and-such a book or so-and-so a novelist is unfilmable. When a film maker of the right caliber tries to take such a work and put their own imprimatur on such a work, sometimes something truly astonishing emerges. How would cinema be without *Blade Runner*, or *LA Confidential*, or the genre-bending genius of *Adaptation*? Arguably, poorer. Cormac McCarthy was placed into

that "unfilmable" category after the long, bloody and unsuccessful transition of *All The Pretty Horses* to the screen, but after the Coen brother knocked the ball out of the park with 2007's *No Country For Old Men*, Hollywood has been dragging the waters of his back catalog. First out of the starter's gate is his 2006 post-apocalyptic Pulitzer-winner *The Road* and, while far from unfilmable, it arguably deserves a better film than this.

It is undeniably a courageous film. After the unforgiveable mauling Hollywood handed to poor, undeserving *I Am Legend* in 2007, everyone should be expecting another high-budget, low-intellect debacle. However, *The Road* never flinches from its core idea, that the end of the world will be a horrific place. Something unknown and indescribable has happened to the Earth. The sky is ashen and grey, the small plants and all animals are dead, the trees are following them, and humanity is reduced to a scavenger race that is quickly turning to cannibalism. A nameless father (Mortensen) and his son (Smit-McPhee) are tracking down America's Appalachian Trail, heading towards the coast in search of the last warmth. Plagued by dreams of the boy's mother (Theron, seen only in flashback) and roaming bands of marauders, they are the anti-Mad Maxes. There's no speeding across the plains here, no metal boomerangs or gyroscope captains. Pushing a shopping cart full of their last few possessions, the only bullets they have are for their suicide pact if life gets much worse – preferably before the rapists and the carnivores catch them.

So, cheerful holiday fare, then.

Director Hillcoat should have been the man to wrangle this film to the screen perfectly. After all, he's twice wrestled Nick Cave's opaque prose into celluloid, with 1988's *Ghosts ... of the Civil Dead* and 2005's remarkable Outback drama *The Proposition*. However, he and McCarthy seem ill-served by Joe Penhall's script. A go-to writer for converting highly-praised novels into scripts, including Jake Arnott's *The Long Firm* and his widely-panned adaptation of Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*, here Penhall gives the audience very little to hang on to. Part of the problem is that his script is punishingly episodic. Without McCarthy's hyper-brutal prose to power the narrative along, it lacks the hypnotic power of the text. Instead, it's almost like a series of random encounter rolls in a desktop RPG ("You roll a six and a three. OK, there's a crazy old man in cardboard shoes, four cannibals in a mansion, and then someone steals your cart").

As a result, it would almost have been more honest to chapterize the action, which is still acceptable for this kind of grandiose art-house fare. At least that would impose some form of structure, but instead there's a certain meandering between events. Yes, that reflects the man's seemingly directionless search for the south and the coast, but it also means the film lacks tempo. Penhall also fails to make anything out of McCarthy's somewhat clunky denouement. Let's just say that fans of Frank Darabont's overblown adaptation of Stephen King's *The Mist* are now in good company.

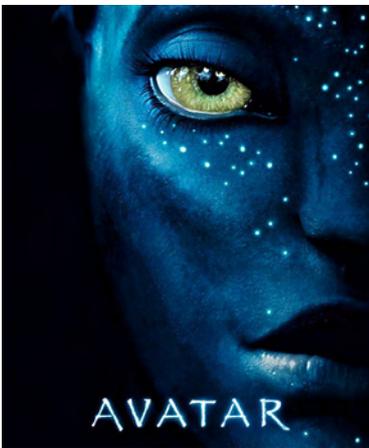
But a more core problem is that Mortensen, continuing a run of great characterizations, really doesn't have anything or anyone to bounce off. Smit-McPhee was obviously cast for his more-than-passing similarity to Theron yet, while he turns in a strong performance as the often catatonic boy, he's not there to give Mortensen the foil he deserves. While Javier Bardem and Josh Brolin rarely shared a scene in *No Country For Old Men*, they gave each other contrast. Instead, Mortensen is left contending with the mist and dust of the end of the world. When he does have more than a few seconds to work with another character, especially Robert Duvall's remarkable cameo as the old man, he produces an amazing performance, so enthralling that it's almost worth all the scenes of him carrying the boy around like a duffle bag. It's hard not to imagine how much better a film this would have been if he had ten minutes with the cart-stealing thief (Williams, AKA Omar Little from *The Wire*) instead of what feels frustratingly like thirty seconds.

