

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

PUBLISHER
LEE HARRIS

MANAGING EDITOR
ALASDAIR STUART

COMMISSIONING EDITOR
ELLEN J ALLEN

REVIEWS EDITOR
PHIL LUNT

ISSUE 113 · 28TH FEB 2010

CONTENTS:

- FICTION:** *Fragments of an Alternating Current* by Derek Molata
- REVIEW:** *Pontypool*
 The Last Man
- FEATURE:** *What Is An Independent Comic And What Does It Matter?* by Stacey Whittle



EDITORIAL:

by lee harris

Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror on television has rarely been more popular than it is right now. In the US we've been enjoying *Caprica* and *Warehouse 13*, while *Flash Forward* and *Lost* continue to make the transatlantic journey unscathed, and in the UK tonight we'll all be glued to our screens in front of the last episode of the second series of *Being Human*. Last week's show was not only a great series episode - it was arguably the best hour of television so far this year, and it'll be frustrating to have to wait nearly a year for series three. Until then, though, we have *Doctor Who* starting at Easter, with a new showrunner and a new leading man (and an episode penned by the creator of *Being Human*, Toby Whithouse).

And for those *Doctor Who* fans among you, to coincide with the start of the new series, we have an Easter *Doctor Who* special, guest-edited by Scott Harrison, and with contributions from a number of *Who* alumni, including Paul Cornell, Joe Lidster and Andrew Cartmel.

It's a good time to be a genre fan.

FICTION

Fragments of an Alternating Current

by derek molata

The girl walked up to his sweat-smeared window from the alley off 45th Street with all the chin-high swagger of a princess, her white feathered coat shimmering under the hotel's neon sign. She spoke to him with copper-flecked blinks and a tongue that slurred the simplest of words. He knew what she was there for, this little coppertongue grinder, princess of nothing.

But Dumpty was hungry; he wanted a piece of her kingdom.

It would be an easy barter. She wanted the copper; he wanted some flesh. She had that smackskin air about her, like she knew what the fuck was down. She'd give it up without thinking about who was probing her as long as she got wires to clamp down on. This was Dumpty's chance and he knew it. The *Waverly* hadn't been converted completely to sewagecell power yet, but it was coming any time now. So why not prong a slapskin on the house? His boss would never find out. Dumpty'd fudged the books before.

Besides, he wasn't after a quick dip session, not with these young girls that flitted about the hive. They triggered something within him, a longing to fill a quicksand void that had smothered some forgotten memory. All he wanted was to wrap his arms around them, to bury his face in their hair and inhale, that maybe the touch of their flesh or the scent of innocence would rekindle his memory. Spark recollection--even for a fragmented moment.

The power fluxed in the hotel, sending a reluctant sigh through the building and setting all the lights into a cardiac flicker. It shook Dumpty from his trance. The girl stood in front of him, eyes copper-bright and hungry.

--*You one of those slapskins?* Dumpty asked from behind his wall of plastiglass. He scrunched his blistered lips together.

--*Nah*, she said, chewing on a glob of gum.

He scratched his shaved head with dirt-caked fingernails. His hopeful expression deflated. Dumpty stared at her through the plastiglass, her image diffused by a nimbus of grey-pink neon that haloed her slender form, illuminated by the sign of *Hotel Waverly* flickering above. The alley was cold. Rain spilled from the black-dome sky. She shivered.

--*Then what you want the room for?* Dumpty asked.

--*Does it matter?*

--*Yeah, it fuckin' matters.*

--*I need a place to sleep. What else would I need a room for?* the girl said. She mushroomed a lime-green bubble.

It had become difficult to obtain an old-style hotel room anywhere within the hive-pit. The corporate hotels had switched to using direct current sewagecells to power their appliances, even the power outlets. The panicky government had started a crackdown on hotels using alternating current to try and shut down the grinders.

You had to dig to find a hotel that used alternating current. You had to go where pretty young girls shouldn't. You had to do favours. Sometimes.

He studied her.

She sighed. --*So, what you need, man?*

Dumpty laughed. --*I need lots.*

She nodded agreement. His muscle shirt was slick with grease and sweat, barely concealing his

protuberant bulk.

--150 creds plus you and I spend some time when I get off shift. He licked his recessed gums and smiled.

--All I got is 100 creds...and I'll fuck you skinny.

--Done like dinner.

--Asshole.

She passed her forearm through the cobalt-blue light of the debit-scanner. A bell tolled and the hotel's cage door groaned. She shoved it the rest of the way open and stepped into the humid air of the hotel lobby--a claustrophobic hallway wallpapered with escort ads. Above the entrance, a small exit sign bathed the walls in ambient red light.

--Here's your keycard for Room 808, Dumpty said. --I'll be up later...probably 'round 4.

He tossed the keycard into a dented metal bowl sitting on the counter.

--What's your name? Dumpty asked.

--Cherry Clusterfuck.

--What kind of a name is that?

--It's just a name, man. Just a name...

Truth was...Cherry never used her real name. Even Mika didn't know it. She'd left that life behind a long time ago, left all the power-mongering shit of parents who liked to make decisions for her. They didn't care who she was, rather what she was. Her 'rents liked to paint her dreams, but she trashed their canvas and split for the hive. Erased her name from memory. That wasn't who she was anymore.

