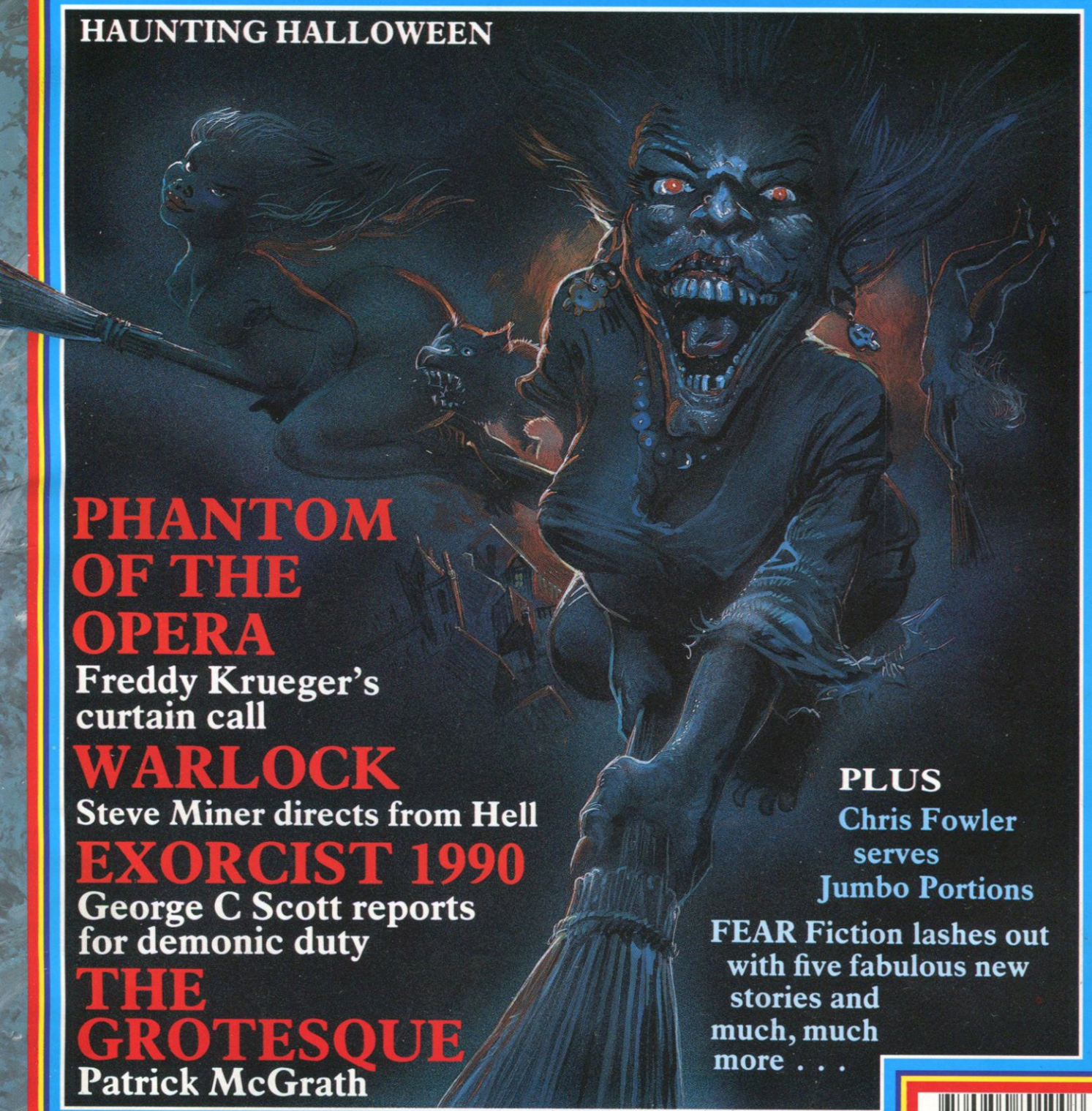


# FEAR

FANTASY, HORROR AND SCIENCE FICTION No.11 NOV 1989

HAUNTING HALLOWEEN



## PHANTOM OF THE OPERA

Freddy Krueger's curtain call

## WARLOCK

Steve Miner directs from Hell

## EXORCIST 1990

George C Scott reports for demonic duty

## THE GROTESQUE

Patrick McGrath

PLUS

Chris Fowler serves Jumbo Portions

FEAR Fiction lashes out with five fabulous new stories and much, much more . . .

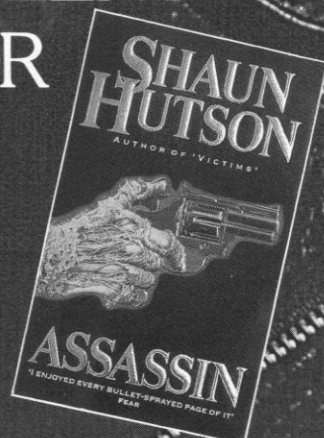
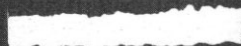
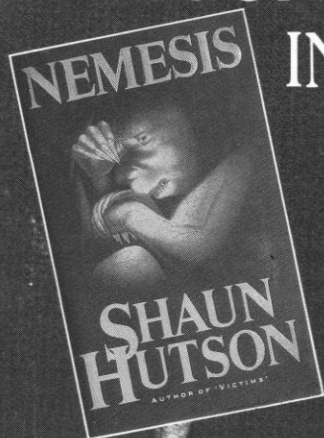
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# FEAR

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Steve Miner, director of low budget classics such as *Friday the 13th*, *House*, *Soul Man* and now *Warlock*, ascribes a measure of his success to his willingness to mix and match genres. He also makes a point of giving a humorous edge to even the darkest of stories, but he is not afraid of the sequel tag. He talked to John Gilbert in Los Angeles.

# MINER MIRACLES

Surprisingly, director Steve Miner is not a fan of the occult sub-genre that spawned his latest successful movie, *Warlock*. He may love the horror genre as a whole but he cannot bring himself to fall for something as outlandish as witchcraft. 'I don't believe

in it. I chose to do the movie because of the way it was written and the way in which it was based on something that could have credibility, if you bring the occult aspect in from the time of the witchcraft trials. *Warlock* was a combination of clever, witty writing and good research.'