Visually, it is arresting, and shows how much of abandoned Middle America now looks like Armageddon. Between the shuttering of Detroit, the devastation of New Orleans, and the economic evacuation of the farm belt, it's hard to imagine that this took any set dressing. Cinematographer Javier Aguirresarobe (widely estimated to be the best thing about *Twilight: New Moon*) sums up the global decay by picking a color palette that looks like a compost heap in winter. When there are hints of color, like blue flowers embroidered on a sun-bleached cushion in an abandoned house. But that's sort of like the rest of the movie. The odd threads of genius rarely emerge from a muted background.

This should be an emotionally brutalizing film. It is two hours with two characters who are starving to death in a hopeless world, whose most common discussions are about pulling the trigger on themselves. It's not a jaunt, but for a film of a book that stares straight down the barrel of oblivion and hopelessness, it's not excruciating either. Maybe that's what it really needed to be.

Avatar

reviewed by richard whittaker



Starring: Sam Worthington, Zoe Saldana, Sigourney Weaver, Stephen Lang, Michelle Rodriguez, Giovanni Ribisi
Written and directed by James Cameron

It's amazing how many nicknames *Avatar* picked up before anyone had seen it. *Ferngully* in space. *Smurfs* in space. And, of course, *Dances with Wolves*. In space. Now it's been released, the reality has become clear: That it is the blockbuster that has not only reminded a lot of people why they want to see films, but reminded them exactly why they want to see them in a cinema. *Avatar* is spectacular and a spectacle, a movie that explains exactly why director James Cameron

has been away from narrative features for 12 years.

Not that he's been completely idle: With three diving documentaries under his belt, he's scarcely been resting on his Oscar-strewn laurels. But *Avatar* has been to Cameron what *Schindler's List* was to Steven Spielberg, and what the tale of the Tuskegee Airmen continues to be for George Lucas: A near-mythical project that looked impossible to complete. Cameron sets his decade-in-the-making sci-fi epic on a fictional moon, Pandora, circling a gas giant in the very real Alpha Centauri A system. The marines are there to provide a little muscle for the Resources Development Administration corporation (call them Weyland Yutani *redux*) which is in search of a rare mineral called unobtainium. It's valuable because it levitates and also because it serves as a fantastic MacGuffin. The biggest supply of the mineral is under a village inhabited by the local bipeds, a warrior race of 12 foot tall blue aboriginals called the Na'vi. Since nuking them seems like a bad plan, and there's a lack of small pox-infected blankets, the corporation uses another tactic: Have humans remote-driving genetically engineered Na'vi/human hybrids called avatars

through neurological uplinks. Crippled marine Jake Sully (Worthington) is brought into the project to drive his dead twin's avatar, much to the chagrin of project manager and chief scientist Dr. Grace Augustine (Weaver) and joy of corporate weasel Parker Selfridge (Ribisi) and security chief Quaritch (Lang). They are convinced that having their own grunt in Na'vi clothing will make their job easier when they finally go in all guns blazing.

Actually, they spend most of the film on the sidelines as Sully goes native, and who can blame him. Cameron has created arguably the most immersive and complete alien environment ever seen in a movie. From the supple and agile Na'vi, all teeth and sinew, to the floating mountains and the array of carnivores, herbivores and big flying beasties that inhabit it, Pandora is one of the most beautifully conceived and lushly executed science fiction environments of recent years. It's also exceptional in that it breaks with the post-*Matrix* palette of greys and steel-blues that has made recent depictions of the future look so dull and tepid. Pandora is iridescent and organic, and it's as obvious why the crippled Sully falls in love with the place as he does with his Na'vi love interest, Neytiri (Saldana). After a seemingly endless slew of Earth-bound techno-thrillers passing as sci-fi, Cameron has revived the science fantasy film as metaphor by bringing together issues of ecological stability, native rights, corporate land grabs, and the perils of the military-industrial complex. He just happens to throw in flying lizards and power suits.