Instead she used Cherry Clusterfuck. For some reason it had stuck like seed; the name of some bukkake porn star from Shibuya. Had a certain ring, like that nurse from Cleveland from one of her favourite books. And that was something else she'd left behind--books. She yearned to sit in a vast library and just disappear, but she had to leave the crust to do that trick, get down in the hive-pit where libraries were filled with nothing more than narcotics or weapons or smackskins, those girls--like Cherry--who'd left something good for something better, only to be perma-fucked by a cold vulgar reality. Cherry learned how to adapt, how to get food or clothes or a grind-hit if she needed one. A bat of lash or lick of lips worked wonders. It was all she had to her name, a clusterfuck of possibility.

Cherry grabbed the keycard, turned, and bounded up the stairs. Pigtails bobbed. No elevator. But Cherry didn't want to rush. No need as long as she was out of this derelict by 4 a.m.; last thing she needed was a confrontation with that retroviral freak.

She wished Mika was with her. Mika was a photo-flash of Cherry a year ago. Still holding onto what life she thought was slipping away; one foot down, the other in the air ready to plunge. The concrete always looked more polished on the other side of the wall. Cherry now knew it was a play on perception, like a holographic butterfly--all a flit of brilliance from a distance, yet up close everything you thought it was dissolved into the spectrum.

Mika would fall soon. When she did, Cherry hoped to be there to catch her.

When Cherry reached the eighth floor, she flung open the stairway door. Shadows lanced across peeling wallpaper as she navigated the hallway. The hum of current tickled her ears, made her excited. Made her wet with anticipation. She swiped her keycard through the lock and her door clicked open.

The room was perfect. Complete retro verve. Disco was back, baby.

Cherry molt her white-feathered coat, ran towards the bed and leaped onto it. The mattress felt as hard as cardboard on concrete. That was all right though. Who'd be sleeping anyway?

She sat on the edge of the bed and hiked off knee-high black boots. Thick shag--soft in spots, crusty in others--carpeted the floor. A rabbit-eared television sat on a particleboard table.

--Fuck, she said. --Not tonight, not now.

She sprung from the bed. The television had already been modified by the government crackerheads. No power cord. Instead, a cylindrical Type-K sewagecell protruded from its side.

Mika's contact told them the *Waverly* hadn't been switched to direct current. Jackalope had come through before. There must be a coppertongue somewhere.

Cherry scanned the room. The outlets wouldn't help, even if they hadn't been converted. She didn't

have the right conduit adapter, no power cord. Her Twister wouldn't work with direct current. She needed a Screamer for that. Screammers were expensive. Screammers were for hardcores. Screammers killed.

She spun around, inspecting the room. Two small windows with ratty curtains provided eyes to the rain-black world outside. The washroom vanity was rimmed in green neon, which breathed its miasmic haze into the room.

Cherry brushed her forehead with the back of a hand and cracked her gum. On the bedside table sat a small ceramic lamp, Asian script whorled under its glaze. Once white, its shade was now stained with the nicotine-sallow of too many smoke-filled nights.

But there was a cord.

A clear amber cord slithered from under the lamp and coiled onto the shag underneath. Cherry crouched and twisted her head under the table. An outlet greeted her. She reefed the lamp's plug from the outlet. The lamp winked out.

Cherry turned the lamp onto its side, knocking a cheap glass ashtray onto the floor. The cord felt cool as she wrapped it around her hand. A forceful yank and the cord freed itself from the base of the lamp. Two pieces of wire stuck out from the cord--a coppertongue with all the pleasure-poison she'd ever need. Cherry stared at it, smiling.

She tossed the amber cord onto the bed, fetched one of her boots from the floor, and held it under her arm. The three-inch heel twisted off effortlessly. Her face lit up from the blinking red and blue LEDs that lined the inside of the heel in a wide circle. A hole remained in the middle from where the male connector from the boot screwed in. Cherry tossed the boot and heel onto the bed.

A pulse rang from inside her pink PVC shoulder bag. She popped the dome and reached in, withdrawing a metallic-blue earphone. Cherry slid it into her ear canal and tapped its side.

--Yeah? she asked.

--How's it goin', girl?

--Hey, Mika! It's goin' better than expected. Got the room at the Waverly.

--Wow! What'd you do to get it?

The sounds of chatter and the clinking of cutlery blended with Mika's ecstatic voice.

--Nothin'. 100 creds and I lied to the grease monkey cocksucker at the counter that I'd fuck him later.

Mika laughed. --Nice. Sorry, hun, but I'm not goin' to be able to get outta here early. Crust crowds are motherfuckers... order so much food and then leave it on their plates like spoiled children. But they got the cred to tip so I gotta stay with a smile. Wish I could leave right now but I have to save up for that new adapter.

Cherry frowned.

--Mika, get your ass over here! someone from inside Cherry's earphone bellowed.

--Yeah, yeah, hold on, Alfonso, Mika said. --Hey, girl, I gotta bounce. My dickhead boss is callin' me.

--All right...

--Hey, don't worry, I'll do my best to blow this joint and hook up with ya.

--Yeah, seriously?

--Fuck yeah. I could so use a grind tonight...besides, I picked up a new jaw brace today down at Su Su's Sook. Gotta break it in.

--Sweet shit, sistah. But hey, how you gonna run the gauntlet at this hour?

--No, worries. I'll meet up with Jackalope before headin' into the pit. He's been up on the rind all day scoring syncane off some rich bitch.

--Well be careful, Jackalope can be --

--Mika, now!

--You better go, Cherry said. --You need that job, Mika.

