

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

PUBLISHER
LEE HARRIS

MANAGING EDITOR
ALASDAIR STUART

COMMISSIONING EDITOR
ELLEN J ALLEN

REVIEWS EDITOR
PHIL LUNT

ISSUE 134 • 10TH FEB 2011

CONTENTS:

FICTION: *Progeny* by Mark Morris

REVIEW: *The Sentinel Mage*
The Devil's Plague
Conflicts

FEATURE: *Interview: Antony Johnston* with Phil Lunt



Hub Magazine is Sponsored by Abaddon Books

EDITORIAL:

by phil lunt

Whenever I'm not thinking of them, an idea attacks. Usually it's scratching and screaming, clawing at me in the middle of the night. Luckily I keep a notepad next to the bed because there's nothing worse than lurching around the house, zombie-like, trying to find a pen that works and something to write on. You can only scrawl random text on walls so many times before folk get worried for you. Alright; nervous around you. These buggers need to be caught sharpish before they scamper off, back into the ether from whence they came.

So, it's 2011 already and I've still not got my jet-pack or rocket-cycle. Mind you, it's only February. Maybe we'll get them next month, in time for my birthday, but look at everything else we have: mobile phones can hold libraries of books as well as play videos, music and games. And make phone calls. There are dedicated e-readers that are getting more and more sophisticated and slowly slipping under the £100 price bracket and, of course, there is the Apple army of iPods, iPads and iEverything-else.

Then we have to find the money to pay for all this which is becoming increasingly difficult in today's current climate with no light at the end of the tunnel for many. Of course, you lucky people, Hub will always be free to bring you quality fiction+ on a regular basis. But remember the powers that be can never take away our imaginations! OK, a bit OTT and Orwellian there but it's true. A big chunk of the best speculative fiction, no matter the sub-genre, has been borne of near soul crushing socio-political waves which, I think, we're swimming against right now. Look at "1984" and "V for Vendetta" for example; extrapolations of the climates the authors were experiencing at their time of writing.

Everyone has at least one story in them, apparently, and that doesn't mean it necessarily HAS to be an autobiography. Go wild! Write something now, you know you've always wanted to so why wait any longer? It's probably been said by many people far more eloquent than I before now but that doesn't mean it shouldn't be said again. Keep a notebook with you at all times to catch those ideas when they strike. Write anything and then set it free! Distribution methods are quite possibly better now than they have ever been, the next step is having information shot straight into our brains for digestion whilst asleep. Well, maybe not the 'next' step but it's coming...



Hub Magazine is Sponsored by Abaddon Books

FICTION

Progeny

by mark morris

I miss you, Dora. I miss you so much. Why did it have to happen like this?

His first sensation was of an incredible lightness, as though, for him alone, gravity had lessened. He was vaguely aware of the floor below him, but had to concentrate hard before he had any perception of his own feet touching that floor. Even then he seemed ephemeral, as though he were suspended from the ceiling and could reach the ground only with his tip-toes. The room at first was like something in a dream: an impression. Something flimsy and insubstantial, like a hastily constructed set. Unpainted. Undetailed.

Gradually, however, a focus established itself. A bed. And, more importantly, the girl in the bed. He immediately felt guilt, shame, fear. At the sight of her solemnly sleeping face, her blonde hair spread over the pillow like a princess's, he felt anguish grip him. Seeing her like this, so serene, appeared to indicate that she had not been traumatised by what she had been through. Nevertheless he knew that she was changed. Irrevocably. Somewhere deep inside. He had seen the evidence, suffered it every day. They shared the scars, the hurt, the ever-booming echo of that dreadful mindless moment.

The dependence. The incapacitation. That was the second thing he noticed. It had gone. All gone. Yet it seemed as though he was nothing but... but an outline. A shell. Full of emptiness.

His brain, his mind, whatever it was up there, sent a message to his arm, told him to raise it. Methodically he imagined the procedure, the arm coming up, the fingers straightening. His eyes (he must have eyes; he could see, couldn't he?) looked at the place where the arm should be. There was no sense of strain in the eyes, no foggy patina of approaching cataracts as there had been previously.

And yes, he *could* see the arm. Dimly, hazily, but it was there, wasn't it?

Well, wasn't it?

His uncertainty troubled him. Why did he feel so strange? He let the arm drop - or at least he thought he did (the instant he stopped thinking about it, the arm seemed to... to go away. To be discarded. To... to... to dissolve?).

I don't think, therefore I may not be.

Sudden anger. The girl in the bed. She was the important one, not his bloody arm. He wasn't here to establish the fact of his own existence.

So what was he here for? What was he supposed to do? Surely not that? No, please God, he wouldn't. He just wanted all this to end. He'd rather die before he put her through that again.

I know what you think of me, Rachel, and I only wish that I could use my voice, or even hold a pen, that I could communicate my regret to you in some way. The last ten years have been hell, partly because of my situation but largely because I can see how it's eating you up, growing and blackening inside you, mutilating your mind. I never meant to do what I did, Rachel. You must believe that, though I know you never will. If only you could read my thoughts. If only I could talk to you. Just ten minutes, that's all I would ask for. I would give my life for just ten minutes of articulation.

Don't you think I've asked myself over and over again why I did it? Well I have. And each time I come up with the same answer - I just don't know. It happened, that's all, it just seemed to progress naturally, which in a way is the most horrifying thing of all. I was perfectly sane, perfectly clear-headed, or at least I thought I was. Mind you, they say the mad always think they're sane, don't they? It's only the sane who worry that they might be going crazy.