There is, of course, a cast, CGI-enhanced as much as the world is. Worthington is quickly becoming a name actor (in between this, last year's *Terminator: Salvation*, and the upcoming *Clash of the Titans* reboot, he is Hollywood's go-to action hero), and his tender-tough-guy routine as both wheelchair-bound Sully and his motion-capture-created avatar here won't slow that ascent. The same can be said for Saldana, straight out of *Star Trek* and heading towards the big-screen adaptation of Andy Diggler's cult comic *The Losers*. Yet it's Cameron's *Aliens* cohort Weaver that has the most recognizable face, and that leads to one of the strangest experiences the film provides. The first time her avatar smiles, it's unnerving, because it's not just a big blue alien. It's Sigourney Weaver as a big blue alien, as recognizable as she was in *Ghostbusters* or *The Year of Living Dangerously*. It's odd, but it also a sign of just how far the state of the digital art has been pushed by Cameron's commitment to the project.

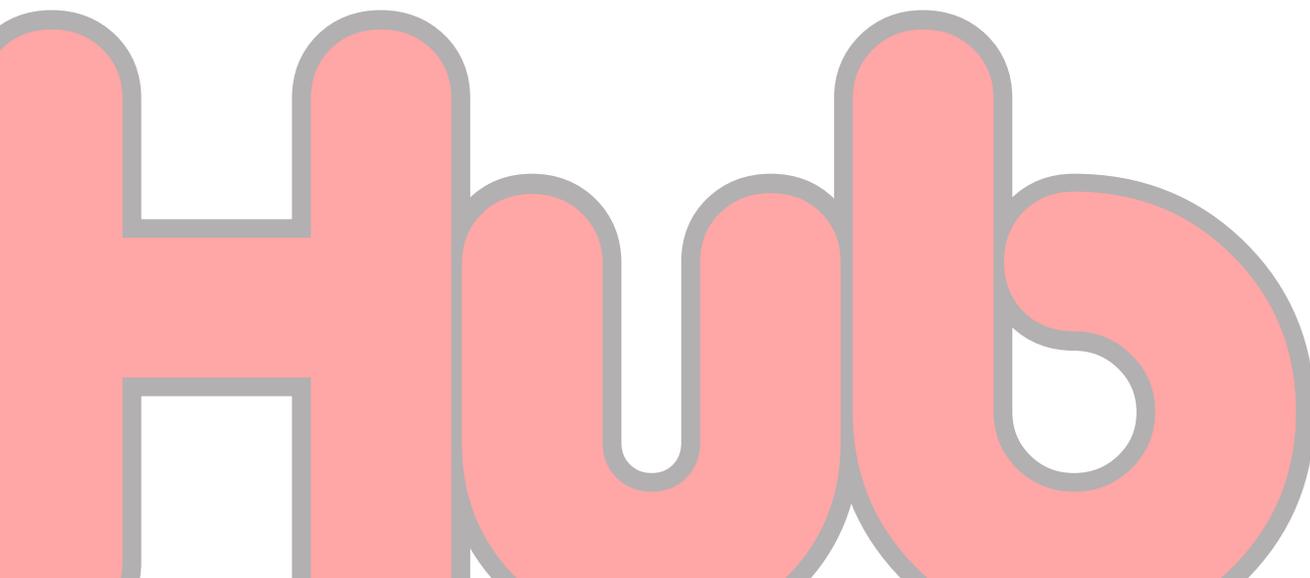
This whole film is a labor of love. It's no secret that Cameron's obsessive streak has been a flowing river for this movie, from his construction of a complete ecosystem to inhabit the moon to his determination to completely rebuild the technology for 3D cinema (much as he did for underwater filming for *The Abyss*). Adding that extra oomph to a flat projected image has a long history of gimmickry, from the fossil sticking out of the mud and out from the screen in *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, to the pick axe being thrown out of the screen in *My Bloody Valentine 3D*. Bar the odd exception, like the gorgeous *Coraline*, the technique has had little to do with artistry, but instead just shock value. *Avatar* does something different: Rather than shoving things out of the image, the 3D adds depth and weight, making the experience more immersive, more engrossing.