--Yeah, I know. Later, hon. Don't grind yourself silly...and save some of that coppertongue for me, right.

--Don't worry 'bout me. I'm not the one savin' for a Screamer.

--Yeah, yeah. Miss me.

The line went dead as she pulled it out of her ear, a yellow light fading on the earphone as she tossed it onto the bedside table. Cherry worried about Mika when she ran with Jackalope. He was a seedy

motherfucker, quiet and reserved. Something rubbed off of him that she didn't like, something she couldn't place. Tainted vibes.

At least she knew Mika could take care of herself. Cherry had learned that when Mika broke her nose because she'd hit on her man at some hive hole. Cherry'd seen him through the smoke-dusted air. He was a cleanboy. Some dude from the crust with Daddy's money and burning pockets. He'd stood out in the crowd so much he fucking glinted.

So Cherry had made her move and slithered across the club, ready to work her hoodoo thang. It would've been so easy if Mika hadn't intervened. Cherry never saw the cleangirl at the bar, ordering a round of vodka tonics. Mika had come in from behind and tapped her on the shoulder. Cherry'd been in this situation before, so she tensed and whirled, taking a step back. But Mika was fast and pounced, pushing Cherry to the floor. It was cold and wet and stank of stale beer and vomit. Before Cherry could raise her hands, her nose cracked from the impact of Mika's elbow, blood washing across Cherry's vision.

That was the last time she saw the cleanboy.

Yet Mika came back, looking for the fallen girl named Cherry Clusterfuck who'd tried hitting on her boyfriend. But she didn't come to finish something; she came to learn from the grinder with the copper-tinged eyes. Mika wanted a taste. Wanted to know what'd happened to Cherry, what made her fall. She could tell that Cherry had been a crust dweller from the glint in her eyes. But Cherry never told her how bitter the hive-pit really was.

There was no honey inside; it was hollow to the core.

Cherry dumped the contents of her shoulder bag onto the bed and unscrewed her lipstick container. The stick was a hollow tube, and two holes were drilled into the head. She took the cord off the bed and threaded it through the tube, snaking the copper wire into each hole, and clamping it tight with an internal screw. Leaving the lipstick case on the bed, she screwed the tube into the blinking heel of her boot, tightening it as snug as she could.

She shuffled through the pile of items on the bed and pulled out a metal sleeping retainer, a circular eye-shadow case, and a small, black eyeliner stick. She fastened the eye-shadow case to the side of the heel, turning it with solid clicks until she could turn it no more. The eyeliner stick threaded easily into the front of the retainer, and the other half screwed into a small hole on the opposite side of the heel.

The pink rubber pads of the retainer prevented her from biting too hard and cracking her teeth if things got too vibed.

Cherry went into the washroom, leaving the Twister unit on the bedside table. She drew open the plastic shower curtain. Rust stains circled the drain. Cockroaches mottled the tiled wall like television static. Cherry turned on the water and stripped. Popping open the lid of the toilet, she spat her gum into the bowl. Sat down and took a piss. The last thing she wanted was a full bladder before grinding. She wiped, stood, and flushed. Let her pigtails unfurl and fall across her shoulders, tossing the elastics into the sink.

Steam rolled from within the shower stall, hugging the ceiling. She stepped into the water. The anodyne shower pelted her back, soaked her hair. Grinding was not the same dry. One had to be soaked in order to really enjoy it, to feel the hum of current prickle your skin, raise the tiny hairs. You could see everything when charged, right down to the pores of your skin.

When the steam obscured the roaches she shut off the water, stepped out and entered the main room. Still dripping, Cherry turned on the television. The tube sent a flickering glow across the room. Better to have something to watch when grinding, better than staring at the ceiling.

Cherry shoved her stuff off the bed with a sweep of her arm. Drops of water tumbled from soaked hair and glistened on her skin from the flashing television images. She scrambled onto the bed and grabbed the Twister unit. Clutching the plug of the amber cord, she leaned over the edge of the bed and fumbled for the outlet.

She slid the plug in. The Twister unit hummed to life, a quiet drone of current.

Sprawling spread-eagled across the bed Cherry pushed the retainer into her mouth. Bit down onto the soft pink pads. The flat end of the heel sat just below her nose, the rounded edge hung below her chin. The cord coiled around her stomach, curled across a leg, and then dipped off the bed.

She reached up and turned the eye-shadow dial one click. The Twister jolted and continued on with its

beehive drone. The current flowed into her mouth and through her body like a tidal wave of ecstasy, the Twister regulating her pleasure.

Cherry turned the dial again. It clicked and her elbows pressed into the soft flesh of her sides. Toes curled and fists clenched. Her current-laced mind hummed.

After a few minutes, the dial clicked again and a reverberating hand withdrew. Her body lurched and skin prickled as if thousands of roaches danced upon it in an electric tango. The Twister hummed louder, her teeth taut against the pink padding, her jaw aching. Her back arched, dark nipples pointed towards the plaster-swirled ceiling.

The television broadcasted the evening news across her skin.

News stories about some militant group taking a school hostage. Images of bloody children smeared the television. Guns. Guns. Guns. Bloodshed. The children were dying. Stretchers of them. All the militants were massacred by the army. There were no survivors. Even the weeping parents looked dead. Then people shopping in crust-side malls with neon rainbows and fashion shows. A new megastore was opening. Good times. Commerce smiled for everyone. Flash to a hospital. Elderly dotted the screen, the aging fruit of an old era, ripe with knowledge but bitter with jaded dreams that never blossomed. Advertisements rang with slogans, *Sign up for memory extension, the new way to go on living*. Enter a piece of synthetic heaven the size of a fucking hangnail. Like that was living.

