

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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by alasdair stuart

The Things They Carried

I like titles. I collect them, and the one above comes from a collection of short stories by Tim O'Brien. O'Brien's a fascinating writer, a man who dealt with his experiences in Vietnam by writing them out, capturing his ghosts on the page. *The Things They Carried* is a series of linked short stories about a group of soldiers, one of whom is named Tim O'Brien. There are several different views of how much of the novel is true and O'Brien's discussion of 'happening truth' and 'story truth' has done nothing to assuage that.

I say that because I'm 400 or so pages into *The Passage* by Justin Cronin and the elements of it that are affecting me emotionally have got me thinking about what I carried into the book with me.

My best friend died when I was 17. I don't say this to elicit sympathy, rather to point the severe left turn my life took at that point. He had leukaemia for the third consecutive time and opted to check out on his terms, refusing treatment. All this happened in the same year I sat the most important exams of my life, moved from the place I'd lived in for 18 years and started university.

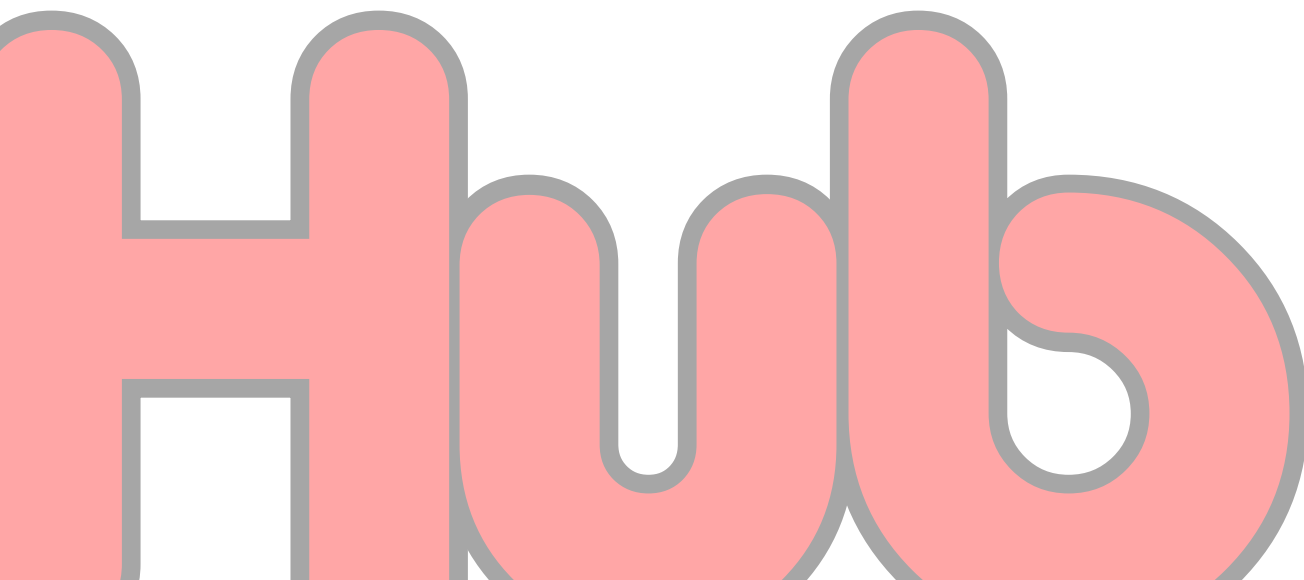
By the way I don't drink and every time I think about that year that fact amazes me.

There's a section of *The Passage* dealing with a colonist who has cancer. He's taken six months to not quite die at that point and his wife tells him it's okay to go, that he doesn't have to stay. It's acceptance, relief, pushing the boat out into the middle of the stream and it almost made me cry in the middle of a crowded bus. The section a few pages later, where Elton, the blind senior engineer, plays Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* to a friend of his because, he wanted her to hear how beautiful she was, finished me off.

We come in with preconceptions, with taste locked in and one of the things that pushes my buttons is just that; small, polite kindnesses in the face of the gathering dark. Bishop Octavian's final words to the Doctor in *'Flesh and Stone'* do the same exact thing and the reason is simple; my best friend died when I, and he, was 17 and all I could do was sit and wait and watch it happen. The little kindnesses meant a lot then. They still do.

This is why it's a fascinating book, at least for me. Cronin is adept at sketching very real, pragmatic, human contact and the complex web of love, affection, debt and irritation that holds the Colonists together is desperately, at times heart breakingly realised. We're human, it's all we know how to be and if that means we're more concerned with getting some stew than the forty two million vampires waiting to kill us outside the walls, then that's just how it is. Humanity red in tooth and claw can be magnificent, it can be evil, but most of all it can only ever be just that; human. The monsters may be outside the wall but we're trapped in here with ourselves and that makes for a fascinating examination of human contact and interaction with, just for giggles, added vampires.

We leave with baggage, just like we come in. But sometimes we get something new on our way to the exit, and put something else down. I won't ever forget him, I couldn't if I wanted to, but *The Passage* has given me a new perspective on his death and how I feel about it. I'll carry it for a long time yet but *The Passage's* exploration of loss and death, of humanity and our blunt refusal to accept anything we don't want to, is something I'll carry too. The pack may not be lighter but it certainly feels better balanced now.



FICTION

Wallflower

by jennifer williams

The letting agent made a joke about it at first. Carl smiled and nodded politely.

"Genuine Sixties that, I think," she said. "Very retro. They don't make them like that anymore, do they?"

Thankfully not, thought Carl. The wallpaper was lurid orange and deep crimson, like hazard lights on the aftermath of a road accident. The pattern consisted of huge, fleshy looking flowers and leaves, the biggest as large as Carl's head and the smallest the size of his fist. It made him nauseous just to look at it. Unfortunately, it was in every room save for the bathroom, and it even graced the outer hallway that led to the other flats.

"Did he have a job lot of it or something?"

The letting agent laughed nervously and clutched at her clipboard with her candy pink nails.

"Mr Kreesot is rather old fashioned, but you can see that the flat itself is well kept and fully furnished. As I mentioned, he lives in the top flat here so that he can make sure everything is running smoothly."