David Twohy is responsible for the script and the months of research that went into its creation. He too has no personal belief in the occult, but witchcraft fascinates him for purely dramatic reasons. During his stint

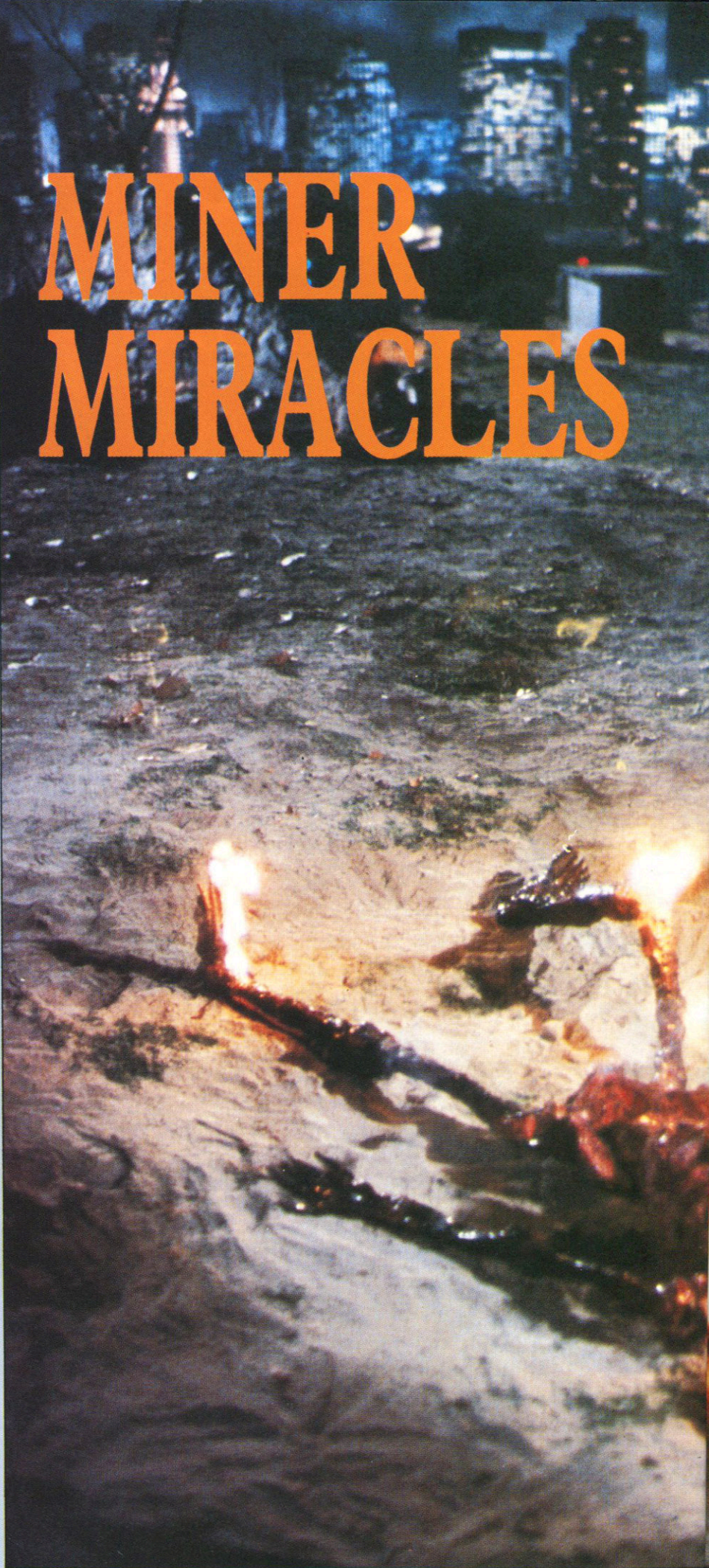
*"Warlock was a combination of clever, witty writing and good research"*

on the film he did large amounts of library research which he then combined with imaginary creations such as the witch compass.

He also paid two trips to Salem in Massachusetts, home of the infamous trials so strikingly portrayed in Henry Miller's play *The Crucible*. There he met with many witches who had chosen the town as their 'spiritual' home.

## HUNTER AND HUNTED

Realism played a large part in Miner's handling of the film, including the casting of the stars to play warlock and hunter. Both had to have English voices because the people in the period from which they came - seventeenth-century America - had yet to develop their contemporary accents and had their ancestry in Britain. 'Julian Sands, the warlock, was first cast. I sent him the script and had one conversation in some Godforsaken place in Russia. He was intrigued by the script and the character.'





Spontaneous combustion: the Warlock meets a fiery fate (left), Richard E Grant as Giles Redferne and Lori Singer as Cassandra (above) and I only have eyes for you . . . Julian Sands as the Warlock proffers a pair of medium-sized peepers (below)



The same was true of Richard E Grant (see **FEAR** Issue 7 for interview) who went on to play Giles Redferne, the witch hunter. His period of initiation was slightly longer and more involved than that of Sands. 'I saw *Withnail and I* and my assistant said that he'd be a really good warlock. I was knocked out by his performance and had to think about him as the warlock character, but we had already cast Julian. So, when we got to London, Richard came in to read for Redferne.'

Richard E Grant is renowned for his comedic roles in films such as *How to Get Ahead in Advertising* and, most recently, *Killing Dad*. His character in *Warlock* has a humorous, as well as desperate, edge and, as Miner acknowledges, he brought some laughs to this serious part. 'Almost all the humour in *Warlock* was scripted. I always wanted to have comedic elements, even though this is a very dark story. There was more funny stuff in the film which didn't work out as well as I had hoped, but Richard definitely made the most of every possible humorous situation. The lines were scripted, but his reactions weren't!'

*"Almost all the humour was scripted. I always wanted to have comedic elements, even though this is a very dark story"*

Lori Singer, who plays American girl-about-town Cassandra, provides a counterpoint for the olde worlde characters of the warlock and the hunter. Her pronounced US accent and glitter garb reinforce the contemporary elements within the film. But why did Miner choose Singer, who has mostly been associated with the popular *Fame* television series? 'She has a very modern air about her and she's a modern girl in her own right. She's smart, clever and has a lot of the qualities of Cassandra.'

## X MARKS THE SPOT

While the human participants achieved miracles with the story, the special effects lagged behind many other low-budget horror movies. The prosthetics were minor masterpieces, but the animated spurts of ectoplasm were dismissed by critics on the film's theatrical release.

Miner makes no excuses for the visuals but defends them in the context of the paltry budget. 'In retrospect, we had only X amount of dollars and some very hard things to accomplish. On a limited budget you just have to adjust the script, to have less rather than more.'

Grant's ectoplasmic fit was originally going to be accomplished with a brand mix of goeey gel, but Miner and Co never could seem to get the right consistency. 'We went into the film with a different concept as to how the ectoplasm would be done, but we changed it in mid-execution. Before we started shooting we tried to eliminate the ectoplasm, but in the end we elected to try and accomplish it on a limited budget.'

## THE WONDER YEARS

It was a brave decision and one which does not mar the film's effect. Indeed, the film has been so successful that Miner, Sands and Grant would all like to do a sequel. 'I don't know. If we were to do a sequel, it might be interesting to take it back in time. The story of Giles and his wife (who is killed



Time is running out for Cassandra, who is cursed by the Warlock to age a decade a day

by the warlock) is not really explored. We could also take Cassandra back to the seventeenth century.'

Miner is no stranger to sequels and would not be put off by having number 2 or

*"If we were to do a sequel, it might be interesting to take it back in time"*

3 tagged onto one of his movies. He did, after all, relish his involvement with the first three *Friday the 13th* movies. 'Without sequels, we wouldn't have a movie business. On *Friday the 13th* we made a conscious decision to continue to make the

same movie over again but each one would be slightly different. For instance, we decided to do three in 3D.'

His next movie project is unclear as Miner has just taken a break from the big screen. 'I took the whole summer off and was lax in my work habits. But I've just got into a TV thing recently with a primetime show about Elvis [Presley] aged nineteen. I'm also doing a series called *The Wonder Years* about a thirteen-year-old living in 1968 suburbia, and I've got a movie next spring.'