No. *This was fucking living*.

Corrupt images danced across Cherry's skin as her mind grew numb, eyeballs rolled back into her head. She'd never been past three clicks on the dial before. Three had always been enough. She'd vibed for hours with that setting, lost in the pulsing currents. She didn't know why she had to push herself tonight, why she wanted to grind harder than before. Mika had copper-kissed at four, but only once. Cherry pulled the plug while Mika shattered three teeth, bleeding from the nose and ears.

Pussy-fried.

Mika would be proud of Cherry right now. *Kiss the current*, she'd say. But Cherry knew Mika didn't need all this shit. She had everything on the crust. From what Mika had told her, her parents wanted her to be anything *she* dreamed, and not some flesh-puppet to their own machinations. Mika had the honey already. Sometimes Cherry wished she'd never shown Mika how to do the coppertongue grind.

But as much as Cherry didn't want Mika to fall, a sick yearning deep in her gut secretly wanted her to take that final step. She reminded Cherry of better times, before she hopped the wall and realized the concrete on the other side was pitted, full of holes you could fall in and disappear.

Cherry reached for the dial. Just one more click, that's all she wanted. But her arm, in the throes of its current-induced dance, spun the dial.

Click-click-click-click-click--

The clicking of the dial blended into the whirl of current until the eye-shadow container popped from the side of the Twister unit and rolled off the bed and into the sea of shadow-frothed shag. Her eyes bulged. Spasms wracked her body. Legs floundered and arms flailed. The pink rubber guard compressed under the strength of her jaw. Teeth burst and splintered.

Steam began to rise from her skin. Flesh curdled under the intense vibe overload. The lights along the heel winked out as it began to melt. Black rubber smouldered onto her cheeks and down her neck. Fingernails dug into her palms, blood soaking the cigarette-burned duvet.

The bathroom light flickered. Neon burst into a lime-bright incandescence. The television shouted its news into the air as the tube exploded. The drone of the Twister unit ricocheted off the walls.

Cherry's torpid mind barely registered the sizzle of burning flesh or the stench of burning hair. The Twister unit coated her face and neck in a black facial of tar and plastic. The power cord stripped to its coppertongue roots. Fierce pain lanced across her body, myriad razor blades dicing her innards.

She tried to scream. Forced her mouth open, stretching the burning tar into ribbons.

Yet all that came out of it was a twirl of smoke.

And the only voice that came in reply was the incessant drone of a current

...clusterfuck.

Darkness came at 2:17 a.m., a rapid descent like a magician snapping a black cape over a pigeon's cage. It startled Dumpty. He'd been sitting in his humid cube, pondering. The girl who'd called herself Cherry looked so familiar. He swore he knew her but couldn't put face to memory. He struggled to lift his cancerous bulk from the chair, knocking over a forest of empty glasses. His senses were off kilter. Confused.

The sonic churn of emergency generators coming to life from the bowels of the hotel filled the room, shaking the foundation and causing bits of plaster to rain from the ceiling. His monitor blinked, scrolling magenta text across the screen. A pair of dim emergency lights awoke, causing the broken glasses at Dumpty's feet to glitter like shattered diodes.

He sat down and ran his fingers over the keyboard, checking for the cause of the outage. Dumpty had a suspicion but he wanted to run some diagnostics to be sure. Three of the twelve stories had already been switched to sewagecells. They were fine, still illuminating the hallways and rooms so the *Waverly's* guests could continue with their perversions. The rest of the floors were registering emergency power, except for the eighth.

Suspicion confirmed.

--*Bloody fuck*, Dumpty said, picking up a utility belt lined with assorted tools and flashlights. He tossed the belt over his shoulder. It'd been a long time since he wore it around his waist. He opened a drawer and took out a Taser for protection, never knowing who he could bump into within the dark confines of the hotel. And if the girl gave him trouble then he'd juice her too, though she'd probably like it.

Dumpty left the protection of his cube and stepped into the narrow lobby. He had to be quick. The emergency generators didn't create enough power to run the magnalocks on the front gate, so any hive-pit degenerate could walk right in. Not to mention the government crackerheads. If Dumpty didn't get the girl off the electrical feed soon they'd be coming down here quicker than a cheap fuck and locking the place down.

Dumpty grunted and shambled faster to the open stairwell, cursing the copper-eyed girl with every heave of breath. He never asked for this. Not once. He used to live crust-side for fuck's sake.

He used to be a cleanone.

As he stepped onto the stairs he remembered his house, over in the sprawl of the plastigen district. Copper patina rooftops curved like wings towards the smog-compressed horizon. It was a short walk to the tube and took him only twenty minutes to get to work. And there was a park near his home. *A park!* That was unheard of in most of the sprawl districts, but he was doing well at Shumacher & Blight as an account executive and could afford a better loft. He walked past the park every morning on the way to the tube, the chemo-humid air filled with the laughter of children.

Second floor. He scanned the dark corners with each step, the red emergency lights shining down like the sun through the melanoma nets that laced the crust-side skies. They reminded him of the beach and of warmer times. The heat of a body laying close every night, sweating under the sheets, the air conditioning not quite able to keep up with the scalding surface outside.