Carl wasn't so sure that having the landlord as a constant presence was such a hot idea, but the letting agent was certainly right about the flat. Despite the old fashioned wallpaper it had all the appliances you could reasonably hope for, and it was clean. And in truth, Carl didn't have the money or the will to quibble over the decor. He signed the tenancy agreement then and there and arranged to have his stuff moved in the following week.

For the first fortnight he was too busy getting familiar with the flat to notice anything strange. He settled in gradually, getting used to the shape of the rooms, the spaces, the time it took the shower to get hot in the morning, the noise from the neighbours next door. The man in the flat above his, a Rico Suarez according to the letting agent, periodically had his television playing very loud in the evenings. From the sounds of it he was a big fan of all the major soaps. Of Mr Kreesot, he saw nothing, although he occasionally heard a low thunder on the stairs as someone with a heavy step came down from the top floor, and then a few hours later, lumbered back up again.

Carl did his best to ignore the wallpaper. It was his constant companion, always just in the corner of his eye like the promise of a migraine, but he kept busy by unpacking boxes and putting up photographs on the hooks that were already there. He hoped that by breaking the space up a bit the red and orange eyesore would become less apparent, but it seemed to swallow up everything he placed in front of it. Even his favourite paintings, the ones he and Rebecca had chosen together at Brick Lane looked small and drained against that background. Eventually he took them back down again and put them away. He wasn't sure he was ready to look at those just yet anyway.

It was an early evening in spring, and the strains of *EastEnder's* theme tune were just draining away from upstairs when Carl decided to watch a DVD. It was a film he and Rebecca had missed at the cinema so they'd put it on the rental list months before it was even available. After the split he had changed the subscription to his new address. Seeing the envelope laying on the mat had made him think about the argument they'd had over that, but in truth it was an aftershock from a series of bigger arguments that all pointed to the same thing. The ground was breaking up, falling away; this world is over, kids, move on to the next.

Determined that such memories shouldn't spoil the film, Carl treated himself to a few bottles of beer and a takeaway curry, and arranged himself in exactly the sort of slouchy, over-relaxed position Rebecca would have hated. The film started, and he turned the volume up to compete with Rico Suarez's soap

marathon.

Twenty minutes later, Carl shook himself awake. He hadn't been asleep as such, but staring at the wallpaper directly to the left of the telly. Of the events in the film, he could remember nothing at all.

"I must be more tired than I thought."

He had a swig of beer and skipped the film back to the beginning, but within a few minutes he was back to staring at the wall. The flowers were, he thought, like no other flowers he'd ever seen. They were plants from a 1950s science fiction film, with thick, curling petals and ponderous alien-looking stamens. The leaves were similarly unlikely, some jagged and some smooth, and there was, he realised, no symmetry to any of it. Maybe that was why he couldn't tear his gaze away. The heart of each bloom was deep with shadows, the thick black lines that described the pattern converging there like the centre of a web....

The bottle slipped from his fingers, splashing lukewarm beer into his lap. Carl leapt up, swearing. As he ran to the kitchen to get a towel he was dimly aware of the end credits of the film playing.

Carl came home from work the following day in a foul mood. A headache had haunted him all afternoon, and Rebecca had sent him an especially terse email about some bills they still needed to divide up from their old flat. When he got into the house the ache between his eyes suddenly spiked into a sharp stabbing pain, and it became a struggle to get his keys in his own front door.

Once inside Carl kicked off his shoes and began to roll a cigarette. Technically smoking was strictly forbidden by Mr Kreesot. The letting agent had mentioned it several times, pointedly, perhaps taking note of the yellow nicotine stain on his right index finger, or the smell of tobacco on his coat. But Carl was in no mood for petty rules dictating what he could and couldn't do in his own home, so he sparked up and leaned out the window for the sake of compromise.

It was a fine evening and he forced himself to concentrate on the mild breeze and soft lamp light. Forget about it, he thought. The bill would be sorted, one way or another. A fresh start was what he needed. Perhaps living on his own would be a tonic. No more bitching about the toilet seat being left up, the pans not left to soak, using the last of the toilet roll and not replacing it. He would be his own man for a while, see how she'd like that. Carl blew smoke through his lips and watched it turn and swirl up into the night air. He'd show her.

After a while though, he became aware of a tingling itch on the back of his neck, like he was being watched. Turning back sharply he saw only his own living room, still partly crowded with unpacked boxes and wreathed in the hideous wallpaper.

"Bloody nicotine's got me twitchy."

He went back to his cigarette, but the feeling returned, stronger than ever. It made the back of his neck feel vulnerable and exposed, and suddenly leaning out the window into the night air was no longer so inviting. Carl turned back again and this time he thought he did spot movement, but it was in the walls.

He paused and pinched the bridge of his nose.

For the barest second it had been as if there was a breeze moving through the monstrous plants on the wallpaper.

Carl took one last drag on the cigarette and threw it out the window.

The following morning, a Saturday, there was a piece of paper on his doormat, apparently pushed under from the other side. On it, in squat crabby handwriting, was a note from Mr Kreesot.

"Carl, a word about the smoking, if you please. I am in all day."

Carl stared at the note for a full minute, trying to discern if he was angry or embarrassed. His landlord must have seen the smoke from his cigarette curling up past his own window, or had seen the used butt in the front garden. But on the other hand, why come all the way down here and not knock on the door? A polite word about not smoking face to face might have been less irritating than being summoned up to the landlord's flat for a telling off.

Carl sighed, screwed up the note and shrugged on his jacket. Best to get it over and done with.

The stairs up to the third floor were scuffed and dirty, not nearly as well maintained as the lower floors. The wallpaper pressed in on either side, sick blooms in an outlandish jungle, and Carl tried not to let his

shoulders brush against it. When he got to the top apartment the door swung open before he could knock, and Mr Kreesot bobbed into sight like a whale carcass floating on a stormy sea.