What is that likely to be? 'Well, I'd like to do a personal movie – something that I know about. It'll be personal and important to me.'



# APOCALYPSE NOW!



**"One morning I was out shooting pick-up shots, when two Jehovah's Witnesses tried to convert me. I told them it would take a sign from God. Ten minutes later, the big Whittier earthquake hit and rocked Southern California so the Witnesses came running back thinking they'd found a new recruit. But I told them it wasn't big enough"**

**Writer and director Steve De Jarnatt fought for nine years to make his new movie, *Miracle Mile*. Now, as this apocalyptic romance-thriller hits the big screen, he takes time out to talk with FEAR's Pat Jankiewicz about his nightmares, John Huston and Alfred Hitchcock, among others . . .**

**R**elaxing in a trendy Westwood delicatessen, Steve De Jarnatt looks like a cross between film director Terry Gilliam and a charismatic rock star. He is gratified that critics have hailed his first film as an off-beat masterpiece in the tradition of *The Terminator* and *After Hours*.

*Miracle Mile* is the frantic story of what happens to Harry, a young trombone player, when he answers a ringing pay phone and gets a misdialled message from a mid-American missile silo. What follows is his attempt to rescue himself and Julie, the waitress he loves, from a terrifying fate. The movie manages to be a scary, suspenseful and funny account of what could be the last night of mankind. How did De Jarnatt come up with such a bizarre storyline?

*'Miracle Mile* came from vivid nightmares I used to have, where I was always 'the first to know', and there was a clock ticking. Now, the film has left viewers with vivid nightmares. I've had people who couldn't drive home [after seeing the film]. Somebody needed medical attention. At one screening, a guy started hyperventilating and they had to call a paramedic. It really messes some people up because



**(AND THERE WILL BE NO SEQUEL . . .)**



On *Miracle Mile*: Harry Washello (Anthony Edwards) tries to escape before the city becomes Ground Zero

nobody makes movies where it doesn't always work out.'

The film takes its title from a wealthy-but-unusual district of Los Angeles. 'It's where the La Brea tar pits are, right in the middle of the Miracle Mile, right next to a giant skyscraper you have this hole in the ground that goes back tens of thousands of years, so I always love that part of town. I got to showcase it more than any other film has done.'

## HITCHCOCK'S DEADLY OBSESSION

Before *Miracle Mile* De Jarnatt made his directorial debut with the premiere episode of the new *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, a series that featured remakes from Hitch's classic television anthology. The segment was *The Man From the South* based on the Roald Dahl story and starring John Huston, Melanie Griffith and her mother, Tippi *The Birds* Hedren.

'Directing John Huston was the thrill of my life! He's my favourite director, the best. Orson Welles has done great, but John Huston's done all kinds of movies, so he's my number one guy. This was couple of years before he passed away and he was pretty ill at the time. So I did a lot of one-take shots, and he'd be great. He was a ham. He really loved to go out there and do it.'

'Tippi Hedren said I was much better than Hitchcock! She and Hitchcock did not get along. He was obsessed with her and she rebuffed him, so he was pretty mean to her. He gave Melanie (Griffith) a doll of her mother in a coffin.'

Melanie Griffith was to star in

De Jarnatt's feature film debut *Cherry 2000*, a futuristic film which he describes dryly as '*Planet of the Apes* - without the apes! We had a pretty miserable time making it. On the Hitchcock thing, Melanie was great, everybody was great, nobody wanted to be an asshole in front of John Huston. *Cherry 2000* was a different thing . . .

**"Tippi Hedren said I was much better than Hitchcock! She and Hitchcock did not get along"**

'Melanie's marriage was breaking up, and she was known to have certain problems, which hopefully she's recovered from now. Still, she was much better to work with than the leading man I chose.'

## GREMLIN TABERNACLE CHOIR

In order to finance *Miracle Mile*, De Jarnatt worked as a screenwriter-for-hire and authored a variety of scripts. 'I wrote a draft of *Jaws 4*, which had nothing to do with the one that came out (*Jaws: The Revenge*). It was set in Malibu, California with surf punks. It was outrageous, but I wrote it for [Former Universal head] Frank Price, who's gone now. Sid Sheinberg [the current studio head] threw it out and came up with something his wife could do (Lorraine *Jaws* Gary is Mrs Sheinberg).

'I had an Australian protagonist. In the opening, there's a girl swimming around. There's a shark coming up towards her, then, all of a sud-

den, a shark ten times bigger bites that shark in half. In the end, it swallows the Australian's girlfriend, so he surfs the shark onto the beach and cuts his girlfriend out of the stomach.' De Jarnatt shrugs. 'You use concepts, you play with them.'

'I did a draft of *Gremlins 2*. It was set in Las Vegas. There were three writers before me and four after me. Warner Bros had some people writing scripts all at the same time because they knew at some point *Gremlins 2* would come out and make a lot of money.'

'In the previous draft, Chris Matheson (*Scars* author, see **FEAR** Issue 4) and Ed Solomon had characters on their way to Vegas, so I set the whole thing there. It's their kinda town. The gremlins ended up in Salt Lake City and formed The Gremlin Tabernacle Choir. Seagulls came in and killed them in the end. That'll never see the light of day! Warner Bros liked the Vegas idea, then somebody rewrote me, somebody else rewrote that, then they decided not to do it in Vegas. The one they're doing is set in New York.'

'The one thing I've done that has a following is *Strange Brew*.' The film starred Rick *Ghostbusters* Moranin and Dave Thomas as drunken Canadian brothers, Bob and Doug McKenzie. 'I write for hire and it was a writing assignment. They locked me in a motel room in Toronto. I wrote the first draft in ten days. Joel Silver (producer of *48 Hours*) hired me to do it because he liked my *Miracle Mile* script. I wrote [a lot of different plots and finally came up with] *Hamlet in a Brewery*. It was fun to write. It's real popular in my home town of Longview, Washington. People drink beer and watch it - it's a beer-drinking movie', De Jarnatt laughs, 'I'm sure Max Von Sydow (who plays the villain) considers it his best work, fitted with buck teeth, doing toilet jokes!'

## GOING FOR BROKE

De Jarnatt, who wrote *Miracle Mile* in 1978 as a development deal for Warner Bros, took his fee from writing *Strange Brew*, as well as 'every penny I had and gave it to Warner to buy *Miracle Mile*. I optioned it from Warners for a year and had to buy it or lose it. I bought *Miracle* for \$25,000, rewrote it and they offered me \$400,000 to buy it and not direct it! I said 'No.' Warners liked it and wanted to keep developing it, but it was going to get more expensive and there was the possibility I would get bumped off it. So, by getting [the script] back, I controlled it.'

Warner Bros wanted to make *Miracle Mile* as *Twilight Zone: The*

*Movie* before they decided on the four-part [Spielberg] thing. The studio also had an ending where Harry wakes up, finds it was all a dream and it all starts happening again. I think you would have felt cheated if that was the only thing you saw in *Twilight Zone: The Movie*.'