This is, bizarrely for how natural it looks, effectively a CGI animated movie, and even its detractors must admit that it opens the floodgates for photorealistic science-fantasy worlds in a way that has eluded filmmakers thus far. But the most striking moment may actually be one of the smallest: It's when Sully's shrunken legs, shattered by war, are shown for the first time. That Worthington, in real life built like a tighthed prop, can be imbued with the outer garment of disability so fluidly really points to the future of technology in serving the needs of the story, and not just grand set dressing.

While there is that emotional depth, the weak point is the story, which is best described as serviceable. The script is almost exactly what could be expected, although Cameron makes the terrible blunder of giving Worthington the most inessential voice-over narration since the original edit of *Blade Runner*. The story as a whole in many ways a remix of his long-standing narrative obsessions, of his mistrust of technology and corporations, his ambivalence to the military mind while still fetishizing the warrior code, and his depiction of strong women. Ribisi's Selfridge owes a huge debt to Paul Reiser's corporate creep Burke from *Aliens*, Lang's Quaritch is an older, more overtly malevolent re-invention of Michael Biehn's crazed

Lt. Coffey in *The Abyss*, and it's amazing that it's taken Cameron so long to hire Rodriguez, whose by-the-numbers portrayal of the tough latina pilot Chacon is *Aliens'* Vasquez sans smart gun.

Yet criticizing that script for being shallow and trope-riddled is almost irrelevant because Cameron is merely trying to get from point A to point B, while still being engaging. Is it occasionally mawkish? Yes, but it is to Cameron's credit that he is not afraid to have actual love scenes, rather than, say, Michael Bay's disturbing fixation on Megan Fox's ass. But it's also spectacular, grandiose, sweeping, and with an ecologically-aware and culturally-sensitive message that is so lacking from most product-placement-funded modern blockbusters. More importantly, it's his attempt to prove that cinema can still provide a real experience that even the best TV set can never provide – and he succeeds.



FEATURES

The Hub Awards 2009

with lee harris

Welcome to the third Annual Hub Awards. ish.

As with last year's star-studded ceremony, the Hub Awards are simply a chance for me (your genial host, Lee Harris) to reflect on some of the genre highlights of *my* year. (Important note: These are **my** choices, and do not reflect the views of other members of the editorial team at *Hub*). This list includes a number of "Best Of"s. These include categories such as "Best Horror Novel" and "Best Film". These aren't necessarily items that were published/released in 2009; rather, they are indicative of the best I have enjoyed this year – thus, there may be works that have been produced prior to 2009, but that (for whatever reason) I didn't get the opportunity to enjoy when they were first released.

Also, as I now work as part of the HarperCollins Angry Robot imprint, I am excluding Angry Robot books from these awards, even where I think they might win.

So... onto the Awards...

1. Best Science Fiction Novel
2. Best Horror Novel
3. Best Fantasy Novel
4. Best Comedy Novel
5. Best TV Tie-In Novel
6. Best Comedy (Audio)
7. Best Film
8. Best TV Series
9. Best Audio Drama
10. Best Comic or Collection
11. Best Writer
12. Best Collection (single author)
13. Best Anthology
14. Best Artist
15. Best Short Story (within Hub)
16. Best Short Story (non-Hub)
17. Best Podcast
18. Best Dead Tree Magazine (UK)
19. Best Website for Timewasting
20. Best Blog

1 Best Science Fiction Novel

A good year for SF – John Scalzi's *Zoe's Tale* was great fun, and I enjoyed Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* quite a lot, despite the Ben Eltonesque semi-preaching. The winning book will be appearing on all kinds of *Best of 2009* lists, I'm sure: Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* is one of the best SF novels I've read in years, and well worth your attention. Published Stateside only by Nightshade Books, this is definitely one to pick up.