All I would like to do, Rachel, is to give you my version of what happened that day, to take you through it step by step. I wouldn't ask you to condone what I did, or even to understand it. I would just ask you to listen to me, that's all, to listen to my side of things. Maybe it would help, I don't know. Or maybe nothing would change. If I could go back and make things different, I would. Believe me, I would.

This is how it happened. I took you out around twelve, twelve-thirty that day. It was a sunny day and I was as happy as I could be under the circumstances. I know it seems that I planned it all from the start, but it's not true, Rachel, you must believe that. If you think I planned it, then it makes me a bigger monster than I already am, but nothing could have been further from my mind, *nothing*, and that's God's honest truth. So what were you thinking about? I hear you ask. Just how *did* you feel?

Well, like I say, happy enough. Just being with you made me feel that way, and there's nothing to be ashamed of in that. I loved your innocence, your exuberance. You didn't exactly make me feel young (in fact you quite exhausted me sometimes), but you made me feel as though the *world* was still young, as though there were still wonders in it, wonders that only children could see.

I suppose you reminded me of *my* childhood. Yes, that's it, I think. But not in a sad or wistful way like we sometimes remember our youth. In a happy way, a nostalgic way, as though you were living what I'd had to give up. Does that make sense to you? Because that's exactly how I felt, no more, no less.

The drive was uneventful, so I'll start from the funfair. I'm sure you think it was there where I started to get my ideas, but that's not true either. Oh, you can argue it was a warm day, there were lots of young girls in shorts and those t-shirts they wear without sleeves (halter-tops are they called? Anyway, it doesn't matter), and lots of couples having fun, their arms around each other, some even kissing, I suppose. But honestly, Rachel, I never really noticed any of those things, and even if I did none of them affected me. None of them "got me thinking" or anything like that.

You were being your normal lovely self. Laughing a lot. Asking lots of questions. Pointing at things, your eyes as big as dinner plates.

I bought you an ice-cream and some candy floss and a toffee apple, and I let you ride on whatever you wanted. I knew I was spoiling you but I thought: grandad's prerogative. I decided that the worst that could happen was that you would be sick on the big dipper or the ferris-wheel, and I thought that that was a small price to pay for all the fun.

The only ride we went on where there was any real physical contact was the Ghost Train, and that was because you got scared and grabbed my hand. There was nothing unusual in it, nothing funny. It was only a natural thing. When we came out of that tunnel, back into the daylight and the noise, all the other kids were holding their parents' hands too.

Should I stay here or move closer? What if she sees me and starts to scream? Oh God, won't someone please tell me what to do?

The room unveiled its details one by one, unwrapped them as though they were presents or secrets. It was a colourful room, gaudy even, filled with innocently smiling images that to him seemed somehow desperate. The Wombles cavorting on the curtains to his left seemed to be denying the existence of the black night. On the pink carpet objects were strewn - or perhaps arranged, carefully placed, like childish charms against evil spirits. There was a fluffy blue dog, a Raggedy Ann on its back, a storybook opened to a picture of the Sleeping Beauty, a pair of small white shoes laid toe to toe.

The shoes. He looked at them and a sensation overcame him. In other circumstances he might have started to shake. A lump might have obstructed his throat. Perhaps even tears might have fallen.

Yes, they were *the* shoes. There was no doubt about it. They were the shoes she'd been wearing on that day.

He moaned, or thought he did, and his gaze skittered, as always, back to the girl. Once again he stared at her face, tried to discern some residue, some mark left by what had occurred. The fact that he couldn't profoundly distressed him. If she had let her feelings show - her confusion, her trauma - then perhaps the badness might have flowed out of her, left her for ever. But her innocence had buried the trauma, secreted it in the deepest darkest part of her mind. Which meant that her scars ran deep, that somewhere in the bubbling

brook that was her childhood a capsule lurked, a flimsy fragile thing, ready at the slightest whisper to crack and spread its poison.

Why? he whispered (thought he whispered). Why oh why oh why?

The girl made a small sound, frowned, twisted slightly, as though a breeze had passed over her face.

He froze. A thought came to him: What was he doing here? Why *had* he come back? Surely the strength of his curiosity, his need to see, to know, had not dragged him here? No, he couldn't believe that of himself. Even after what he'd done he found it impossible. He was no slaving ghoul, no voyeur, no gloater. God knew, there were enough of them around, people who revelled in the misery of others, but surely he could not be counted amongst their number? Those people were disturbed, mad, spiteful. But that day, *that day*, he must have been too. And if he had been then, why not now? Why was he here, after all? *Why was he here?*

He moved a little closer to the bed.

Can you recall what we did after the funfair? We walked along the promenade for a bit and then we went down on the beach. Starmouth beach is lovely. Smooth sand, hardly any pebbles, a pier you can walk right underneath, and lots of caves and rock pools.

You loved it. You picked up some shells and some bits of glass. The glass was all rough and rounded, do you remember? I explained this was because the sea had moved it around a lot and the salt and the tide had worn it down. I said the glass had probably come from a foreign country, that it had been washed miles and miles, right across the ocean. You looked at me, wide-eyed. "Which country, grandad?" you asked. I told you America or China or maybe even Russia. "Wow," you said and looked out to sea, shielding your eyes with your hand. I think you thought that you would be able to see the coastline of one of those countries just peeping over the horizon.

I remember that moment so clearly: the way you looked. You had your blonde hair tied back in... what do you call them? Ponytails? Bunches? Anyway, tied back with these little bits of elastic with plastic butterflies on them. Your dress was flapping around your knees because of the wind coming off the sea and your white shoes were covered in sand. I told you we'd have to clean those shoes before we came home or Mummy wouldn't be pleased, but you just shrugged and pouted. I remember teasing you, telling you what a little madam you were, making you laugh.