He had been married. It was painful to remember. Not the marriage but the loss of it, how it fell apart slowly at first, like sand in an hour glass. And then it shattered, and all of the hurt and pain ruptured in one moment of finality. He missed Lauren. He missed how she smelled when she got out of the shower, her hair wet and scented with lavender and vanilla; scents he hadn't smelled in a very long time. And her lips--they were thin, yet as full as the moon when she smiled. And he missed how she whispered his name while they hugged along the seascape walk.

Victor.

Third floor and he thought something moved in his peripheral. Dumpty shined the flashlight and a mouse scurried away from the glaring eye of brightness. Shook his head and kept moving.

Dumpty was slender then, before he fell. They had barbecues when the sky was clear and dinner out when the rains came, sizzling against the patina rooftops to create rainbows of ochre and violet. Lauren and Victor would sit under the skylights and drink top-shelf synthetic wines, fucking under the washed out canvas of sky. One day she refused to drink, told him they were expecting.

Fourth floor. Dumpty's breathing quickened. He wiped his brow. Sweat. And then he was standing in the labour and delivery room, holding onto one of Lauren's legs, a nurse holding the other. Push. *Push,*

Lauren. A baby's wail filled the small, sterile-white room. It was a girl.

Dumpty closed his eyes. Her name...her name was Sunshine. Sunshine Daydream so she would never be restricted by the weight of a dying planet, but could aspire to dream amongst the stars.

She grew fast, with Lauren's black hair and eyes as blue as a virgin sky.

Fifth floor. It was amazing how fast something so ripe and brimming with future possibilities could turn sour and rot away. He remembered the hours at work, the promotions. Late nights at the office. When he came home the sun had already been snuffed out by nightfall. Lauren said she understood, but Dumpty explained again while she slept. Said he was doing it for their family so they would never have to worry about downsizing, or whether or not Sunshine would go to an Ivy League school. There would always be enough cred. Always.

Sixth floor came with a tightening of his chest. His breathing intensified. White flecks of spittle escaped with each heave. Dumpty recalled screaming for help, a mad panic in his voice. Sunshine was on the floor of the restaurant. It was her fourteenth birthday and he'd decided to take her out for a father-daughter dinner, so they went to Limelight, a trendy fusion eatery on the lower east side, the ceiling ribbed in neon and electric pink fish tanks. And here his beautiful girl was in spasms and there wasn't anything he could do, her mahi-mahi erupting from her mouth, foaming. Everyone in the fucking place froze, watching with half-full mouths of food and mumbles. A waiter, *Rob, Ron, Rick*, came running over. Said she was having a reaction...*like no fucking shit, asshole*. He continued to rabbit on about histamine poisoning in the fish, scombroid something-or-other, but this severe of a reaction was impossible, that it's usually just like food poisoning. And all the while his daughter with dreams of kissing stars was dying.

The doctors said it was a severe epileptic attack. She had choked on her tongue, swallowed it under an electric pink sky. Dumpty counted on Lauren to get through the tragedy, they'd need each other more than ever, but she was ocean-cold with icicle eyes. They were never the same again and quickly drifted apart.

Dumpty withdrew into himself with memories of sunny days and daydreams.

Seventh floor. He felt his face lighting up, flushing with heat. He'd let himself go, trying to eat himself into forgetting the past, obliterating any memory of a family he'd never see again. A daughter he'd never again hug or laugh with. Or see her wedding.

Lauren said she fucking understood, about the hours at work, about the panic at the restaurant, the frozen reactions from the patrons. If he could have switched places with Sunshine he would have.

Then after a few months, Dumpty came home early one day with flowers in hand. Real ones, blinded into thinking a few organics would make up for years of neglect. But she was standing outside, bags packed. She left without saying goodbye. No hug, no it's been real...nothing.

That was the last time he saw Lauren.

Soon after Dumpty locked himself in his home and stopped showing up at the office. He'd stare out from Sunshine's room at the park and watched the children run around, laughing and playing. With him not working, the cred soon dried up and the bank foreclosed on the mortgage. He had nothing. So he did the only thing he could.

He had a great fall into the underbelly, broken.

The eighth floor brought on crushing chest pain, as if the building itself were sitting on him. Dumpty leaned against the cool skin of the door. He'd known for a while that he was dying. Tumours riddled his body. Large pustular growths sprouted from his flesh like burned mushrooms. He didn't know what caused them, but living down in the hive-pit anything was possible. Dumpty figured it was nothing more than some divine retribution for failing his daughter and family. He accepted that.

After a few deep breaths to replenish his bloodstream with oxygen and clear the spiders from his vision, he opened the door and shined the light down the hallway. The eighth floor had no power at all, emergency or otherwise. As he started down the hallway towards room 808 he readied the Taser.

Someone screamed from one room, muffled moans from another. Seemed that the lack of light didn't deter the usual activities. When Dumpty reached his destination, he knocked on the door with a soft rapt.

--*Cherry, it's the front desk. You fuckin' alive in there? We got business to deal with.*

No reply came from within. He swiped his master keycard and the lock chimed. Opened the door, its

metal handle warm against his clammy hands.

The inside was ripe with heat and the stench of burnt ozone, the unmistakable pong of burning hair and flesh. The sharp tang of heated metal mixed with tar and rubber bi-products singed his nostrils and made him cover his mouth and nose, dropping the Taser gun. A pewter haze spilled into the hallway from inside, swirling around Dumpty's boots.

He walked inside, squinting to make out objects.