2 Best Horror Novel

It's been a fairly decent year for horror. I finally got around to reading Conrad Williams' *One*, which I loved, and I also got around to taking Joseph DeLacey's *Meat* off my to-read pile, as I was one of the judging panel for the British Fantasy Society's "Best Newcomer" award. Joseph won, and quite right, too.

Meat was an impressive debut, and wins this award.

3 Best Fantasy Novel

Mike Carey's *The Naming of the Beasts* – the latest Felix castor novel, and the best in the series so far. You should read the series from the beginning (*The Devil You Know*) and book a week off work to enjoy them.

4 Best Comedy Novel

I read a couple of Christopher Moore novels earlier in the year, and they were pretty good, but Paul Magr's Brenda and Effie series continues to delight, however, and *Conjugal Rites* wins by a furlong. Though it did read a little like a "Best of", it's always great to be back in his Whitby.

5 Best TV Tie-In Novel

I read none this year. None! However, I am going to name a winner – Guy Adams' Torchwood novel *The House that Jack Built*. Why? Because he named a character after me. Yes, folks, I am that easily bought...

6 Best Comedy (Audio)

Finally got around to listening to series 2 and 3 of the fabulous radio series *Nebulous*. These win by a country mile. Graham Duff's writing is matched by his delivery, and Mark Gatiss has rarely been better! If you've never heard *Nebulous*, buy series 1 now – wonderful, daft, silly, essential stuff!

7 Best Film

A good year for films. At the time of writing I've yet to see *Avatar*, but nevertheless it's been a strong year. *Coraline* was as wonderful as I hoped it would be. *Monsters Vs Aliens* was enormous fun, and *District 9* was impressive – and came a very close second. The winner? JJ Abrams' updated *Star Trek*. Not just a good *Trek* film, but a good film in its own right – it had a couple of clunky moments (red matter? Really? Spock's "this is the plot of the film" mind-meld with Kirk?) but the great parts massively outweighed the nitpickers' nitpickings.

8 Best TV Series

Not *Who*, as the one-offs didn't count as a series for me. *BSG* was pretty damn great, but my choice is going to be *Torchwood: Children of Men*. Partly because it was such a bloody well-told story, and partly because the death of one of the main characters pissed off so many people.

9 Best Audio Drama

I've listened to far too little audio drama this year to possibly award a vote, so this category gets no winner this year.

10 Best Comic or Collection

This is a tricky one – some absolutely wonderful reads this year, and some disappointing. Warren Ellis won last year for *Freakangels* and I decided to check out his *Gravel* when he announced the film rights had been sold. *Gravel* turned out to be the disappointment of the year – a poorly-plotted magical murder-of-the-month starring a sub-par Constantine wannabe.

Geoff Johns' run on *Green Lantern* is a pleasure I've missed until this year, when I picked up all the trades from *Rebirth* onwards. Really good storytelling. His co-authorship of *Justice League: The Lightning Saga* with the always-excellent Brad Meltzer was also superb stuff. Kudos to Paul Cornell for his treatment of the brilliantly-named Captain Midlands in the criminally short-lived *Captain Britain and MI3* – nice to see a superhero go bad. The opposite happened to the superhero at the heart of Ed Brubaker's brilliant *Incognito* which almost took this award, as did Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning's *Nova*. Brian Michael Bendis almost won with the *Daredevil Omnibus volume 2* – a fantastic 25 issue run (and his final issues) in an award-winning

series (and deservedly so). The winner, though, is Mark Millar's brilliant *1985*. Set in that year, it tells the tale of a little boy who lives in our world – the world where Marvel superheroes and supervillains exist only on the pages of comic books. It's the tale of what happens when the real world is infected by the imaginary. Lovely, lovely stuff.