I think of that laugh now. So childish. So carefree. How could I have done what I did? What in God's name drove me to it?

Anyway, I'll carry on, tell you the rest.

We walked along to the caves and the rock pools. You wouldn't go further than any of the cave entrances, especially when I told you about the dinosaur skeleton they'd found in one of them. In a rock pool we came across a big crab with only one claw, half-hidden by an overhang of stone. You found a stick or a reed or something and lowered it down, right in front of the crab. I bet you remember that, don't you? The crab didn't pay any attention, so you swirled the stick around a bit, disturbing the sand. All at once the crab's claw shot out and grabbed the stick. You should have seen your face! You jumped and let go of the stick and let out a little scream. Then you looked up at me and started laughing and laughing.

We walked back along the beach. You took off your shoes and socks and started splashing along the sea's edge. You kept trying to kick water up at me but the wind caught it and scattered the droplets. We walked under the pier, which smelt all seaweedy, and then, believe it or not, you announced that you were hungry again so we made our way back to the promenade. I gave you the choice of doughnuts and lemonade or some proper fish and chips from a seafront cafe. You chose the fish and chips, so after we'd found a bench where you could brush the sand off your feet and put your shoes and socks back on, we made our way to a cafe.

I don't want all this to happen again. I don't. I truly don't. My only crime - my only true crime - was that I loved her far too much.

The girl's eyes opened. They looked straight at him. He froze, suddenly more terrified, more ashamed, than he'd ever thought it possible to be.

"Mummy," the girl shouted. "Mummy, where are you?" She sat up, blonde hair falling to her shoulders, snatching at the pillow and holding it to her chest like a shield.

Movement in the corridor outside. Mowgli and Balloo and King Louie and Bagheera lay flat on the wallpaper, framing a pink door. The door opened. Light fell into the room. A woman entered, sleepy-eyed, tousle-haired, a dressing-gown draped over her shoulders like folded diaphanous wings.

He felt, in that instant, a crushing desperate terrible shame. To be found here, to be discovered by this woman, the product of his own seed... No. No, it was too awful to bear. He wanted to shrink, to dissolve, to burst. Felt he would be struck down the moment he saw the lightning bolt of accusation in her glaring eyes.

But he was spared all that. The woman didn't even look at him. Instead she crossed straight to the bed, took the girl in her arms, whispered, "Sh now, sh. Mummy's here. What's the matter?"

The girl clutched the woman. Held tight to her sleeves. Half-buried her stricken face in the woman's breasts. Through a mouthful of thumb she murmured, "Someone was here, Mummy. Standing by my bed. I think he came out of the wardrobe."

The woman turned. Looked straight at him. *At him!* He felt like screaming.

He waited. For the anger. The hate. Perhaps even the violence.

But:

"There's no one there," the woman said. "You've had a bad dream, darling, that's all."

He listened, amazed. No one there? What did she mean? Why was she lying? He heard her continue:

"Do you want to sleep in Mummy's bed where it's warm? Shall we go and wake Daddy up? Get him to read us a story?"

The girl gave a sulky half-nod.

"Come on then. My, you're getting to be a big girl, aren't you? Hold tight. Do you want Raggedy Ann to come too?"

Chatting quietly to her daughter, allaying her fears with a weave of words, the woman carried the girl across the room and out, closing the door behind her.

He stood for a moment, wondering. Listened to the murmurs finally dwindle to silence. Then he crossed to the bed, sent a message to his hand, saw - or thought he saw - the hand lying flat on the place where the girl had lain.

And suddenly he understood. Thought he did. Wasn't sure. He felt the girl's warmth, felt it dissipate little by little. Felt the bed become cool. Cooler. Cold.

I'm sorry, he said, though he could hear no sound. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

You had fish and chips and mushy peas. A child's portion. And bread and butter and a strawberry milkshake. Despite what you said about being hungry, you couldn't eat it all, which didn't surprise me after all that stuff at the funfair. You pushed the food around your plate with your fork until I'd eaten mine, now and then stopping to have a sip of your milkshake. You had a funny look on your face, a sort of faraway look, as if you were leading up to something, thinking about something you wanted to ask. Sure enough a few seconds later you put down your fork and looked straight at me. Then you said, "Grandad, where's Nanna gone?"

Well, as you can imagine, the question threw me. I had to think about it a bit before answering. I wasn't sure what to tell you - how much you would really understand and how much I wanted you to know. It surprised me, coming three months after Dora's death. I would never have thought a six-year-old would keep such a question bottled up so long.

Eventually I said, "She's gone to Jesus, pet. Didn't Mummy explain?"

"Yes," you said with a frown on your face, "but I don't know where Jesus is."

I nearly laughed at that but I stopped myself just in time. You looked deadly serious and I didn't want you to think I was making fun of you. I was about to tell you that Jesus was a person, not a place, but then I realised it would sound as though Dora had run off with the milkman or something. Eventually I said, "Jesus is God's son, pet. They live in the sky. In Heaven. That's where your Nanna's gone."

You frowned. "You mean with the angels?" you said.

"Yes," I said, "with the angels. Your Nanna's one of them now."

"But doesn't she want to come and see us any more?" you asked.

"Of course she does," I said, "but once you get to Heaven you have to stay there. You can't leave."

"Then I think Heaven's horrible," you said. "And I think God's horrible too. She's my Nanna, not his."

I felt as though I hadn't explained things very well. Children do that to you sometimes. You try to be delicate, try to skirt round the real facts because you think you're protecting them, when all you're really doing is confusing them, avoiding taboos not for their sake but for your own, and succeeding only in tying yourself into knots.