While Anthony Edwards, known for his sidekick roles in *Top Gun* (as Goose) and *Revenge of the Nerds*, is perfect as Harry the trombone player, De Jarnatt makes a surprising revelation. 'In the original script. Harry and Julie were fifty years old. It was Gene Hackman, still the trombone player, going back to get his ex-wife who hasn't talked to him in fifteen years. Their reconciliation story was always the main story. I miss some of that, I think it's really strong. In all of the *Miracle* drafts it's always been a vivid story of

**"I bought *Miracle* for \$25,000, rewrote it and they offered me \$400,000 to buy it and not direct it!"**

being the first to know and going back to get somebody you love.

Julie originally had a kid, so when Harry came in during the middle of the night to rescue her, you'd open the door and here's this six-year-old kid, who you had to deal with. But . . . shooting at night with a kid and helicopters? Forget it! Logistically, you couldn't do it.'

## AVOIDING THE TWILIGHT ZONE

Does his *Miracle Mile* have a message? 'Everyone knows they're gonna die some day, so if we're all die on the same day then look at what's important in your life and deal with it before you get there. None of the characters have any power to change what is about to happen. There are no generals around, so they're dealing with it on a personal level.'

De Jarnatt points out that the film is deliberately based on coincidence. 'Every little thing is connected, and everything you do will affect something else, since the whole movie is based on this enormous coincidence that you're there when this 'phone call comes in. You never know what little things of fate are going to affect you.'

Is the movie a fantasy? 'It's supposed to be real, but if you walk around the streets of Los Angeles at that hour it's very surreal. It has certain elements of that. I wanted the movie to end without it being a dream. That was critical to me when





In the company of the symbolic Fat Boy and unaware of the impending disaster, Julie Peters (Mare Winningham) waits for Harry to arrive

Warner Bros were going to make it as *Twilight Zone*. I was even willing to cut to Harry staring into the tar pits at the end of the movie, to suggest it was a day dream, but I just thought an audience would say 'Ohhh.' [Groan].

*Miracle Mile* is rich in bizarre, humorous images: rats tumble out of palm trees, a woman speed reads Cliff Notes for Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, billboards deliver cryptic messages to the audience. De Jarnatt discusses those unusual aspects: 'There are rats in trees, really. I read an article that said, 'There are one million rats living in the palm trees of LA!' I don't know how they found that out, if they shimmy up every tree and say, 'Hey, we're doing a census.' I thought that was great, that you'd hit a tree and there would be this unexpected vermin everywhere you look. Actually, [in the film] it's a sweet mother rat and her three little babies, and I defame them.'

*Gravity's Rainbow* is about the arc of a missile. I thought it would be a really absurd thing to do, that you could absorb a thousand-page book in two minutes of time. We actually had to get Thomas Pynchon's permission for that. He must have thought it was such a ridiculous idea. Cliff Notes sent me two boxes full of everything available on Cliff Notes . . . Now I can go back to school!

## BIG BANGS AND BASEBALL

One of the film's strongest images is of missiles shooting

over the Hollywood sign. 'One thing I miss from the script that we tried to do is a scene when the first missile comes over the Hollywood sign and Harry and Julie are holding each other. It lands and everybody thinks - this is it - then nothing happens. They go over and the missile's lying there steaming. You can even read the Cyrillic lettering. That could actually happen with the Russian missiles. So, everybody thinks it's a hoax and then some more come flying over and *do* go off. When you see a missile, you don't know if it's really happening.'

## "He rattled off a bunch of diseases and half the crew left!"

For a low budget film, *Miracle Mile* boasts impressive special effects and vast riot scenes. 'The effects in the film all work, like the helicopter crash. We did some pretty big stuff, like a car crashing through a department store. I put a lot of money into a couple of big things, but usually we had to work pretty sparsely. I loved the look of that old movie *Invaders From Mars* [the original] and how they designed everything for the camera.'

'For the riots we actually blocked off Wilshire Boulevard. We shot all night and had huge baseball stadium Musco lights overhead. A huge set-up, especially for a low budget film. People thought we were crazy, but we finished on budget and on schedule. There's a little in

humour in the riots. Notice when Harry is crawling under the cars, there's a guy, an agent or something, holding a copy of *Variety*. He's been run over in the foreground.'

This is followed by a harrowing sequence in which a rioter tries to shoot Harry for jumping on his car. 'I'll never forget - we shot that and [Hemdale president] John Daly looked at it and said, 'It's not realistic that, if you jumped on somebody's car roof, they'd shoot you.' Then all the California freeway shootings started happening. I sent him an article and he said, 'Okay, okay.'

## IN THE SEWAGE

Filming wasn't without some problems. 'We shot [sewer sequences] in a highly toxic storm drain. Tony Edwards broke out in a big rash. A guy from the city [sewer authority] said, 'You guys had all your shots, didn't you? The mosquitoes down here all got malaria'. He rattled off a bunch of diseases and half the crew left!'

The cast includes several genre names, including Denise Crosby of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Pet Semetary* and Jeanette Goldstein, Vasquez from *Aliens*. 'I cast Denise before she was in *Star Trek*. Much as I love Denise, I cast her because she was unknown at the time and if I'd known she was gonna have that publicity I probably wouldn't have. I would rather have a character you don't know.'

As for Jeanette Goldstein's

cameo as a gun-toting Beverly Hills chick, 'I've known her for a while and it was kind of a part where there isn't much, but she could do something with it. She's great.'

He has nothing but praise for Hemdale and John Daly. 'Most people in Hollywood really liked the energy and audaciousness of the *Miracle* script, but everybody would have changed the ending except John Daly. He's great, he takes chances and does things nobody else will touch.'

'I love Hemdale. No one else would give me the money. John didn't mess with the movie, he and Hemdale have gone all out in turning it into a commercial thing. I wanted the ad campaign to be, *Miracle Mile, there will be no sequel*. They've done a great job. I'll definitely work with them again.'

'I don't think that Jim Cameron (*The Terminator*) and Oliver Stone (*Platoon*) should complain because John backed them on their first major films. Cameron had done *Piranha 2* and Oliver Stone had done *The Hand*. I had done *Cherry 2000* and he let us all make another movie! He lets you know that, too: 'I'm your last shot!'

## "I love Hemdale. No one else would give me the money"

Would De Jarnatt have allowed any other director to work on *Miracle*? 'I would have let James Cameron direct *Miracle Mile*. He liked the script and wanted to come down to the set.' He jokes about Cameron's supposed view of the film. 'He wanted Julie to have a big, super-powered weapon and to stop the war!'

'It's never gonna happen, but I hoped since Cameron liked the *Miracle* script and I had a relationship with John Daly, that I would do *The Terminator 2*. Right now, though, there are too many lawsuits between Arnold [Schwarzenegger] and Hemdale. Daly and Cameron aren't on speaking terms.'

What's next? 'I'm writing a script for Dan Melnick, who produced *Altered States*. It's a straight, mainstream fireman movie, with a tough, Mel Gibson-type fireman hero. I'm starting on it now, then I'll be able to pay my rent and get out of debt because I've put all my money into *Miracle Mile*.