The word that sprung to Carl's mind and refused to budge was "toad". The man was shorter than Carl, and nearly as wide as he was tall, so that he appeared to be almost spherical. He was overweight, certainly, but there was a compactness to his flesh that meant there was no flab as such, and no wobbling jowls. His face looked to have been constructed from firm handfuls of grey putty and a ring of fine black hair served to highlight his bald spot rather than hide it. Small grey eyes peered out of thick creases at the tops of his cheeks, which were themselves dotted with dark marks, like liver spots. He wore an old fashioned striped shirt underneath a brown tank top. Everything about him seemed to be covered in a light coating of grease.

At the sight of his tenant Mr Kreesot twisted his mouth into a grin, revealing small even teeth set into bright pink gums. They were the most colourful thing about him.

"Carl! Do come in, please. You've been here a little while now but I've not had a chance to make myself known to you." His voice was educated, calm, self assured, and weirdly at odds with his unhealthy appearance. Carl shuffled into the flat, nodding politely. The room was crowded with items, and immediately he had to step to one side to avoid colliding with a coffee table. There were three televisions, two sideboard units covered with ornaments and keepsakes, two small tables that he could see, a writing desk with two computer monitors balanced on it, and everywhere framed photographs of grinning people. Carl couldn't see Mr Kreesot in any of them.

And there was the ever-present wallpaper, giving everything a bloody sheen.

"I'm sorry about the smoking Mr Kreesot. I'd just had a bad day and I needed to calm my nerves, you know?"

Kreesot waved a pudgy hand dismissively and disappeared into the small kitchen. When he carried on talking, Carl reluctantly followed him.

"I understand, of course I do. This is new, we're new to each other and we all need to find out where our boundaries are." The kitchen was similarly crowded. On a stove spotted with fat a large pan was on the boil, filled with a lumpy sort of stew. "But smoking is something I do feel quite strongly about, I'm afraid." Kreesot put a kettle on and began retrieving mismatched mugs from a cupboard. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

He didn't, but Carl nodded anyway, feeling he should at least try to make a good impression.

"The smell of it hangs around for months afterwards, and it stains the décor." The kettle boiled and Kreesot poured hot water over a couple of teabags. Carl briefly considered mentioning that a bit of yellow staining on the wallpaper could hardly make it any worse, and then thought better of it. "Milk? Sugar? Just the milk then. Here you go. Now, as I was saying, I had a tenant before who used to smoke like a chimney and it made the whole place smell just dreadful. He didn't last long of course, and we soon got Rico in to replace him. So if you could refrain, that would be just so lovely."

Carl nodded in what he hoped was a convincing manner and sipped his tea. It tasted like the milk was close to spoiling.

"I haven't met Rico yet," he said to fill the awkward silence.

"Quiet man, keeps himself to himself." In the pause, the stew bubbled over slightly and Kreesot barged past Carl to turn the heat down. The contact was only very brief, the back of the large man's hand brushing Carl's bare forearm for less than a second, but it was enough to make him cringe. Kreesot was smooth, as though covered in Vaseline, and slightly moist. Carl was filled with a sudden urge to wash his hands.

"Thank you for the tea, Mr Kreesot, that's very kind of you, but I need to be getting back. Still got some unpacking to do, you know how it is."

"Of course, don't let me hold you up." Kreesot moved away from the stew, running the palm of his hand over the wall as he did so. It made an unpleasant, rasping sound that made Carl think of the barbed surface of a cat's tongue, and then he was being ushered towards the door. "Do let me know if you should have any problems!"

On his way back down to the ground floor, Carl paused outside the first floor flat. Inside he could hear the

television blaring as usual. *Emmerdale*, by the sounds of it.

As foolish as it made him feel, Carl found that he didn't want to go straight back to his empty flat. He wanted to talk to someone normal, as though this would wash away the greasy memory of Mr Kreesot, so without really thinking about it he knocked on Rico's door. After a long, reluctant pause he was greeted by a suffocating wall of beer breath, closely followed by the emaciated form of Rico Suarez. Carl's grandmother would have said he was a "filleted earwig", and indeed there was something vaguely insectoid about the man. Pale and almost painfully slim, his jet black hair was slicked back against his head with a generous amount of gel, giving it the look of a shiny helmet or carapace. A straggly black beard adorned his lips and chin like an afterthought, reminiscent of a child who draws a felt tip moustache under their nose in an effort to look more like their dad. Rico's eyes peered out from between dark shaded lids.

"Who're you?"

"Rico, is it? I live in the downstairs flat, just wanted to say hello really." Carl tried out his best friendly neighbour smile, but was met with sleepy indifference.

"Carl," said Rico. "I've seen your post."

"Er, yes. That's me." Now that he was here, Carl found he wasn't sure what he wanted to say. Spontaneous conversation with strangers in London was like an extreme sport: not recommended and likely to end in injury. Behind Rico the flat was in near darkness, the curtains pulled and the only light coming from the flickering television. He could still make out the pattern on the walls though, and in the spirit of solidarity he nodded to where Rico's hand rested on the wallpaper.

"What about this decor, aye? Like going back in time forty years." He forced out a laugh. Rico looked at the wall, and for the first time seemed fully aware of where he was. He drew his hand back from it hurriedly.

"Yeah, man." Carl noted with alarm that his neighbour's eyes were watering and blinking rapidly. "It gives me such headaches, you know?" Rico tapped long pale fingers against his slightly bulbous forehead. "And I have nightmares where I can smell it, sometimes."

Carl took a couple of steps backwards, wondering how he could extract himself from the suddenly weird conversation. Was everyone who lived here unnecessarily creepy?

"Well, nice to meet you Rico. I'd better get back. Catch you later, yeah?"

Whatever had come over Rico seemed to fade from his eyes, and a sleepy expression shuffled back into position on his face. He nodded slowly, no longer meeting Carl's gaze.

"Sure man, sure. Catch you later."

Without waiting to see his neighbour close the door, Carl went downstairs to his own flat, and ran his hands under the tap. After a couple of minutes, he heard Rico turn the volume on the TV up.

It was the smell that woke him.