Does that make sense? I hope so. The reason I'm telling you all this is because it was due to this conversation that I gave you a hug in the car. Again, I didn't mean anything by it. It was just a hug, that's all. I suppose I was frustrated because I couldn't explain things and because I just sort of loved you all of a sudden, loved your childishness, your innocence. Even now I wasn't thinking anything. You were just a little girl, my grand-daughter, and I loved you only because of that.

We started to drive home. It was about six, seven o' clock. You were pointing at things, asking questions, and then bit by bit the questions tailed off and you went very quiet. I thought you must be sleepy but when I looked over I noticed you were a bit green around the gills, so I asked if you felt all right. You said, "No, I feel sick." I drove another fifty, sixty yards, then pulled into a lay-by.

I unbuckled your seat-belt, then reached over and opened the car door. We were in the countryside by now. There were fields and hedges and trees, a couple of distant farmhouses and not many cars on the road. You leaned right out of the car and was sick on the ground outside. And that's when it happened. Right there while you were bringing up toffee apple and fish and chips and candy-floss and ice-cream.

Your dress got kind of bunched up and I could see brown legs and white pants and something just sort of clicked inside me. I've been through it time and again in my mind and I just can't explain it any other way. One minute I was thinking what a nice day we'd had and working out what time we'd get home, and the next I was doing those awful things.

Even now when I think about those things it makes me want to die in shame. I hope you won't feel the same way for ever, but I think that you might, I truly truly do. In a way I still can't believe I really did anything. It's as though it was someone else there that day, someone who looked like me but wasn't me. Someone who pushed aside my control and who used my body and my brain for their own degraded purpose.

But saying that is crazy, and much too easy. Of course it was me. I have no excuse for what I did and no explanation. It happened, that's all. It happened. I just want you to know it wasn't planned, it wasn't pre-meditated. It was terrible, I admit that. It was unforgivable. But I'm sorry. I've suffered enough. I know what it's like to be a victim and now I just want some peace.

I'm drifting. Can feel myself going back. No, I don't want to. I can't stand it any more.

He woke with a jolt when the door slammed. For a moment the sound made him forget who or where or when he was. The door was as wide and as blank as his mind. There was colour to the left of the door - pink flesh, blue denim, yellow and black bee-stripes.

Rachel.

He remembered then, and was struck, as he often was, by their separate perception of a shared world. Time for him was an endurance, a boulder he was forced to drag in his wake. For her it was nothing, or at worst a feather which she could blow from her cupped palm and watch float away. Was she really seventeen? It seemed inconceivable. And yet in her swift maturing he had crossed deserts of anguish, oceans of pain.

As best he could he regarded himself. He saw as always the blanket covering his wasted legs, his hands like roots entwined in his lap. If only he had some autonomy he wouldn't mind the wheelchair. But no; the stroke had been as merciless, as uncaring and as permanent as his actions over a decade earlier. Of course he'd rather have died, but that would not have been suitable retribution. He ached at the sight of her golden hair. If only. If only...

She walked across the room, staring at him as ever with dreadful accusation. She never spoke but then she had no need to. Her hate seemed to spill like poison from her cold eyes. Monster, freak, beast, betrayer, pervert: he saw all this in her gaze. He could close his own eyes but that was somehow worse, knowing she was there, watching.

She sat cross-legged on the floor before the wheelchair and stared at him. She was motionless, expressionless. He could have believed she was an automaton, bled of all emotion, if he had not heard her laughing with her friends. This was the moment each day when their worlds conjoined, when time for them both ran parallel. This was their shared hour, a time for remembering. For him it was the longest hour of all.

PROGENY was first published in a long-defunct small press magazine called **INVASION OF THE SAD MAN-EATING MUSHROOMS** & then re-printed in the *Piatkus* collection **CLOSE TO THE BONE**

fin

Handwritten-style text in red with a grey outline, partially visible at the bottom of the page.

The Sentinel Mage

reviewed by jared shurin



by Emily Gee
Solaris
rrp £7.99

One of the most commonly addressed themes in fantasy fiction is that of identity. By traditional, this is the pig boy/High King. He may *start out* swilling the livestock, but by the time book five rolls around, Timmy has harnessed the power of the All-Flambé, married the Imperial Princess and drawn the legendary Dragonsword. He now knows who was he was all along: *super-special!*

In *The Sentinel Mage*, author Emily Gee uses the freedom of the fantasy setting to explore the concept of identity in unusual and daring ways. After writing two well-received stand-alones, *The Sentinel Mage* is the start of her first trilogy. Ms Gee also uses the added space and breathing room of the series format to stretch her legs and set up some intriguing characters.

The trilogy's set-up is fairly straightforward, and fantasy-conversant readers will quickly pick up the tropes involved with a minimum of fuss. The land of the Seven Kingdoms has been at (uneasy) peace for some time. Even the ambitions of Osgaard, the westernmost kingdom, have been temporarily sated after their conquest of some outlying islands. However, the status quo is shattered by the onset of a long-prophesied curse. Starting at the easternmost edge of the Kingdoms and extending day by day to cover the land, people are being turned into Feral-Zombie-Animals.

The one man that can stop the Feral-Zombie-Animal plague is Prince Harkeld of Osgaard. He combines the royal bloodline with the forbidden blood of mages. By racing around and placing his royal hand (and dripping some royal blood) on three magical "anchor stones", he can stop the curse. Unfortunately, as his enemies soon realize, neither Harkeld's hand nor his blood need to be attached to the rest of his body for these conditions to be fulfilled.

This is, as noted above, a fairly conventional fantasy story: a magical scavenger hunt featuring the child of prophecy. Where Ms Gee starts to make things interesting is with her two main characters: Harkeld and Innis, his shapeshifting magical bodyguard.