'After that I'll do something that's weird, but still mainstream. Something comedic, that can make a lot of money.' He smiles. 'I'll do something commercial so I can do a couple of weirder things.'

## PET SEMETARY

**Starring:** Dale Midkiff, Fred Gwynne, Denise Crosby, Blaze Bredahl, Miko Hughes, Brad Greenquist, Susan J Blommaert

**Director** Mary Lambert

**Distributor** UIP

**Cert** 18

Let's be frank. I wasn't expecting it to, but this movie scared the shit out of me! Not because of the gore or shocks, though there was plenty of those, but because of the way screenwriter Stephen King has adapted his gruelling, tortured novel to the screen.

Here we have a powerful exploration of death, grief and guilt. The screenplay is only slightly different from the book and misses not one of its shocking down-strokes at the climax.

Young Doctor Louis Creed (Midkiff) moves into a sprawling, spooky house in Ludlow, Maine with wife Rachel (Crosby) and daughter Ellie (Bredahl) — oh, and we mustn't forget Church the cat.

We're soon introduced to elderly neighbour Jud Crandall (Gwynne) who warns the children to stay away from the busy backroad, traversed by rushing tanker trucks at the front of their house. He tells Louis that many a Ludlow pet has been killed on the road and they are buried in a pet semetary in the backwoods.

During Louis' first few days in his new job as doctor on the Ludlow university campus, a young

man called Victor Pascow (Greenquist) is knocked down by a truck and dies. But he's soon up, kicking, and providing some of the pleasanter shudders and shocks in the film as a portentous ghost who warns Louis about what lies beyond the semetary.

Greenquist is brilliant as Pascow who sports a gruesome hole in the skull, but has a kind and benevolent soul. He has some of the movie's best lines and, towards the climax, provides what would be riotous humour given other circumstances.

Unfortunately, Louis does not heed his warnings. Church the cat is killed by a juggernaut and, while his family are away visiting his mother and father-in-law, neighbourly Jud Crandell takes the good doctor to an Indian burial site beyond the semetary. They bury the cat who returns from the dead, much the worse for wear and temperament. So you just know what's going to happen . . . Louis asks Jud whether a human being has ever been buried up there.

The film's descent into the grief following human death, as painfully exhibited after young Gage's death, will take you into a prime, though little explored, area of horror. Death has always been so easy in horror films: not so with *Pet Semetary*. The viewer is made to feel personal grief with some realism, and that's something which most horror filmmakers have never handled or ever been



Zombie visitations in Mary Lambert's multilayered sreen version of King's *Pet Semetary*

willing to handle.

I suspect that few would have been willing to show a savage fight amongst relatives at a funeral which results in Gage's coffin being tipped up to show a glimpse of sleeve, and virtually no one would dare to show a two-year-old boy, back from the dead, dressed in top hat and tails, holding a scalpel, and ready to kill mum! Even *Halloween*, with its memorable opening of the young boy holding the knife, took a camera's eye view during the actual murders. Yes, Miko Hughes, despite his age, stole the show for me. Those innocent eyes and wide grin were very effective both alive and undead.

In fact, every member of the cast is superb, each thoroughly involved in their parts. Brad Greenquist has to follow Hughes on the role of honour, but Midkiff,

Gwynne, Crosby and Bredahl should all take a bow.

If there is anything wrong with the film it comes from the pen of Stephen King, who should have kept his denouement — and I won't divulge what it is! — fairly straight. No. Here we have a shock ending, I suspect for the sake of dramatic effect. I wouldn't, however, let that spoil a very fine film which works on the level of entertainment but with much, much more besides.

*Death is a mystery. Burial is a secret.*

Stephen King, *Pet Semetary*, 1983

John Gilbert



## THE RETURN OF THE SWAMP THING



**Starring:** Louis Jourdan, Heather Locklear, Sarah Douglas, Dick Durock  
**Director** Jim Wynorski  
**Distributor** Medusa Pictures  
**Cert** 15

It would be all too easy to describe this as a turkey with no stuffing, but there are few (and very far between) good points to this mickey take of one of my favourite comic book heroes.

For those of you who don't know the story, I'll give a brief recap. There's nothing to stretch the imagination, so I suspect you'll grasp the milky weak ideas fairly quickly.

Swampy was once human, a scientist called Alec Holland who played with genetics to create antidotes for some of the world's most virulent diseases. Unfortunately a mad scientist, Dr Arcane, tries to grab his discovery and, during a fight for possession, Holland is set on fire, immersed in his latest liquid invention and then dunked in the swamp. The result is half-man, half-plant and Holland goes to live in the swamp which spawned his new body.

Meanwhile, Arcane is after the secret of eternal youth and

believes that by capturing Swamp Thing he can decipher the eternal verities. Some task, and to add to his problems his beautiful daughter Abigail, owner of a plant shop, comes to visit. She soon finds out that her mother died in one of Arcane's experiments; she races from his Bayou-bound house in some distress and teams up with Swampy, after a steamy plant version of love-making, to defeat her wicked father's plans. All is well in the end and Swampy goes off hand in leaf with his new girl friend.

Yuck! And that's about all I can say for a movie which takes a wonderfully-revived comic book series, slices out its guts and maroons it in a one-dimensional storyline. Individual performances occasionally raise the tone of this B-movie. Heather Locklear as Abigail is fairly forgettable love interest, but Louis Jourdan steals the show as the gloriously evil Dr Arcane. His comic one-liner's are delivered with great panache, his bearing is reminiscent of the great James Bond villains of the early Seventies, and his ability to deal with the script's inanity without batting an eyelid is amazing. Well, he did manage to raise the tone of the James Bond movie

*Octopussy*, so I suppose he's had lots of practice playing OTT villains.

Dick Durock, who returns as Swamp Thing does a passable job as the goodie of the piece, sweeping Locklear off her feet, sharing leaves with her and giving the thumb to two teenagers who are eager to take his photo, but he's not exactly the dark, depressed and mysterious Swampy that I drew from the comic books.

Indeed, the two kids steal all his scenes with them.

Jim Wynorski's attempt at

righting the atrocious blunders wrought by Wes Craven when he first brought Swampy to the screen have not improved the squelchy giant's movie lot. He has deliberately gone for satire rather than emphasising the mystical aspect of the comic book hero. Satire is never easy to achieve and it can easily fail. Wynorski goes way over the top with this one and nothing can stop it from being a bit of a vegetable.

Shame. We were expecting such great things.  
John Gilbert

## EARTH GIRLS ARE EASY

**Starring:** Jeff Goldblum, Geena Davies, Jim Carrey, Damon Wayans, Julie Brown, Charles Rocket  
**Director** Julien Temple  
**Distributor** Twentieth Century Fox  
**Cert** PG

Reasonably fresh from her date with death in Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice*, Geena Davies is again on course to meet more strange beings, this time in the form of microscopic aliens from the planet Jhazzala.

life.

Still, her friend and boss at the local hair and beauty salon, Candy Pink (Julie Brown), is intrigued with these guys and decides to make them more human by shaving all their considerable, and highly coloured, hair off. Then it's out on the town.

Unfortunately, Dr Gallagher discovers his ex-girlfriend is seeing strangers(!), and the pre-marital property hasn't even been split yet. He sends in the police to evict them, and that's when this riotous film really lifts off.