When he was a kid his grandfather had an old water butt at the bottom of the garden, hidden from view of the house by the shed. One summer, a blackbird got inside it somehow and drowned, and it was a number of days before they realized it was in there. It was a sweltering summer, and the smell that hit them when they took the lid off was enough that his grandfather, a stoic man who had pulled bodies from the sea in his navy days, had frowned and spat into his hanky. It was rotten and sweet, sulphur and spoiled meat – and that was the smell that hung in his bedroom.

Carl's first thought was that he must have left something awful in the bin too long, but in truth it wasn't that sort of smell. He sat up in the dark and pressed his fingers to his nose.

"What the hell...?"

It was like the bins outside a butcher's shop, like a compost of worms. Carl shook his head. He was still half asleep. Swinging his legs out of bed to open a window, he spotted something else. A small amount of orange light from a street lamp outside fell on the wall above his bedside table, and the wall there was glistening, as if it were wet.

Carl opened the window and turned back to the wall, reaching out to touch his fingers to the damp and stopped half way. Whatever the wetness was, the smell was definitely coming from it, and he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to get the substance on his fingers. What if a sewage pipe were leaking from the flat above? With a noise of sleepy impatience he flicked the wall light on, and winced against the light. The

wallpaper was waiting for him in all its orange and red glory, and it was all glistening, all wet... and moving. Slyly, like the rustling of snakes in long grass, the flowers and leaves and vines were twisting sinuously around each other.

Carl found that he couldn't move. His eyes were rooted to the strange jungle on his walls, no more able to look away or flee than an insect trapped in tree sap. As he watched, the flower petals began to pulsate, opening up as though they were warmed by an alien sun that he couldn't see or feel.

It's me, he thought wildly. I am their sun, they open for me.

The inner petals peeled apart, revealing tiny globes within, while the leaves and vines rustled ecstatically. The flowers opened their eyes, and Carl began to cry.

He woke up the next morning lying at the foot of the bed with the covers tangled around his lower body. Of the previous night he only had vague impressions. There had been a terrible smell, an orange light, and a sense of being watched. Before he ducked his head under the shower he caught sight of his face in the bathroom mirror and was surprised to see that his eyelids were puffy and red, as though he'd been crying, though he had no memory of it.

He sat through the morning meeting at work without really listening, doodling instead on his notepad and concentrating on not nodding off. When his boss slapped him on the shoulder and jerked him back to attentiveness, he found that his page was covered in curious organic-looking swirls.

Lunchtime passed in a similar haze. Normally Carl would sit in the small canteen with his colleagues, eating whatever dubious pasta was on that day's menu, but he found he had no stomach for food at all and instead he took another coffee to the bench outside the main building and sat on his own for a while. Despite it being early spring and the nip in the air left over from the morning's frost, Carl drifted off to sleep and dreamed of a brightly coloured jungle that was forever in the corner of his eye. Creatures were moving in the jungle, he could hear and smell them, but they never came out to where he could see them.

By the late afternoon, after a number of accidental naps in front of the computer, Carl decided that he was of no use to anyone in the state he was in, and arranged with his boss, Bill Singh, to go home early.

"You've not been yourself today," said Bill. He was a portly man who used his paunch as a sort of barrier between himself and his employees. His face was all smiles, but get too close and the belly would come into play. "Get some rest, yeah? I need you sharp for the meeting with the IT bods tomorrow."

"Sorry Bill, I'll be fine after a good night's sleep. I think it was the smell, you know."

Bill Singh's smile faltered a little, and he nodded Carl out the door.

When he got home and stepped inside the front door, Carl stood for a time and looked at the wallpaper in the hallway. In the semi-dark of the small space it was truly oppressive, creating a tunnel through unfriendly foliage, one that made him anxious about touching the walls as he passed. Suddenly he remembered what Rico Suarez had said about the smell that sometimes gave him headaches. His comments had appeared to be related to the wallpaper, and Carl could still remember the terrible stench that had haunted his sleep the night before. Could it be possible that the wallpaper was made of some old, dodgy substance, something probably banned now? It was like those stories you heard on consumer rights programmes sometimes, about asbestos being found in old attics and sofas made in foreign countries that were highly toxic to the people that sat on them. If this were the case, then they would be able to take their concerns to Mr Kreesot and get the bloody house redecorated. He might be fond of the hideous eyesore adorning his walls, but if it was genuinely hazardous to his tenants' health then he would have no choice but to get rid of it.

With renewed purpose, Carl took the stairs two at a time and knocked firmly on Rico Suarez's door. It was only when knocking a third time that he noticed the television wasn't on, and there was no sound of movement from inside the flat. He was just considering writing a note with his phone number on and slipping it under the door when a creaking on the stairs above alerted him to the approach of Mr Kreesot. Immediately Carl wondered if he still smelt of tobacco from that day's cigarette breaks.

Kreesot appeared on the steps like an errant air balloon, his stomach pushing at the buttons on his vest. If anything he looked even greasier than the last time Carl saw him; he appeared to be sweating great

glistening drops of it from his forehead and there were gravy smears on his shirt.

"You won't have much luck there, I'm afraid. Our friend Mr Suarez has moved out."

Dumbly, Carl turned back to the door as if expecting Rico to swing the door open and prove the landlord wrong.

"Really? I mean, I heard him in there yesterday, with the TV and that."

Kreesot shook his head slowly, as if he were wishing he were not the bearer of bad news.

"He was a troubled man, you know. The televisual periodicals were not his only addiction. He finally lost his job, Carl, and sadly he could no longer pay his rent. A great shame. He was a good tenant, always kept himself to himself and never a complaint from him. As long as he had his soaps and his vodka he was as happy as, what is it you say? A pig in its own effluent." Kreesot smiled, baring his small neat teeth, and tented his porky fingers against the wall. Carl considered bringing up the possible toxicity of the wallpaper, but without an ally or any sort of evidence he felt vaguely foolish. After all, they were standing surrounded by the stuff and there was no sign of any aroma or damp. It was probably all a dream, brought on by the stress of his break up with Rebecca. In any case, he had no desire to stand in the hallway talking to Kreesot any longer. As if sensing that, the landlord took a couple of steps towards him.

"Was there anything I could do for you? Any problems at all? If there is, please do let me know. I'm in the middle of preparing dinner at the moment but it's nothing that can't be put in the slow cooker, as it were."