Prince Harkeld, for example, is born to wealth and privilege. He wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth - he had a golden one, studded with gemstones and carried by a half-dozen slaves. More critical to his character, Harkeld has spent his entire life knowing that magic is wrong. This isn't just the conviction of his Evil King father, this is a commonly-held "truth" across all seven of the Kingdoms. Not only is Harkeld forced to travel in the company of witches, but also he has to accept that he is, in terms of heredity, one of them.

The "witches" are the titular Sentinel Mages, a group of magical experts that have trained their entire lives for this very moment. They're a hardy lot, but the physical danger facing them is nothing compared to the emotional strain of escorting around Harkeld. He may be the object of prophecy and therefore the most important man in the world, but he also loathes them. Harkeld won't eat the witches' food, share their tents or listen to their advice. Considering the vital role that he needs to play, this is unacceptable. The Mages' response? Have one of their own number shapeshift into an "ordinary" person and sneakily protect Harkeld by offering him someone that he can trust.

Awkwardly, the best shapeshifter in the party is Innis, a young mage with great strength but little experience. Although set up in the great tradition of Shakespearean comedies – dressed as a man, falling for her new pal – Innis has worse problems to deal with than star-crossed romance. Taking any form for too long means that a mage can slip into said form permanently. Added to *that* danger is the temptation inherent in her borrowed shape: Innis is a shy young woman that gets to play at being a confident young

man. She finds the strength and swagger of her new role very seductive, not to mention its proximity to a handsome young prince that otherwise finds her repulsive.

A few of the other characters also step on to the main stage on occasion. Karel is the bodyguard to Prince Harkeld's half-sister, a princess of Osgaard. His own identity is very firmly established: as a bondsman he's essentially a slave, as an Islander, he's the lowest social caste in his society. However, he acts as a strong moral focus for the book's secondary storyline. Petrus, another of the Sentinel Mages, is also a compelling minor character. He's one of Innis' classmates and, in a way, serves as the baseline "intended" for her. Were the status quo maintained, they would be an excellent pair. But *The Sentinel Mage* seems to be all about upsetting the status quo...

In *The Sentinel Mage*, Emily Gee has filled an unexceptional world with exceptional characters. The plot is conventional, and whenever the author pushes it forward, the book stumbles. However, in the gaps between the plot, the book's strength shines through. With her rich extended cast, especially the book's two leads, Ms Gee has set up characters and conflicts that have extraordinary potential. With *The Cursed Kingdoms* trilogy, she has created the opportunity to explore identity issues in a way that conventional literature never could. I am eager to read the second volume, and to see if this comes to fruition.

The Devil's Plague

reviewed by matthew fryer



by Mark Benyon
Abaddon
rrp £6.99

I've read several of the *Tomes of the Dead* range from Abaddon books, and the quality has been increasingly high. Despite its title, "The Devil's Plague" by Mark Beynon isn't one of the bleakest, but presents an interesting alternative history to the series of gut-wrenching apocalyptic.

We're in 17th century England during the civil war, and Oliver Cromwell's drunken excuse for an army is flagging beneath the onslaught of the Royalists. So like any good commander finding himself up the creek without a paddle, he throws consequence and ethics to the wind, and sells his mortal soul to the devil. In exchange, he is awarded the help of an ancient demonic army of mounted warriors: the terrible *Kryfangan*.

But despite the temporary glory, Cromwell learns that he can't control these bloodthirsty wraiths, and that their slain victims are rising from the mire. Soon England is falling to a zombie horde that makes the original Great Plague look like a sniffle, with the *Kryfangan* battling both living and dead. It's a great idea to toss a couple of new supernatural factions into an already violent period of English history, and the floundering, war-torn survivors have no idea whose side they're supposed to be on.

Delivered in short, effortless chapters, this is the kind of book than can easily be read in snatches – on the bus, in a waiting room, a cheeky cigarette break at work – without us either losing track of the plot or becoming too involved.

The main player is an actor named Davenant, a fugitive knight of the dethroned king. Despite the constant threat of arrest (theatre has been banned under Cromwell's ruling), he tours an underground show across England along with his daughter and acting entourage. Their story begins before the outbreak, and is a nice slice of cat and mouse as the group village-hop to evade Cromwell's acolytes. King Charles Stuart himself, his burly aid and an elegant trio of condemned witches soon become part of the unlikely band of outlaws.

The tour of Stuart-era England is brilliant. We visit filthy taverns, blood-stained battlefields, the dripping chambers of the Tower of London, and as the plot mainly evolves through the eyes of either the hunters or hunted, it has a nicely tainted atmosphere. But despite this, the mood is generally light-hearted. There are comically inept guards, drunken pranks and indignant arguments, and the author uses a smooth combination of modern slang and slightly antiquated language to good effect: it captures the period yet is still perfectly

accessible.

When the humour relents, the genuinely unpleasant scenes stand out all the more. For example, during a witch trial, the women are subjected to the torture of “pricking”, and I grew angry with the hypocritical injustice and absurdity, whilst silently urging the bystanders to intervene. This proved a sobering and effective break from the fun. Unfortunately, this doesn’t happen often enough, and there were times when I wished the wisecracks would take a back seat and just let me get spooked by the gothic surroundings. I do love comedy in horror, but it needs to be carefully gauged. Here, the threat is sometimes diluted too much and the pursuits of Davenant and company become something of a ripping yarn.

I also have a couple of issues with the prose. While the dialogue is tight, description can be flat and sometimes states the obvious – whether conveying a scene or a character’s feelings – which feels slightly patronising. I also struggled with the author’s use of point of view. The perspective sometimes fixes comfortably on one character before switching to another mid-scene, the effect of which is jarring.