The movie's natural humour is



They crash land into her life, and her swimming pool, at a rather awkward moment. She's just split with her boyfriend, Dr Ted Gallagher, who is the extremely jealous type. As well he may be. You don't often get aliens in the form of Jeff Goldblum and two beachboy types, who behave oddly and speak even more strangely, disrupting your love

elevated by a Fifties-style soundtrack, the sight of Jeff Goldblum, after his role in *The Fly*, aping around like Michael Keaton, and the wonderful sets which look as if they've crawled out of a Sixties SF serial.

Magnificent - let's have more. Or at least a return of these wonderfully wacky aliens.  
Andrew Morentis

## PHANTASM

**Starring:** Michael Baldwin, Bill Thornbury, Reggie Bannister, Angus Scrimm  
**Director** Don Coscarelli  
**Distributor** Video Collection  
**Cert** 18, 87 mins

A night-enshrouded graveyard is the horribly clichéd setting for this 1978 oldie and portends doom for its characters - and the movie itself. Orphaned Michael Pearson and his brother Jody become involved in the bizarre events which follow the burial of their brother, whose coffin is single-handedly stolen by the literally named Tall Man...

Events escalate: shadowy voices and dark creatures haunt the graveyard and the brothers' investigations of the ghostly mausoleum force encounters with savage cloaked dwarves and flying steel spheres of death. The unexpected attack of a carnivorous worm drags Reggie the ice-cream man into the fray and the ultimate showdown with the Tall Man himself.

Quite why any one of these mortal characters feels compelled to become so deeply involved in the horrific goings-on of the mortuary is as much a mystery as why the Tall Man is body-snatching, co-habiting with manic dwarves and commanding blood-pumping balls. Certainly the characters concerned don't seem to care and their flat, immature acting soon ensures that you won't care either.



Despite poster-paint blood, the effects of the 'murder by ball' scene are the highlight of endless night scenes that would have benefited from sharper editing to maintain some semblance of pace. If, like the sequel, more brutal scenes had been left intact, they could just have saved it - as could a less random plot - but many opportunities are lost amidst low budget restrictions and directorial mystique.

'If this one doesn't scare you, you're already dead!', says the packaging blurb. It would appear to me, then, that there's actually a lot less life on earth than the statistics would have us believe.

Warren Lapworth

## PROM NIGHT II

**Starring:** Michael Ironside, Wendy Lyon, Justin Louis, Lisa Schrage  
**Director** Bruce Pittman  
**Distributor** Video Collection  
**Cert** 18, 95 mins



Sub-titled *Hello Mary Lou*, this movie opens at the prom night (naturally) of Hamilton High in 1957 at which a certain Ms Maloney jilts her boyfriend, Bill Nordham. When scorned by Mary-Lou's acid tongue, Bill plans his revenge. As the proud girl is crowned Prom Queen, he drops a fire cracker from above the stage, and disaster strikes when its fuse catches her dress. Flames quickly spread and Mary-Lou suffers a nasty death-by-fire.

Thirty years later, Hamilton High approaches another prom night. Vicki Carpenter's stingy mother forces the girl to search the school's dusty stage basement for a dress to wear at the great social event. Vicki discovers the sash and tiara of the 1957 Prom Queen in an old chest, but by opening the chest she also releases the restless soul of Mary-Lou, who gradually takes possession of Vicki. No one will prevent Mary-Lou from becoming Prom Queen again - particularly not Hamilton High's latest principal, Bill Nordham.

Few marks for originality here; movies in which a supernatural force causes grisly deaths of vengeance have been seen countless times, and in this case the prom setting makes it distinctly

reminiscent of *Carrie*. Though fairly predictable, inconsequential stuff, it flows at a steady pace and is nothing more than the fun, late-teenage thriller I'm sure it was intended to be.

The action sequences are largely unelaborate but entertain without the need for real gore and are held together with solid performances throughout. *Prom Night II* is certainly worth a rainy night's rental but it wouldn't stand the repeated viewing that the sell-through price tag warrants.

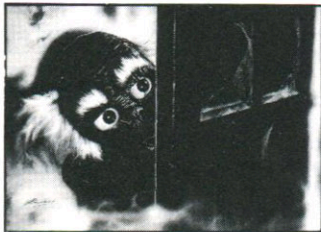
Warren Lapworth

## GHOST CHASE

**Starring:** Jill Whitlow, Chuck Mitchell, Paul Gleason, Jason Lively, Lewis

**Director** Roland Emmerich  
**Distributor** Medusa Pictures  
**Cert** PG, 86 mins

After a short though amazingly spectacular theatrical run, *Ghost Chase* is now prime material for video release, particularly when rental shops are gearing up for kids and the Christmas season.



Its star is not human – he's more of a ghost puppet, you could say – and his name is Lewis. His death interlinks with the life of Warren, a filmmaker who discovers that his grandfather has left his estate to him in his will. Warren, however, feels he has been short-changed when the only inheritance he gets is an old clock.

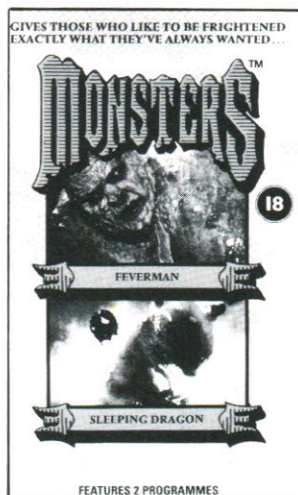
But what a clock it is! When it strikes twelve (midnight, of course) the spirit of Lewis, his grandfather's butler, springs out (some cuckoo!) and takes over the shell of a puppet that was created by Warren's friend. Then it's on to find the lost inheritance while being pursued by a big-bucks movie mogul and his ugly-tempered grandfather who wants to keep his fortune, even after death.

The high comedy is perfectly suited for children. There's definitely no gore, the shocks are goodnatured, there are some hilarious, though fairly stock, chase scenes and, as with many of the films up for review this month, the dummy has all the best lines.

If you're over the age of thirty, don't plan to spend the evening out while the kids watch this movie. It may be a kids' movie, but it certainly ain't childish.

Andrew Morantis

# MONSTERS



Laurel Entertainment, makers of *Creepshow* and *Creepshow II*, recently axed their horror anthology series *Tales From the Dark Side* and replaced it with a show called *Monsters*.

The new show's concept is simply to bring a diverse series of creatures to the screen, and they range from the demons and mythological creatures of the past to the aliens and freaks of the future. Award-winning special effects man Dick Smith is series consultant so all bodes well for a success story.

*Monsters* is shown on network television in the States but in the UK, as with *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and, of course, *Tales From the Dark Side*, we have to rely on videocassette.

There are two stories on each tape and the first two of these slices of fear have just been served up on an 18 certificate by distributor Castle Hendring.