"Oh no, I just wanted a chat. You know, about the soaps," he finished lamely. "You don't have a forwarding address for him, or a phone number at all?"

"I had no idea the two of you were that close." Kreesot pressed one finger to his lips in a mimicry of thinking. Carl noticed that the nail had a thick line of brownish filth under it. "I don't believe he left any forwarding information but I shall certainly have a look for you, Carl."

"That would be brilliant, thanks." Carl began to back away down the corridor, towards the steps that took him to his own flat. "I'll let you get back to your dinner."

Kreesot smiled again, showing more of his gums than Carl wished to see.

"You are most kind."

Back in his living room, Carl paced the floor. At first he kept his eyes on the carpet, but again and again his gaze would be dragged back to the livid walls. He knew that the sensible thing to do would be to go out for the evening, perhaps give one of his mates a ring and meet down the pub for a catch up. He'd been largely insular since the break up, unwilling to face going over the whole sorry mess with a well-meaning friend, but perhaps his isolation was the true cause of his disrupted sleep pattern and odd behaviour lately.

He got as far as putting his jacket on when a movement out the corner of his eye stopped him dead. The flowers on the wall above the sofa were twitching ever so slightly, the edges of the petals beginning to undulate and throb. As he watched, the movement spread outwards like ripples in a pond until most of that wall was alive with a soft, sighing rustle. Carl dropped his coat and knelt on the sofa. The wallpaper was growing moist, almost as if it were sweating. Like the night before, the centres of the blooms began to peel open to reveal eyes that rolled and winked at Carl.

And Carl couldn't look away. Not even when the rotten meat stench began to pour from the walls like sour sweat, not even when a glistening liquid began to run down the wallpaper and stain the back of his sofa. Instead, he leaned forward until his cheek brushed its surface.

"I am their sun," he murmured. The wall was warm and wet, like a huge red and orange tongue. "And they open for me."

He splayed his fingers against the wall, and in the end this was what brought him back to himself. The silver thumb ring Rebecca had bought for him when they were on holiday in Greece caught the light and briefly grabbed his attention. Instantly he remembered the long days on the beach, the funny little restaurant they'd found that had plastic donkeys on all the tables, the tops of Rebecca's shoulders red and peeling where she'd burnt them... They were tiny memories, but they were real enough to shock him awake again. He stumbled back from the wall, crying out with disgust and wiping his hands on his shirt. The wallpaper had stopped moving, but he could feel it watching him.

Carl left the flat at a pace and ran up the stairs to Rico's apartment. He was suddenly certain that the skinny young man hadn't moved out at all, and was probably lying on the floor at that very moment in a sort of toxic stupor, unable to call for help or crawl away. Without bothering to knock he threw his shoulder against the door, once, twice, until it crashed open on the silent flat.

"Rico? It's Carl from downstairs."

The curtains were still drawn and the living room was a collection of shadows and half-hidden furniture. Carl trod on a discarded pizza box and got cheese on his shoe.

"Are you in here? I thought you might be in trouble. If you're here, give us a shout, aye?"

There was the smell again. Not as strong as it had been in his own flat, but still enough to dry up the back of his throat. Stepping carefully around the small coffee table crowded with empty bottles and fast food containers, Carl pulled the heavy curtains aside. The last of the evening's light revealed an untidy, sad little room, dusty and uncared for... and on the wall next to the front door was a mess that had once been Rico Suarez.

A raw bloody skeleton clung to the wallpaper like a limpet on a rock. It was still wearing a black t-shirt with the emblem of some rock band on the back, but that was torn and soaked with blood. All the skin and flesh appeared to have been pared away, leaving ragged remnants of muscle and tendon, and the skull was turned at a painful right angle to the wall, so that its bony cheek was pressed lovingly to the bloodstained wallpaper. Rico Suarez's eyes stared raptly at nothing.

"Oh, god, no."

Bile rose in his throat and Carl pressed the back of his hand to his mouth. He had to call the police, or an ambulance, or something. But even as he made his way to the door again the wallpaper began to twitch and move, swirling faster and faster near the body of Rico. Half stumbling Carl ran back down the stairs and into his own flat, and snatched up the phone from its cradle. He'd entered the first two digits when the wallpaper surrounding his small phone table burst into frantic movement, swirling and rustling with a new, hypnotic energy. The colours flashed inside his head over and over, orange and red fireworks that pushed away all thought of escape, all sense of terror, while the walls began to sweat their foul smelling fluid again. The phone dropped from his numb fingers and Carl pressed his hands and face to the unnatural jungle. All around him the blooms opened their eyes.

"So soon, Carl?"

The voice was Mr Kreesot's, although it barely registered with Carl. He tried to turn his head to look, as any animal will on hearing a sound directly behind them, but the viscous liquid that covered his face and hands had become fearsomely sticky, holding him fast to the wall. His legs kicked weakly.

"I was waiting for our friend Rico for a long time. Waiting till my reserves were low, at least. You I thought I could have over the autumn, make some of those fine stews with root vegetables, always so pleasing on cold October nights, as it were."

Kreesot came into Carl's view and knelt down beside him. From his pockets he was busily taking long steel knives, the sort you sometimes saw in butcher's shops.

"Ah, not to worry, Carl, my friend. I have a very large freezer upstairs."

Mr Kreesot got to work, and beneath the pain and the blood Carl was the sun, and they opened for him.



The Final Empire

reviewed by catherine mann



By **Brandon Sanderson**
Gollancz
rrp **£8.99**

The tag line asks: What if the Dark Lord won? It's an interesting question, and one that rarely gets answered. The Final Empire is the dominion of the Lord Ruler, a god-emperor who has reigned for a thousand years. It's a two-tier society consisting of pampered, scheming nobles and oppressed, miserable workers, called the skaa. No rebellion has ever made a real impact, and no one has ever persuaded the skaa that they can change their circumstances. However when an ingenious thief recruits other criminals and turns himself into a freedom-fighter, the Lord Ruler is faced with a challenging and unorthodox new foe.