But overall, I was caught up in the adventure, and the initial arrival of the zombies – a pivotal moment in any such tale – is spooky and well executed. Particularly pleasing was the 17th century reaction. We 21st century folks are familiar with the whole concept of zombies, if only from fictional media, but our civil war protagonists beheld the lurching undead with a refreshingly startled innocence.

“The Devil’s Plague” didn’t descend into the routine survivalist carnage I expected. The ruined streets of London provide the set for a taut finale, and there’s some lovely merging of real and alternate history that I wouldn’t dream of spoiling for you. A tidy (if predictable) epilogue mirrors the prologue, but the theme of history repeating itself is probably lost beneath a wry smirk. Despite its flaws, and as long as you don’t expect too much Horror with a capital *H*, this escapist cauldron of demons, zombies and period atmosphere will happily while away your lesser moments of the day.

Conflicts

reviewed by david gullen



edited by Ian Whates
NewCon Press
rrp £9.99

Newcon Press’s first SF anthology is a solid, enjoyable and varied collection of work from established and upcoming writers. The mix of styles varies from gung-ho Rambo-in-space testosterone slugfests to thoughtful, literary writing that does exactly what the very best SF has always done: shine a light on our own lives and world. There are also have some excellent romps, and some wonderfully imagined worlds and universes.

The theme of conflict is broadly interpreted. In one way this is to the collection’s advantage as we get writing from the uncompromising combat SF of Andy Remic’s *Psi.Copath* to the subtle emotional punches of Chris Beckett’s powerful and brilliant *Our Land*, and the nicely observed contemporary commentary of Rosanne Rabinowitz’s *Harmony in My Head*.

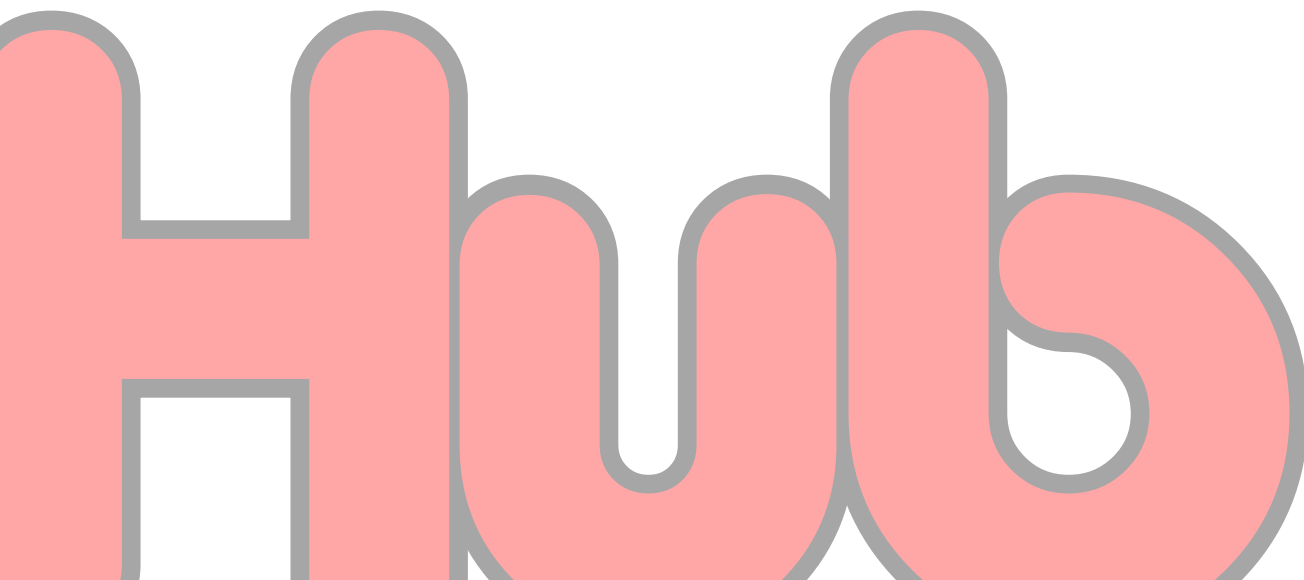
On the other hand this does dilute any overall style and theme beyond conflict. If you are looking for a particular style of storytelling you won’t find it here. Instead this is a broad sampler of contemporary genre SF and as such does an excellent job as a showcase.

The anthology settles down with the second story, Michael Cobley’s *The Maker’s Mark*, a micro-chaptered min-novel of high adventure and romance in a wonderfully imagined multiverse. From then on it gets better and better, but what else would you expect from Keith Brooke, Eric Brown, and Neal Asher – the later once again showing us how high-octane action should be done. *Songbirds* by Martin Sketchley twists and turns towards an excellent end-of-days dystopian story from family survival through sinister betrayal to a genuinely nightmarish end devoid of hope. It’s a bleak but powerful end story and provides a nice contrast to Martin McGrath’s *Proper Little Soldier* which takes us on a similar journey though this time it

is one that ends in hope.

Along with Chris Beckett's tale, two other pieces really impressed me. In *World Without End* Una McCormack writes about loyalty, guilt, regret and the lasting price of war. From her bio it looks like all her novels are DS9 and Dr Who franchise spinoffs and here is someone who I would really like to see write some original novel-length fiction. David Clements' *In the Long Run* is great example of fast-paced hard technical SF. A dazzling array of coherent, relevant ideas that drive a story measured in aeons and micro-seconds. There's more invention here than in some novels.

Both great reads in what is a fine collection. Recommended.