## MONSTERS ONE: FEVERMAN/SLEEPING DRAGON

Two very different stories, the first directed by Michael Gornick, the second by Mark Rezyka. *Feverman* stars David McCallum as a faith healer who, with only a magic crystal, charms some very ugly and very big fevers out of human beings for a high price. One night, a man whose little daughter is very sick visits and asks to see this feverman. His local doctor is very much against the visit, seeing it as, at best, charlatanism. But he's about to change his mind when confronted with the fever and forced to fight it. The story is the most gross of the four, and acts as a spectacular introduction to the series.

*Sleeping Dragon*, on the other hand, has B-movie overtones and concerns a prehistoric monster who escapes from a time-locked capsule at a research establishment to do damage and eat humans. The creature is a throwback to the early Japanese Godzilla and King Kong films, but

puts up a brave effort to frighten its audience.

## MONSTERS TWO: PARENTS FROM SPACE/PILLOW TALK

*Parents From Space* is a moralistic tale starring Frank Gorshin, who you might remember as The Riddler in the Sixties *Batman* series. Here he and his wife have it in for their foster-child until two rat-faced aliens land in their barn and take over their bodies. All is fine until they fix their ship and prepare to leave. But the little foster-child has grown to like her new parents and doesn't want them to leave. Her solution is obvious but nonetheless it's a fitting end to this episode.

A change of mood again

and we switch to the bedroom of horror writer Miles Magnus who gains his inspiration by watching his bed devour beautiful young ladies. His latest lunch – sorry – find, played by the wonderful Mary Woronov, is not so keen on bed, though. In the end she has her revenge on the culinary Casanova, who forgets that just because he's got one exotic pet it doesn't mean that there are no others.

Of the four episodes, *Pillow Talk* has the most satisfying and unpredictable ending, although even it is fairly foreseeable. That's the main problem with *Monsters*. The creatures are the only original aspect of the show. Unoriginal storylines and stock characters litter the place and even the medium-name stars cannot cope with all this shallowness.

I hope that *Monsters* takes on the edge that *Freddy's Nightmares* has often shown, but I'll need a lot more convincing and so, I think, will most horror fans.

John Gilbert

## MAMA DRACULA

**Starring:** Louis Fletcher, Maria Schneider  
**Director** Boris Szulzinger  
**Distributor** Entertainment in Video  
**Cert** 18, 92 mins approx

Dracula certainly seems to get about, or is it just that there's a whole family of vampires doing the world rounds? That's the premise of this depressingly bad straight to video release from Entertainment.

The big Mama of the title (Fletcher) lives in a castle on a hill. But life is not as chilled out as she would like in that spooky old place. First, her business – a fashion boutique (what else?) – has its fair share of problems and then when she gets home she's got to deal with her diabolic kids, Vladimir and Ladislav.

After dinner, however, she can relax in a soothing bath of virgins' blood which smoothes out all the

wrinkles of the day. The problem is, the age of promiscuity is in full swing and Mama just can't find the girls. To ease the situation she employs a specialist, Professor Van Bloed, who quickly bumps up supplies with artificial Rhesus Negative.

Problem solved? No way. The former mass disappearances of young ladies have been brought to the attention of the police and a young undercover investigator, Nancy Hawaii (Schneider), is sent to the castle to poke around. She joins the jollies at Mama's birthday party, but soon becomes the object of lust for the Prof and young Vlad, while all the very old mother hen would like to see is Hawaii's red stuff in the bath.

*Mama Dracula* is an appalling farce, generated from an overburdened vampire sub-genre. The less I see of this type of blood-sucker the better.

John Gilbert

## TIPS FOR THE TOP

A video checklist of films that any self-respecting genre fan will want to see:

**Bigfoot and the Hendersons.** An ordinary family adopt a gentle American legend (sell-through)

**The Blob.** Remake of the classic B-movie, directed by Chuck Russell (rental)

**Dead Ringers.** David Cronenberg dissects the darker side of the lives of twins (rental)

**House III.** Yet another haunting *House* sequel which can only be better than number two (rental)

**Parents.** Life with an average family of cannibals (rental)

**The Serpent and the Rainbow.** Director Wes Craven leaves Freddy Krueger behind for Haiti and the walking dead

**They Live.** John Carpenter's futuristic terror tale of aliens who influence our lives (rental)

**Warlock.** Julian Sands takes on witchfinder Richard E Grant (rental – see Steve Miner interview this month.)

**Willow.** An evil queen with her eye on a midget (rental)

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DOLLS  
SLAUGHTERHOUSE 5  
SCANNERS  
THE FLY  
THE FLY (original)  
HANDS OF THE RIPPER  
TWINS OF EVIL  
VAMPIRES  
GHOULIES 2  
THE LOST BOYS  
HOWLING II  
AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON  
BARBARELLA  
HOUSE BY THE CEMETARY  
HOUSE OF GAMES  
KRULL  
THE AWAKENING  
DRACULA A.D. (1972)  
EMBALMED  
THE HUNGER  
TASTE THE BLOOD OF DRACULA  
DRACULA HAS RISEN FROM THE GRAVE  
SCARS OF DRACULA  
FRANKENSTEIN MUST BE DESTROYED  
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CARRIE  
CHILDREN OF THE FULL MOON  
ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13  
BASKET CASE  
HILLS HAVE EYES  
VIRGIN AMONG THE LIVING DEAD  
TORTURE ZONE  
RATS  
THE TOMB  
FROM BEYOND  
DEATH MASK  
NEAR DARK  
ERASERHEAD  
GOTHIC  
NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET  
NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 2  
NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 3  
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MASK OF RED DEATH  
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EYES OF LAURA MARS

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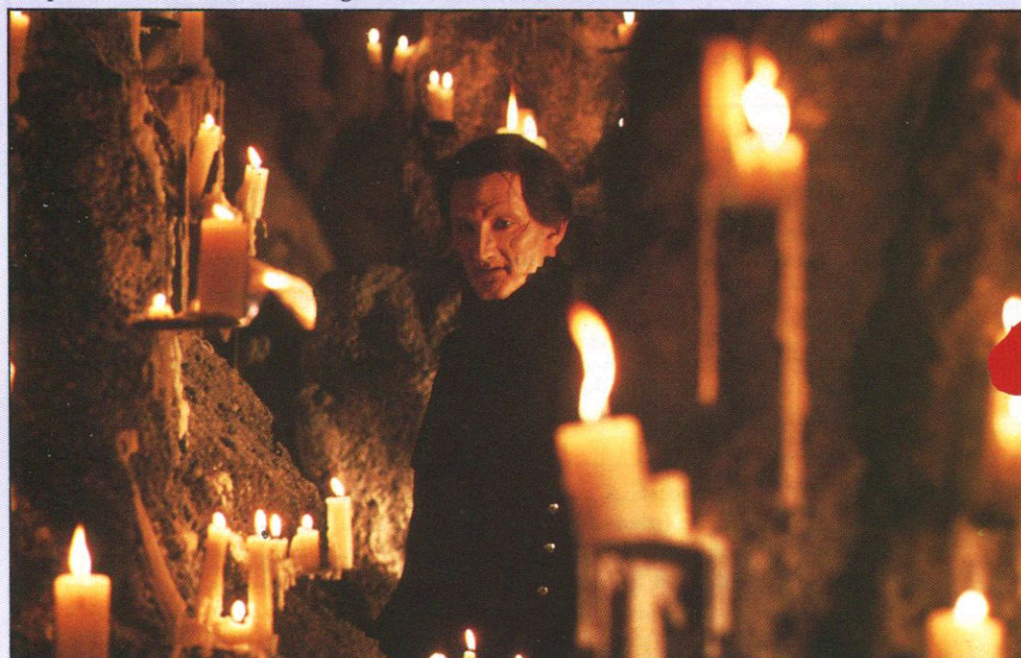
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# OPERATIC NIGHTM