This book is the reason Brandon Sanderson is now writing Robert Jordan's epic Wheel of Time series. The Final Empire was published in the US by Tor in 2006, and greatly impressed Jordan's widow. Not being a reader of the Wheel of Time I can't comment on how Sanderson is doing continuing that mighty series, although I can see why he was chosen to do it.

The Final Empire resembles a familiar fantasy dystopia: a shadowy, powerful ruler oversees an empire of corrupt noblemen and an oppressed underclass. However the story and setting don't feel typical. The world has been thoughtfully created, a fact that becomes more obvious as the story progresses. There are detailed maps – if you like that sort of thing, although they aren't required reading. The system of magic – or powers, or abilities, depending upon your preferred term – has been fully worked-out and is refreshingly original. In this way The Final Empire is similar to Sanderson's standalone debut novel, Elantris, which I also recommend. Like Elantris, it's clear that at some point in history something went badly wrong. Whilst Sanderson's first book had the corruption happening just a decade earlier, in The Final Empire things have been bad for a millennium. The world is full of volcanoes, which rain ash across the land. The effect of this environmental peculiarity is wide-ranging; the sun is red, plants are brown, and simply being able to keep clean is a sign of high status. It is, unsurprisingly, like a stereotypical evil empire; the kind of landscape a cartoon artist might draw behind a Dark Lord. However these details are fed to the reader slowly and gradually, so that by the time you realise that the author is playing with a stereotype, you're already invested and able to picture the setting as a realistic world.

Another deviation from the realms of fantasy trope is the characterisation. The heroes are not a group of dedicated rebels, pulling themselves up from nothing, for liberty and equality. In fact the Rebellion – a longstanding, yet ineffectual organisation – proves decidedly unimpressive. The real problem is that the skaa have been underdogs for so long that the majority are far too downtrodden to disobey their overseers. Enter a crack team of prosperous and devious thieves who are adept at swindling nobles and fooling the government. Even they think that overthrowing the empire is an insane and impossible prospect. However, under the leadership of criminal genius and newly-minted legend Kelsier, it's a challenge they're will to take – for the promise of riches, of course. The banter between the thieving crew members is friendly, mocking and witty, conversations between men who have been working together for years. These relationships are all the more poignant when seen through the eyes of Vin, a girl who has lived on the harsh fringes of life for her entire childhood.

Vin is a newcomer to the group, to the plan, and to the magic of Allomancy. It's through her eyes that we meet the characters, learn the secrets and see the plot unfolding. Vin grows and changes during the course of the book. Her initial instincts are all suspicion and self-preservation, learned whilst living on

the streets under the supervision of her cynical brother. However Kelsier not only helps her discover her abilities, he makes sure she understands the benefits of friendship, empathy and trust. At first you feel sorry for her, but as the book progresses Vin earns the respect and affection of the reader, as well as the other characters. Kelsier, as the other main character, is a real contrast to Vin. He's brimming with self-confidence and determined to succeed, with a smile on his face and a glass dagger in his hand. He's built up as the hero of the book; it's his vision and charisma that drives the plot. However he can be blinded by his extreme prejudice against the nobility, and is not without a dark side and a hard edge. He's an interesting and dynamic character, chiefly because you never know what's he's going to do next.

The main supernatural element is the magic of Allomancy –although as an inherited talent it's more like a superpower than anything mystical or occult. After a traumatic event some people discover they have abilities, these people are Allomancers. Commonly Allomancers have only a single ability, however a few can tap all the abilities, these people are called Mistborn. Allomantic power can only be accessed by ingesting metals, each of which has its own specific effects and limitations. Sanderson clearly outlines what each Allomantic ability can and can't do, then he has a lot of fun showing off all the clever, devious ways these powers can be used. Through Vin the reader experiences the excitement and novelty of discovering new abilities, and ways to use them. With Kelsier we are shown just how devastating an experienced Mistborn can be. The combat scenes, in particular, read like an exciting description of a telekinetic martial art.

You may have noticed that I thoroughly enjoyed this book. I will add that, so far, everyone I've recommended it to has also enjoyed it. The story is gripping, the characters are interesting, the setting is coherent, and the whole thing is well written. The main problem is that it takes a bit of reading to become immersed in the book, but this is common in a fantasy that features a new and unfamiliar setting. Once you the plot gets going it hooks you, reels you in and doesn't let you go. I was glad that *The Final Empire* wasn't the standard first-in-a-trilogy book. In a traditional three-volume fantasy it would have taken all three books to cover what happens in just this one, proving that Sanderson is not one for filler or plot-padding. The scale of the story in this one volume is impressive, and it's clear that Sanderson has a greater and wider tale to tell. This is exciting because at the end of this book you simply don't know what will happen next, but hopefully you'll be determined to find out.

You Suck

reviewed by martin willoughby



By Brandon Sanderson
Orbit
rrp £8.99

This is one of the funniest books I've read this year and a great antidote to *Twilight*. It involves a lot of young people who are, or become, vampires, two teenage minions and several other youngsters who are vampire hunters.

The story begins when Tommy Flood wakes up to find that he's dead. His girlfriend and hot lover, the redhead Jody, has turned him into a vampire and he's angry. His anger soon subsides when he discovers that having sex as vampires is not only great, but hot. He ends up hanging from rafters, destroying furniture and breaking limbs.

Jody was herself turned by a vampire called Elijah a couple of months ago and had originally taken Tommy on as her minion. As she passes out during the day she needed someone to do things for her, like rent a flat. Well, she can't keep office hours.

Elijah is encased in Bronze and is kept in Tommy and Jody's apartment. He escapes when he's left on a pier and some 'dudes' try to shoot him as they think he's being a living sculpture. I'm not even going to try

and explain how that comes about, you'll just have to read it yourself.

Also involved are a group of youngsters known as The Animals. They spend their nights stacking shelves at a supermarket... in-between using the frozen turkeys as bowling balls. Recently they helped Tommy, their shift leader, to encase Elijah in bronze. With the proceeds from the sale of Elijah's art they ransacked from his expensive yacht they have disappeared to Las Vegas and hired a blue-skinned hooker called Blue to give them all the sex they can pay for. As they have a few hundred thousand dollars, that's a lot of sex.