FEATURES

Interview: Antony Johnston

with phil lunt



Most folk will know the name Antony Johnston from his recent work on the Marvel comic series *Daredevil* but that's just the tip of the iceberg. From post-apocalyptic wastes to undead horror in space to romantic comedies in Europe, from comic books to novels to video games; Antony Johnston has tackled them all to critical acclaim.

He also sparked me off listening to *Paradise Lost* again after I'd not dabbled for years!

Anyway, understandably all this work keeps him extremely busy but he's also a bloody nice chap and agreed to answer a few questions for us at Hub.

Hub Magazine: Your work has covered many genres. Have you a favourite genre from the ones you've worked in or have you yet to cover your favourite?

Antony Johnston: I'd say my favourite genre to write is "thriller", but that encompasses a whole swathe of sub-genres, too; I've done spy thrillers, superhero thrillers, paranormal thrillers, sci-fi thrillers... And I don't really have a favourite of those. All I care about is a good story, genre doesn't concern me much. Which is why I've written such a variety of them -- if I have an idea for a good story, I'll write it, regardless of what genre it might be in.

HM: You've also worked across different media including novels, comics and video games. Which medium do you prefer working in most?

AJ: Comics will always be my first love. There's something very special and unique about the medium, both to create and to read. The way you can play with time, visual subtext, pacing... I love it. But I really enjoy working in games, too, because it's an even younger medium than comics, and there's so much still to be figured out. It's great to be involved in helping define how a medium evolves.

HM: You've worked on the sci-fi/horror game series *Dead Space* as well as the comic book tie-ins. *Dead Space* for iPhone/iPad, the latest game in the series that you have worked on, was released a couple of weeks ago. How does writing for video games differ from comics or standard prose? Do you have as much creative input into the game world or do you have strict guidelines to play within?

AJ: It varies from game to game, even within the same universe like on *Dead Space*. Sometimes the basic story is already worked out before I come on board, and it's my job to stitch it all together with a script; sometimes the high concept is all that's in place, and I get involved in the narrative design, i.e. how the game story plays out; and most of the time it's somewhere between the two.

One of the good things about working on *Dead Space* specifically is that, given it's an original property and still quite young, there's a lot of room to come up with stuff that defines the game world. Like, with the first comic, almost nothing had been decided about the planetside colony before I came on board, so a lot of that -- the characters, their jobs and lives, the organisation of the mining effort, even the slang -- was left up to me. And that's had a knock-on effect throughout the series, which is very fulfilling creatively.

HM: Sega have recently unveiled work on a new futuristic sci-fi shooter, *Binary Domain*. From reading your blog it appears you have had a hand in its development, are you allowed to elaborate on that at this stage?

AJ: I can't say too much about *Binary Domain* right now, other than to confirm that yes, I'm involved in writing it, and have been working with Sega in Tokyo. It's the first time Sega Japan have ever used a Western writer for a Japanese-developed game, so it's all unexplored territory, and rather exciting.

HM: You have a few novels under your belt (including *Stealing Life*, published by Hub Magazine sponsor Abaddon), are there any plans for more novels in the future?

AJ: Definitely, yes. As I said before, comics is my first love. But writing a novel is a completely different challenge, not least in terms of how much time it takes. So I don't think I'll ever be someone who bangs out a novel per year, but I do have plans for more. I'm hoping my next will be a series of YA dark fantasy novels, but I won't swear to that; things always change!

HM: From speaking with you before, I gather that *Wasteland* has a definite endpoint. Was this something you had always planned or was it ever considered to run it as a continuing on-going series?

AJ: *Wasteland* has always been planned as a finite story. My favourite stories, in any medium, are those which have a definite end. The end helps define the story itself, and with something like *Wasteland* that's important, because the whole thing is really one long story, from start to finish, with a big mystery at the centre. If you're going to have an overarching mystery, you have to reveal it at some point, and so that's the natural place for it to end. The ending was planned before I even wrote the first issue.

HM: In *Wasteland*, the character of Abi comes across as important as that of Michael, if not more so, in terms of the development of the story. Will we see Abi move to even greater prominence as *Wasteland* progresses?

AJ: Abi and Michael are equals; Michael gets more "cover time" because he's the more iconic of the two, and more like a traditional anti-hero, but in terms of story importance there's nothing between them. And that will continue, right through to the end.

HM: Is A-Ree-Yass-I (fabled location of the beginning of the events that led to the downfall of mankind in *Wasteland*) actually Area51??

AJ: My lips are sealed.

HM: In *Spooked*, *Closer* and *Wasteland* you write convincingly female lead characters. Do you find this easy to achieve?

AJ: I don't know if I'd say it's easy as such, because it's never easy to create any good character, male or female. But there's no great mystery to writing "great female characters"; they're just "great characters" who happen to be women. I always try to have a diverse cast, but I never use gender (or race, or sexual orientation, or religion) as a substitute for characterisation. Life is diverse, and I like to reflect that.

HM: Have you ever considered re-visiting the worlds of some of your older graphic novels? *Spooked*, for example, which I felt was left open for further exploration and development.

AJ: *Spooked* was very much left open; it was planned as a three-volume series, but unfortunately immediately after the first book Ross and I both increased our paying workloads, and moved on to other things. I have sequel ideas for a couple of other older works, like *Three Days In Europe* and *The Long Haul*, but whether I'll get round to them, I don't know. I like creating new things.

HM: It's noticeable that in the art for the works noted above that the female characters are drawn to be more 'real-life', i.e. although the characters all have their own special 'look', they aren't of the usual "cheesecake" variety... Do you have a great deal of input into the art and character sketches and if so, do you find that the artists respond well to being able to draw interesting women in a way that still appeals visually?