The electric churn of current overflowing into the air greeted his ears, that soft thrum that teased the senses with its almost silent ability to pleasure and kill. He shined the flashlight around the room, trying to find Cherry Clusterfuck.

And there she was...on the bed. The light flitted over her tangerine toes, up glistening legs to her naked chest, then her face and--

Dumpty gasped. She lay there, shaking in tight spasms, her wet flesh rippling like a breeze caressing still water. Her limbs were outstretched, toes curled and fingers splayed. She vibrated, surrounded by a toxic shroud.

He hustled over to the side of the bed and focused the flashlight on her face. His stomach heaved.

Cherry's face was no more. Instead, a mask of smoking black rubber covered it, oozing onto the pillows. Her copper-tinged eyes were rolled back into her head, exposing the whites that flickered like a television powering off.

And there was the power connection. A copper snake of wire spiralled out of her mouth and down the side of the bed. Dumpty followed it under the bedside table. It plugged into the wall outlet where little shocks of blue-white light sparked.

When he stood and looked at her quivering body again, he realized why he thought he knew her.

Her black hair fanned outward like an oriental fan...

The whites of her eyes...

The spasms...

And then she was no longer Cherry Clusterfuck, some slapskin whore on a coppertongue grind, but Sunshine Daydream, his *daughter*, there in the throes of an epileptic spasm that would soon claim her life.

--*Sunshine*, Dumpty said, quickly setting the flashlight on the side table. --*Sunshine, you're going to be all right. Daddy's here, baby.*

Dumpty needed something to break the connection, so he shuffled over to the washroom. He took the toilet plunger, broken neon glass crunching under his boots. He walked back to Sunshine and gingerly hooked the wooden shaft of the plunger under the copper wire, near the outlet. With a quick tug the wire unplugged from the outlet. Sunshine's body heaved and then lay still.

Dropping the plunger, Dumpty reached out and touched Sunshine's face. Rubber burned his skin but he ignored the pain. He took a hold of the unit. He had to remove it carefully, had to get airflow. There was no way he was going to let her choke. Sunshine would not swallow her tongue.

He grabbed the adapter, that small metal cylinder that the wire fed. He pulled on it. At first it wouldn't move, her head lolling with each tug. Then he pulled with more force. It suction popped and came out. Shards of broken teeth and shredded tongue came out with it, adhered to a pair of small metal plates. Tears welled from the horrible sight of his daughter. Her eyes were still open, still white. He leaned close against her face, tilting his head to listen for the soft rhythm of life. There was nothing.

Tears spilled. The smoke in the room stung his eyes. He climbed onto the bed.

--*No, Sunshine, come on, baby...come on...*

He straddled Sunshine, convincing himself that he'd make her breathe again, her lifeless, charred body warm between his legs. There was hope. She was not dead. She would not die.

Dumpty started to wipe away the tar facial from her nostrils but it had already started to cool, forming a permanent mask of rubberized flesh. He put his hands on her chest. A tear fell, landed on her breast.

--*Come on, Sunshine, don't do this to me.*

Dumpty spread hand over hand and pressed down against her body. He didn't know what the fuck he was doing, but he was going to try. She would not die.

He pressed *again*, like how they do it on television. *Again* he pressed. And *again*, and a crack

punctured the quiet of the room, then another.

Crack...crack...

Dumpty pushed up and down on her chest as fast as he could, screaming at her, telling her to breathe. Tears ran down his face like the rain on the patina rooftops, where had they lived. Together.

--Sunshine! he yelled. --Sunshine...

Then there were hands on him, pulling him off of her. Was it the waiter, *Randy, Rayne, Red*, who was trying to help, or trying to disrupt his efforts?

Chrome masks, convex and polished like the back of a spoon, came out of the haze accompanied by the harsh sound of respirator-laden breaths. Their grip was firm, squeezing his arms and grabbing at his shirt.

--Come on, one of the crackerheads said. --Get the fuck off.

Another quick tug and he lost contact with Sunshine. Dumpty crashed to the floor. Feet rushed past him, topped by candycane stripped neoprene suits. Each one had a rod of Asclepius etched across their high-gloss mirror-masks.

They flooded the room, surrounding the bed and pulling out equipment from large orange packs. They seemed to dance around the bed in a haze of burnt hair and ozone, placing circular white pads on Sunshine's body. More wiring. Monitoring screens flickered to life in the packs.

--We've got a pulse, one of the candycanes said. --It's weak and fading, but it's there.

Dumpty struggled to get up but a crackerhead held him down with a steel-toed boot.

--We're going to take her to H-131, a candycane said, running a hand over the black mask of plastic. --She's going crust-side...

For treatment.

Dumpty never saw that coppertongue grinder again after they had rolled her charred body out of the room on a stretcher, electric diodes perforating her body like a newfangled Christmas tree.

In the following weeks the hotel was completely switched to sewagecell power. Dumpty's boss was arrested for non-compliance of Power Bill C-42.1 and the hotel sold to another chain.

Dumpty went back to work as a desk clerk for the next few months until his body grew tired of the cancer and shutdown. Though he was no longer broken, he felt whole again, daydreaming of a new dawn and content with the unmistakable glow that surrounded him like a comforting blanket...

Sunshine.