The star of the book, though, is a teenage Goth who has the street name of Abby Normal (real name Allison). Her diary entries are extremely funny. She's not a particularly good Goth as she is too perky and not miserable enough.

After setting the scene (San Francisco), the story settles down to one of Jody and Tommy's efforts to avoid being killed by Elijah or arrested by the police. They manage both.

Along the way, the blue skinned hooker finds out about Tommy being a vampire and decides to handcuff him to a bed and insists that he turns her into one so she can have life immortal and earn lots more money. After he does so, she goes on her own murderous rampage, turns The Animals into her minions and starts a reign of terror that's ended by Elijah who's looking for some sexy company before he leaves Frisco.

The fly in the ointment is Steve. He's a medical student who thinks he has found a way to turn vampires back into humans and drives around in an old Honda armed with UV lights that can incinerate vampires... well sunlight works, so why not UV? With his help, Elijah is prevented from killing Jody and Tommy and Abby gets to be their minion for almost, like, evah... and Steve's girlfriend.

This is an excellent book and will keep you entertained from start to finish. And it has a better of a last line.

Tron: Legacy

reviewed by ro smith



I'm a big time Tron fan, so I was excited beyond words and right down to my toes to hear that a new Tron film was coming out. In some ways, I was going to be pleased no matter what the film was like. In others, I was bound to be disappointed, too. I knew these things going into the movie, and you should probably be aware of them going into this review.

For those unfamiliar with the original film's plot, it went like this: Kevin Flynn is a computer programmer and games designer. He designs a highly successful video game called 'Space Paranoids', which is stolen by Ed Dillinger, an executive at the company where he works, which proceeds to make squillions without Flynn.

With the help of friends Alan Bradley (Bruce Boxleitner) and Lora Baines (Cindy Morgan), Flynn breaks into his old company, Encom, to attempt to steal his programs back. However, the company also has an advanced Master Control Program (MCP) that has developed an intelligence of its own, and has ambitions to control not just all the programs in the company, but the whole computerised world. The MCP and Dillinger are in league. When Flynn breaks in, he uses Dr Baines's terminal in her lab, where the company has been experimenting with 'digitising' objects from the real world. Naturally, the MCP, perceiving Flynn as a threat, takes the opportunity to digitise Flynn.

Flynn enters a virtual world where programs are intelligent (to variable extents) and lead dangerous lives under the fierce control of the MCP, in terror of being assigned to The Games. Together with Tron (a program designed by Alan Bradley, also played by Bruce Boxleitner) and Yori (again, Cindy Morgan), Flynn fights to defeat the MCP, freeing the other programs from its dominion, and allowing Flynn to escape from the Grid, back into the real world.

The new film picks up a few years down the line, where Flynn has become a great success, in charge of Encom. He's also picked up a wife and kid along the way. Then, one night, having told his young son that he's done something that's going to change the world, Flynn disappears, never to return. Sam, his son, grows up to be a tear-away with no interest in running the company, despite Alan's (Boxleitner from the previous film) hopes that he might cease control of his father's company and run it in a free and open way.

Until, that is, Alan receives a page from Flynn's offices – from a line that's been disconnected for 20 years. Rather than answering this himself, Alan urges Sam to do so. Sam returns to Flynn's old arcade, finds his hidden lab, and winds up getting digitised and thrown onto the grid.

Once there, he learns about the secret world of programs Flynn built and allowed to flourish independently from the outside world. Including Clu. Clu is a duplicate of Flynn himself, but as he was as a young man – which is confusing for his son, at first. Clu likes order and perfection, and apparently rebelled when Flynn discovered that programs had started to evolve all on their own without any regulation. Clu destroyed the new 'Iso' programs and chased Flynn into hiding – where he has been all these years, getting old and Zen-like. Now Sam must rescue himself, his father, and the last of the Isos (who happens to be a hot female-looking program), and prevent Clu from escaping into the outside world with his army of Evil Orderly Perfection.

So how does it rate?

Overall response: this was a fun movie, but it wasn't as good as the original. I suppose there's no surprise there, and even less surprise that a long-time fan would say such a thing, but I think it's an accurate assessment nonetheless.

The good: the CGI was pretty damn cool. It had to be really. The original Tron was a ground breaking piece of cinema, containing the first totally computer generated scene – the famous light-cycle sequence. Naturally, Tron: Legacy had to make use of the latest techno-cinema fad: 3D. There are a few really good sequences. In particular, I went into a bit of fan-heaven just about whenever the updated 'recognisers' came on screen (the massive, sinister, arch-like things, used for either flying around in or stomping on stuff). The updated light-cycle sequence was also quite fun, and, in general, the destruction of various programs in the games was both effective and surprisingly horrific in its depiction.

They were also working with an arguably even more interesting and original computerised de-aging process. Jeff Bridges had to not only play a much younger version of himself, but the ageless Clu. Ten years ago one might have employed a younger actor to do the job, but with this new process, we're being opened up to a wealth of new possibilities. I'm not sure how I feel about them. In a world where the pressure to extend youth and beauty is only increasing, this goes beyond a little retouching a magazine cover. The youth, beauty, and longevity of the stars on the screen is now literally unattainable for us mere mortals. On the other hand, I love that they were able to use Jeff Bridges to play his younger self – why not, if the man's still alive and up for the job?

So how did it work out? Well, I'd heard bad things about this – that it didn't really work, and was rather disappointing. But in terms of the actual visuals, I thought it was startling. He looked real. He looked like a younger version of himself, not a smoothed over or obviously CGI'd image of himself. That said, it wasn't without issue. They made him look younger, but they couldn't make him sound younger. Bridges has an older man's voice – a bit more muffled, a bit more gravelly. Often it simply didn't sound right, and it threw me out of the action. Moreover, he moved like an older man, and there's simply not a lot you can do about that. Still, the technology that worked on the image was definitely impressive.

As for the much anticipated Daft Punk soundtrack, I'm going to jump on the praise bandwagon. It was spot on. A wonderful balance between a frantic and nostalgic electronica that gave a wonderful 80s feel, as well as injecting something more up to date. It was perfect, and I enjoyed it immensely.