11 Best Writer

Oh, I do so hate having to do this award, as it is always so difficult to decide between the different forms of fiction I consume (novels, comics, audio, film, television, short stories). This year I am plumping for the comics writer who has given me the most pleasure over the last couple of years - Brian Michael Bendis. He writes great dialogue, he plots well, and he writes brilliant scenes even with little or no dialogue. His run on *Daredevil* was arguably as good, or better, than Frank Miller's, and everything he touches turns to gold. His creator-owned (with Michael Avon Oeming) series *Powers* is among the best superhero cop series you will ever read (beating Moore's *Top Ten* and Ed Brubaker's brilliant *Gotham Central*).

12 Best Collection (Single Author)

Last year's winner was Rob Shearman for his debut collection, *Tiny Voices*. This year he wins again for his follow up: *Love Songs for the Shy and Cynical*. It's at least as good as his first collection, and contains the (deliberately) funniest love scene you will ever have read!

Paul Meloy's *Islington Crocodiles* and Ian Whates' *Gift of Joy* were also contenders this year.

13 Best Anthology

You will only have seen this if you are a member of the British Fantasy Society – *The British Fantasy Society Yearbook* wins this year, containing stories from some of the best writers around, including the aforementioned Robert Shearman, Kaaron Warren, Mark Morris and Christopher Fowler. What's more, it's free if you're a BFS member!

14 Best Artist

A great year for art. My favourite is Jon Foster's brilliant cover for Cherie Priest's acclaimed *Boneshaker* – one of my Christmas presents, and one which I am looking forward to immensely.

15 Best Short Story (within Hub)

The Bohemian of the Arbat by Sarah Pinborough (issue 91). A great story, brilliantly told by a writer who is going to be absolutely huge this year! If we had a "Best Novella" category, she would have also taken this with her astonishing *The Language of Dying* (PS Publishing)

16 Best Short Story (non-Hub)

Rob Shearman's *Roadkill* (from *Love Songs for the Shy and Cynical*). A story of love, lust, romantic fumbblings and the misery of loneliness. Beautiful, just beautiful.

17 Best Podcast

Mur Lafferty's *I Should Be Writing* continues to inspire, and wins for the second year running. Would-be writers should listen to it, and would-be podcasters should check out *Tricks of the Podcast Masters* by her and Rob Walch.

18 Best Dead Tree Magazine (UK)

SFX almost got it this year, but the award goes to *Black Static* for publishing some of the best horror short fiction around.

19 Best Website for Timewasting

SF Signal is the clear winner here. Frequently updated, and always interesting – if you only have time for one SF website, bookmark *Angry Robot's* (commercial over) – if you have time for two, *SFSignal.com* should

be your site of choice.

Note: Twitter almost won, but as I use desktop clients, rather than the website itself, I didn't allow its inclusion.

20 Best Blog

I've been introduced to a few new blogs this year, including Hugo award-winner Cheryl Morgan's site (www.Cheryl-Morgan.com) which is always interesting. Neil Gaiman's journal continues to impress, but for the second year running, *Whatever* is the winner – John Scalzi's blog is often contentious, and I often disagree with his views, but it's **always** a good read. It can be found at whatever.scalzi.com.

A little note on awards.

Last year, John Scalzi won the *Hub* Best Sci Fi award with two books set in his *Old Man's War* series. This year, another of those titles was shortlisted for a Hugo.

The Dark Knight was *Hub*'s choice for Best Film. It went on to win the Hugo for Best Drama (long form).

Doctor Horrible's Sing-a-long Blog won for Best TV Series (despite it never having appeared on TV). It went on to win the Hugo for Best Drama (short form).

Best Collection in the *Hub* Awards went to Robert Shearman's *Tiny Deaths*. It went on to win the equivalent World Fantasy Award.

The Best Anthology went to Stephen Jones' *Best New Horror 20*. The follow-up collection (*BNH 21*) won the Best Anthology British Fantasy Award.

Best Artist was awarded to Vincent Chong, who then went on to win the same award at the British Fantasy Awards.

So, if anyone would like to throw some cash my way in consideration of being winners in next year's *Hub* awards, I'm always open to negotiations. I probably won't accept, and it's no guarantee of a win at the Hugos, World Fantasy or British Fantasy Awards, but hey – it's worth a try, right? ;-)



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