Derek Molata was born in Ontario Canada at the forefront of the disco revolution, which may explain his affinity for v-necks and velour. As adolescence descended, Derek gave up the velour for Vuarnet and firmly took hold of all the 1980s had to offer--including *Blade Runner*. He hasn't let go since. When he's not buried beneath laundry or spending time with his wife and 3 daughters, he jumps down the rabbit hole and writes. Follow his exploits at <http://www.derekmolata.com>



Pontypool

reviewed by david gullen



Starring Stephen McHattie, Lisa Houle, Georgina Reilly, Hrant Alianak
Directed by Bruce McDonald, written by Tony Burgess
Cert. 15

Shock and Gore? Not in Pontypool.

I don't do horror films. With a few exceptions Hollywood horror has become a formulaic procession of fright, loud noises and special effects. Drag Me to Hell? You'd have to drag me to see it. They're not scary.

Pontypool is not like that. Adapted for the screen by Tony Burgess from his novel Pontypool Changes Everything, Bruce McDonald's film is an intelligent, claustrophobic and deeply disturbing horror in the classic sense. Original and subversive, from the early setup of one character's military background, to the strange mental virus that is spreading through the local population via infected words, this is film that understands how horror works. There can be no saving heroes, only moments of insight. If salvation exists it is only there for other people.

Pontypool treads similar territory to SF playwright David Wake's plays Inveigle and Invidious, explorations of the danger and power contained within words and language. In this eerily paranoid film the threat is out of control, the danger weirdly fatal. Stripped down and sparse - the film never moves beyond the radio station - this is film and acting at its best. Although the gore is indeed gorey, this production is all about plot, character and dialogue.

Stephen McHattie is near flawless as confrontational shock-jock DJ Grant Mazzy. From the beginning Mazzy is isolated in his small-town radio station deep in Ontario's February winter as he broadcasts the early morning show. We're right next to him as he follows, and tries to make sense of, a series of traumatic and increasingly violent local news reports. One by one everyone he knows are turning into deranged echolalial monsters. Don't let this fool you, Pontypool is by no means a standard zombie flick.

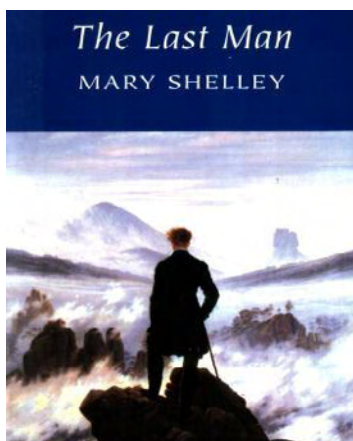
Mazzy's eventual discovery, that the English language is the source of a new disease, where words themselves are vectors of a lethal illness, leaves a man whose whole life is built upon the spoken word in a world without language. After they stumble on a cure that takes Mazzy and his show producer Sydney Briar (Lisa Houle) through the infection to a state of mind beyond normal meaning they are faced with a final, paradoxical quandary. Knowing the cure how can they communicate it to the wider world when speech itself is dangerous, when understanding and meaning can be fatal?

The Valentine's Day setting is perhaps a little too understated, the arrival of the curiously likeable and possibly insane local physician Dr. Mendez (Hrant Alianak) fortuitous, and the final countdown feels contrived but these are minor faults in an otherwise excellent and original film that delivers great acting and an intelligent and sophisticated premise in a taut and highly unsettling way.

Pontypool is not a movie to watch on your own - honestly. Find a friend, turn the lights down and get a blanket (you're going to need it to hide under). Pontypool is smart. Pontypool messes with your mind. Once Pontypool is in there it won't leave you alone.

The Last Man

reviewed by martin willoughby



By Mary Shelley
Published by various
Price varies

I was doing some Christmas shopping and walked into a shop called 'The Works'. Whilst browsing I came across a stack of books from Wordsworth Editions, which were being sold at three for £5 and were mostly books by authors that I had never heard of. Being the adventurous type that I'm not, I decided to buy six of them. One of them was *The Last Man* by Mary Shelley, which I bought purely because I enjoyed reading *Frankenstein*.

The main thrust of the story is Lionel's life from birth until the death of everyone else on earth and it is told through his diary. It is set in the last few years of the 21st century, with the main background to the novel being an ongoing war to free Greece from the overlordship of the Turks. The plague makes its appearance halfway through.

This background is a reflection of the events of Shelley's own time and in the novel she has seen that war of freedom as taking centuries to accomplish. It is worth noting that her friend and fellow Romantic, Lord Byron, fought in that war, dying in 1824 of disease. The fact that one of the main characters, Raymond, also dies in this manner in the same war is not a coincidence.

The pivotal event occurs nearly half way through and is the discovery of the plague in Constantinople as the Greek army's siege finally succeeds. The details of the siege are fairly sparse, but as Lionel is not involved in it, this is not too much of a surprise. The rest of the story is about how the plague spreads and how humanity reacts to this.

There is also an interesting subplot about the removal from power of the British monarchy and its replacement by a protector. We read about an attempted kidnapping and forced marriage in the first part of the story and the political machinations that follow the proclamation of the new republic.

In these events Mary Shelley's political views come to the fore and are in themselves fairly interesting, but are sadly unexplored. Most of the book is typical of early 19th century literature and as the main character is only peripheral to the main events, we get little detail.

Yet in all this, there is the making of a great 'alternate history' film. There is a peaceful revolution, a new start, a kidnapping, love, war, sacrifice, all the elements that go to make a superb movie.

Whilst there are few SF elements that we would recognise, Shelley does show a flash of futurology, with a balloon ship being used by the aristocracy to travel. But it is still a novel of its time.