The not quite so good: there's a lot about this film that simply didn't make sense, and one wonders if heavy editing were engaged in somewhere along the way. OK, so this is a film based around the idea that programs have secret inner lives and can interact intelligibly with a 'digitised' human being, but still. At least in the original Tron there was some attempt to relate these programs with programs one might actually encounter in the real world and have a use for. The original Clu (not to be confused with the Clu of the new movie) was a hacking program; Tron was a security program; Yori was involved in the creation of digital

simulations; Bit was, well, a bit. Their designations might have been vague, but at least they had some kind of role to perform. It's not clear what any of the programs in the new film were supposed to do, except play games. Granted, Flynn had cornered this 'Grid' off from the rest of the world as his own personal playground, but they can't have been 'evolving' on their own, because that's what the Isos were meant to be special for doing, so what was going on, here?

Then there's character motivation. If Clu is driven by order and perfection, why is he obsessed with

The Games? And why does he want to escape to the outside world? How is he going to escape? The MCP wanted to control the real world, electronically, but it was never clear that a computer program could become a real, fully formed human being, simply because something that was once human could be so again. Why does Clu even care about the real world? And how is this order-driven creature related to the original hacking program anyway?

The problems with Clu pale in comparison to Tron, though. This is the movie's title character. In the original it was, really, as much his quest as Flynn's. Now he's relegated to playing in The Games as a sort of super-gladiator who's fairly solidly obedient to Clu throughout most of the movie without any clear explanation as to why. His conversion to the 'good' side at the end felt like an after-thought. My friend (who had only a vague recollection of the original film) said that he didn't even realise 'Tron' was a character in the film until the end. I like to think that maybe there were some bits of script and character development that were cut, but if so, they were lost to the detriment of the story.

It was also disappointing that we didn't get to see Tron's face. I guess they must have spent a fortune 'de-aging' Jeff Bridges, and doing the same for Boxleitner, too, would have been very expensive indeed. Plus, it was presumably supposed to be unclear that it was Tron until a fair way into the movie, but here the balance was clearly missed. As a fan, it was obvious that this was Tron from the start, but my less-obsessive friend was just confused by it.

Another place I felt there might have been some script missing was with the character Zeus. I liked this guy – he was morally complex and highly charismatic. It was heavily indicated that he had some history with the love interest (aka the last Iso), but we never got to find out what that was. As a result he appears as a disappointing McGuffin, used to get all the lead characters together again and allow the plot to thicken.

The costuming also bothered me. It bothered me on two fronts. The first concerns women's shoes. Not one woman (of the tiny number in the film) wears a heel below 5 inches. It may seem petty, but I'm sick of it – sick to death. Was Audrey Hepburn not sexy in flats? It's not just Tron, it's an irritating trend across modern media, but it's a particularly daft case in point. I don't hate heels (as a particularly short woman, I have learnt to value them), but it's gone beyond silly. These are programs. They seem otherwise content to wear clothing according to function – why, why, must this pressure be applied to hobble women in ridiculous footwear when they're in a world completely divorced from our modern fashions? Show a bit of imagination!

To be clear, I don't want to say that this film is entirely rubbish from the point of view of the presentation of women. The love interest kicks some serious butt throughout the movie, and is the rescuer of the hero more times than he is the rescuer of her. That's no small thing, and I value it quite a bit. The problem is that there are so few women, and they are all highly sexually objectified. I mean, come on, what possible reason could programs having four fetish dolls to help them get dressed in the morning? This may be symptomatic of a general trend in cinema, but it's also illustrative of a broader failure of imagination in Tron: Legacy itself.

Which brings me to my second point: hair. Part of the reason you only got to see the faces of the characters in the original film was because dealing with hair on a blue screen would have been a nightmare. This is clearly no longer a problem – hurrah for technology! But it still felt like having the hero in a war film take his helmet off to make sure you can see his face: not strictly necessary and actually a bit stupid. There was no obvious reason for this change, and I liked the clean lines and feel of the original movie. Yes, it was simpler because it had to be, but it was also very beautiful, and emblematic of the foreignness of the computerised world. With the increasing quality and realism of computer graphics, I suppose the thought was that The Grid could reflect something more like modern computer games, but The Games were only ever a small part of The Grid. Again: the reasoning behind what's actually going on in

the computerised world appears to have been lost. I don't get why programs would have hair if they're not abandoning other constraints like the skin-tight rubber jumpsuits. I don't think 'Rule of Cool' applies here, because I think it made it markedly less cool.

Perhaps I am prejudiced. Perhaps I am a curmudgeonly old fan waving her stick at the kids on the lawn, but I don't think it's just nostalgia. I love me some special effects, but one thing I think we're losing in the rush towards ever greater realism is the sheer inventiveness and other-worldliness that coloured 70s and 80s sci-fi. You wouldn't get a film like the original Tron being made now, just like you don't get films like Logan's Run made anymore. You get films like The Island instead, which draw on inventive predecessors, but ultimately create a lesser, more confused, less inspiring products.

There's a drive to present the familiar, because it's assumed that audiences will balk at anything too weird. But that's what I'd like to see next – let's take this new technology and go somewhere really inventive with it. You can knock Avatar for a whole bunch of reasons (including the thoroughly unoriginal plot), but this is one area where it was doing something right. Show me the unreal. Show me something I don't get in real life, and make it into something I want to believe in. That's what the original Tron did for me, and that's what I found lacking in this sequel.

To re-iterate, though: this is a fun movie. Plot-wise, and imaginatively, I found it distinctly uninspiring, but that doesn't mean that it wasn't inspiring in other ways. It's an incredible opportunity to reflect on how far we've come in the last 30 years, and the difference is startling – not least because they didn't settle for using the grown-up version of the technology that brought the first film to life. They used two brand-spanking new technologies to press us even further, and they didn't do a half-arsed job with them. The film is nothing special, but the technology is. The original had the whole package, and that's why I loved it, but I don't think we should be too hard on the new film for failing to fill those shoes completely. They were very big.