AJ: I tend to give my artists copious notes and character descriptions up front, but then largely leave them to it; after all, they're the artist, not me. But it's true, those notes do often include things like "not built like a superhero!"

I also tend to choose artists who are a little unusual anyway, and most of them have no interest in cheesecake to start with. So maybe they do respond well to female characters who aren't defined by their bra size.

HM: You also do some design work on your graphic novels, how important do you feel being able to control some of the look and feel of your books helps the story telling process, if at all?

AJ: I think it helps insofar as all book design is geared towards priming the reader for the kind of story they're about to read. And, obviously, I like to think I have a pretty good idea what that story is and how to present it well. So where I think it's important, and where I'm in a position to make that decision, I'll handle it myself.

But I'm scaling that back, to be honest; *Wasteland* is the only book where I still do the design work as well as write, and once that's finished I may bow out entirely. The quality of comics design has come a long way since I first got into the industry. And that's not a rip on the designers; we've been blessed with many great designers for a long time. It's more to do with publishers finally recognising that design decisions matter, and just slamming everything on the page in the biggest and boldest type possible isn't always the right solution.

HM: You've created a soundtrack to accompany the *Wasteland* series. This adds to the growing amount of "backmatter" that is sometimes included with comic work nowadays. We see lots of it in certain projects by Warren Ellis, for example. How important to your work, and comic books/graphic novels in general, do you feel add-ons such as this are?

AJ: It's very important to *Wasteland*, because it's an outgrowth of the same sensibilities that inform the story in the first place. The "Walking The Dust" pieces, the original soundtrack, and even the website, are all geared towards building the same mood and feel. I think when backmatter's done like that, as a way of helping the reader get deeper into the creator's mindset, it's invaluable. Warren's very good at that, as is Ed Brubaker with the *Criminal* essays, and Matt Fraction's *Casanova* backmatter has always been stellar.

The best backmatter is like ambient music; if you pay attention to it, it's brilliant and will engage you. But you don't have to; you can ignore it just as easily. There's nothing in the *Wasteland* "extras" that readers absolutely need to know. But if they want to get into them, they're rewarded with an even deeper experience.

HM: Devin Grayson once commented on how she would work up a musical soundtrack before beginning a writing project (to get a feel for tone/mood etc). You've mentioned online how important music is to your creative process, also. Do you have a different soundtrack per project?

AJ: Not as such, but I'll often restrict my listening to a certain genre, or artist, to get me in the mood. I couldn't bear to listen to a single mix CD over and over again while writing, I'd be sick of it by the end.

So, for example, I have a "Dooooooooooooooooom" playlist in iTunes which I'll often set going on shuffle while working on *Wasteland*. I tend to play the "Metal" genre list for *Dead Space*. While I was writing *The Coldest City*, it was mostly classical CDs and movie soundtracks. And so on.

HM: You've recently been working on mainstream Marvel Comics property *Daredevil*, including the *Shadowland* event which saw you write the excellent tie-in mini series *Blood on the Streets*. Are there further plans to work with more 'mainstream' properties that you can tell us about?

AJ: Yes, there are plans, but no, I can't tell you about them, sorry!

HM: As a talented British writer, how did you come to walk down the road less travelled and skip doing any writing for *2000AD*? Was it something that never appealed to you or have you plans for working on it in the future?

AJ: I owe *2000AD* a huge debt; I grew up reading it, and it informed my own work in a huge way. Still does; *Wasteland* is definitely born of that same stable. But I was lucky; I came on the comics scene just as the Internet was starting to matter, and online collaboration was becoming viable, which blew open the "established routes" that had existed before. Suddenly, British creators didn't have to go through *2000AD*, as was once the norm.

I'd write for *2000AD* if they asked me, sure, but when I was starting out I had no intention of submitting dozens of *Future Shocks* (the done-in-one, six-pagers-with-a-twist that they run as filler) just to try and get a break -- mostly because I find those kinds of stories very difficult, and rather boring, to write. It's the same reason I never submitted spec backup stories for superhero titles; it didn't strike me as a useful expenditure

of effort, when instead I could be writing stories that I actually cared about for other publishers.

HM: In the past, you have worked with Alan Moore to adapt some of his work outside of comics into comic book form. Moore is undeniably a big name in the world of comics so how did it feel to work with him on those projects?

AJ: It was pretty awe-inspiring, literally. I was nervous as hell, not least because Alan's work was some of my favourite in *2000AD* when I was a kid, and I have nothing but respect for the man.

But eventually I just steeled myself and went for it; I figured, Alan wouldn't have approved my involvement unless he had confidence in me. I mean, it's not like he's known for a reluctance to speak his mind. And it turned out really well, partly because Alan's actually a really nice bloke. Of course, it may also have helped that I'm a Brummie...

HM: What else does 2011 have in store for you that you're allowed, and willing, to mention?

AJ: My Cold War spy thriller, *The Coldest City*, will be out from Oni sometime this year; *Wasteland* will continue, of course; there's more video game work in the pipeline; and I'm talking to Marvel about doing another series with them. That's about as specific as I can be, I'm afraid, which is very frustrating, but that's NDAs for you. Suffice to say, it's looking like a busy one, with lots of interesting stuff coming up!

Antony can be found online at www.antonyjohnston.com

Wasteland issue 1 is available free from <http://www.onipress.com/thebigwet/downloads/freeissue1.php>

Dead Space: Salvage went on sale January 18th from IDW and is also available digitally for ipad here;

<http://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/dead-space-salvage/id409395496?mt=8>

(photo by Charlie Chu)



Hub Magazine is Sponsored by Abaddon Books