If you can look past the flowery language and overlong descriptions of place and time, if you can read the Austenesque dialogue without scraping the saccharine off your fingers, then there is a good novel here.

It can be bought cheaply (£2 or less) from Amazon or any bookshop. You can also see a copy for free on Google Books, or at Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/18247>).

FEATURES

What Is An Independent Comic And What Does It Matter?

by stacie whittle

Independent Comics, what does that mean exactly? It used to be material either self-published or published through a small publishing company and/or an item that was creator-owned. These days it tends to mean anything not published by Marvel or DC ("the Big Two"), though even that is slightly confusing because both of these companies have imprints which produce Indy type or creator-owned property: Vertigo from DC and Icon from Marvel.

What do you think of when you think of Indy music? Chances are that any guitar based band with interesting hair and very tight trousers springs immediately to mind regardless of how their music is produced and who owns it. And comics are much the same, Indy is much more a theme than a mode these days. You hear terms like "Indy flavoured" or in the "Independent spirit" and that basically means it is a different take on the superhero genre or (more likely) it doesn't involve superheroes at all, hence the Vertigo/Icon confusion.

This newer definition is incredibly silly when you think about it; it declassifies the entirety of the comic world into only three sections: Mainstream/Superheroes, Independent and Manga (which again has a massive set of subgenres all herded under the same heading). How many different genres of books can you think of off the top of your head? There are just as many comic genres. This massively broad way of defining genres is akin to addressing *all* books as either fiction or nonfiction and that's it.

Can you imagine being in a bookshop in which the books are arranged by the publisher and not the genre? This bizarre state of affairs is the norm in comic shops and as a newbie comic reader this can be very intimidating. You have to know a little bit about what a publisher produces before you can choose a comic, or even find one you're looking for. This is a big problem - and almost more important in the comic world than it is in the music or film worlds. You can't go into a comic shop and look for the "crime" or "romance" or "science fiction" sections, they don't exist, you have to find out first who writes them, who produces them etc etc before you can locate these items.

Also, Indy is cool, it's hip everyone loves it when they "discover" a little known gem before it hits the big time. Owning a first print run copy of *Chew* (published by Image) is the comic book collector's equivalent of being able to say, "oh yeah, I used to love them before they got big, saw them play in a tiny pub years ago".

Self-publishing in comics is respected and almost expected, the Small and Independent press are cool and very often incredibly dedicated. They put themselves through the wringer for little or no monetary gain, for the love of it, because they're passionate and they believe in what they are producing (the music analogy holds up very well here too). I do wonder if the actual Indy creators feel frustrated that the Big Two and their imprints can do what they do and do it well. For example the *Criminal* series by Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips is often put into the Indy category but it is published by Icon. It doesn't and shouldn't take anything away from this brilliant series because of who the publisher is. Then there is the financial security and larger distribution that the bigger publishers can offer their creators and if this is coming with a creator owned contract it really does seem to be the best of both worlds. That and both Vertigo and Icon are putting out some wonderful titles in a range of genres.

Not that I am dismissing the smaller publishing houses in any way! Relative newcomers to the block, *Insomnia Publications* are a small British publishing house whom interest me greatly. This is mostly because I

think that they have the perfect model for the future, they offer free chapters or samples (equivalent to a single issue of a comic) of their upcoming trades but only sell the actual trades or “original graphic novels”. I think this is absolutely the way to go, I think it’s innovative and forward thinking. They also work with Sony to distribute their comics via the PSP. I think this is the sort of thing that Indy publishers should be looking at to keep themselves in the game. Markosia are looking to distribute their comics via itunes. These are the interesting options and outlooks the Indy world are offering us right now, great isn’t it? Look to the future, look to the stars!

All in all, the question to ask is: does it actually really matter? As a Small and Indy press reviewer this is a question I am very interested in, and I’m not entirely sure I know the answer. Jonathan Cape is an imprint of Random House Publishing which is the largest UK publisher yet they produce beautiful, quirky, Indiesque graphic novels. I read two of their books last year; *Fluffy* by Simone Lia and *Britten and Brulightly* by Hannah Berry. They are both completely wonderful books I couldn’t recommend highly enough, but before I reviewed *Britten and Brulightly* I had to have a long conversation with my podcasting partner in crime to decide whether or not we thought it was appropriate for us to review it. We decided ‘yes’ in the end, even though the book does not fit the Indy definition – I found plenty of reviews of the comic by newspapers and book blogs but very few on comics review sites or comic podcasts, and these are the places comics fans would look (or listen!). This book would really appeal to our listeners, so it would have been wrong not to include it. Conversely, we also had to decide that although *2000AD* may technically be an Indy title it might not be so appropriate for us to review (though as passionate *2000AD* fans, this could change at any time!).

How else could it matter? Are the big publishers taking something from the independent creators by appealing to their readers? I’m not sure I know the answer to that either; maybe they are, or maybe they are exposing mainstream readers to a wider reading experience. Maybe they are jumping on the cool kid bandwagon but then maybe after being exposed to the “Indy flavour” a reader may be more inclined to search out more “true Indy” books. It could be a good working symbiotic relationship, whether it is or not would be very difficult to tell. I think that maybe it doesn’t actually matter at all what we call anything – it’s all just labels really, but I also do think that it is frustrating that the massive, massive range of diversity in comics is lumped together so unceremoniously. I do also know that I love having discussions about this with other comic fans especially over a couple of pints of real ale, the best part of geekery is arguing about it in the pub!