Music student Christine (Jill Schoelen, above) finds herself transported back in time, from New York 1990 to London 1889, when she summons up the spirit of the hideously disfigured composer, Erik Destler (Robert Englund, )



wight Little's *Phantom of the Opera* marks the fifth occasion that Gaston Leroux's venerable tale about everybody's favourite musical madman has been brought to the

screen. (A sixth version, written by Dennis Potter (*Pennies From Heaven*, *The Singing Detective*) and set during Hitler's Reich, is also being planned by director Wolfgang (*Das Boot*) Petersen). Readers of **FEAR** are no doubt familiar with the Phantom's previous screen incarnations, courtesy of Lon Chaney in 1925, Claude Rains in 1943, Herbert Lom in 1962

# ARES

Misunderstood musician or malformed maniac? The Phantom of the Opera has been depicted as tormented genius and pitiable killer on the big screen, on television and on the stage. But, as Dwight Little, the director of the latest screen version, tells John McCarty, star Robert 'Freddy' Englund will leave the other pretenders to the mask standing.

and a more obscure 1983 made-for-television adaptation starring Maximilian Schell. Interestingly, Schell's Phantom prefigures the latest version in that Schell played a scarred Hungarian voice coach and the film was shot in Hungary.

A 1980 graduate of the University of Southern California (USC) film school, Dwight Little is perhaps best known to fans of the horror genre as the man who engineered Michael Myers' successful comeback as a big screen bogeyman in *Halloween 4*, the director's first horror film. After cutting his cinematic teeth as a second unit director and documentary filmmaker (he won an Emmy for an ABC-TV documentary called *Spies*), Little broke into features in 1986 with the caper film *Getting Even* (aka *Hostage: Dallas*) starring Edward Albert. Following a tour of duty making another caper/adventure film called *Bloodstone*, he netted the assignment of resurrecting the *Halloween* series from producer Moustapha Akkad.

same rueful, chandelier-dropping ogre we've seen in the past, but a tuneful terror who is three parts Jack the Ripper . . .

## GRAND GUIGNOL

**JMC:** How did you come to direct the latest version of *Phantom of the Opera*?

**DL:** I'd just finished a picture last year, *Halloween 4*. What was then the Cannon Group – Yoram Globus and Menahem Golan – had seen and liked *Halloween 4* and called me in for an interview. They had a project with Robert Englund attached which was basically a horror version of *Phantom of the Opera*. They asked if I'd be interested, I looked over the material, talked with Robert, got very excited and agreed to take it on. Simple as that.

**JMC:** The script was already written then?

**DL:** There was a draft, which we changed quite considerably. Another writer, by the name of Duke Sandefur, was brought on at my behest and he and I worked on it together.

**JMC:** Apart from the wraparound story which takes the tale into contemporary times, the plot seems to follow the Leroux novel quite closely.

**DL:** The middle section of the picture, the main body of it, is basically Gaston Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera* told in a very streamlined fashion. Streamlined in the sense that we don't get into all the backstory about the haunted box in the opera house and who the phantom is. But it is essentially Leroux's story. We try to hit the cinematic highs and keep going. The difference is that our phantom is a much more aggressive, much more lethal personality than he's ever been portrayed as before.

**JMC:** How else does your version differ from the others?

**DL:** On a number of levels. We start the movie off with a very contemporary character who's living in New York City and who, by opening the Pandora's Box of the phantom's unfinished opera, is propelled back in time to live her parallel life as Christine Day, the young opera singer with whom the phantom gets fixated. So, we've added a parallel universe aspect to the story. Secondly, the phantom in our version bears little resemblance to either the Lon Chaney, Claude Rains, Herbert Lom or Maximilian Schell characters. He's a sociopathic killer. He's still obsessed with Christine and eliminating anyone who gets in her way – that's pretty closely followed, but our treatment is much more graphic and scary than any of the others.

## MOVIE MAINLINE

### FREDDY PLUS PITY

**JMC:** Of the other versions, which do you like best?

**DL:** The Andrew Lloyd Webber musical is much better than any of the films that have been made of the same story. It's excellent, though it's certainly not what we're doing. It tells a very romantic story where the killing is so off-stage that it's barely even touched upon. As far as the other movie versions go, the only one with any appeal is the Lon Chaney version because of the sophistication of its film language and the make-up effects that Chaney was able to achieve. But even that version is very long and dull in places. So I'm not all that excited by any of the movie versions, although I think Chaney's Phantom was memorable.

**JMC:** How does Robert Englund's Phantom differ from Freddy Krueger, if at all?

**DL:** He's both actually. He's very sinister, which Freddy is too. But he also brings a sympathetic edge to the Phantom's character, which is something Freddy doesn't have at all. The attraction of the phantom in *Phantom of the Opera* has always been that he's a mad killer who is pitiable. Freddy – as well as Michael or Jason – are just evil incarnate. But the Phantom is an interesting character whom we come to understand in some kind of perverse way. Robert is able to communicate both aspects. He's scary as hell when he kills people, but he's also able to express the pain of a soul in torment. The closest he comes to stomping on Freddy's turf is when every so often before he kills somebody, he says something that you might describe as a sort of acerbic and/or clever line – a Freddy-ism – but that isn't very often. I think this movie will answer the question: is Robert just Freddy or can he act? The fact is, he's an incredibly good actor and he is just marvelous as the Phantom. I think he blows Claude Rains, Herbert Lom and Maximilian Schell out of the water and gives Lon Chaney a run for his money.

### THE RESURRECTION OF MICHAEL MYERS

**JMC:** Do you like directing horror films?

**DL:** Yes I do, although this is only the second one I've done. As far as genre movies go, they're much more interesting than action/adventure because horror movies always have a psychological underpinning that I like very much. I don't like axe murder-type horror movies. It's hard for me to sit through a *Friday the 13th* – although I enjoyed sitting through my *Halloween* movie.

**JMC:** How did you become involved in resurrecting Michael Myers?

**"Our Phantom is a much more aggressive, much more lethal personality than he's ever been portrayed as before"**

**DL:** I was hired on *Halloween 4* because I had just finished a little action/adventure movie in India called *Bloodstone* and my agent sent over a demo reel. They liked what they saw, called me in and I basically helped them rewrite the script and turn the one they had, which was not very good, into something shootable. It was a case of good agent work that got me that assignment.

**JMC:** Were you offered *Halloween 5*?

**DL:** Yes, but I turned it down. I did it once and that's enough. I haven't seen *Halloween 5*, but I talked to Moustapha Akkad and he said the film is close to a director's cut. Moustapha's attitude is that the minute audiences stop coming to the *Halloween* movies, that's the minute he'll stop making them. *Halloween 4* did very well, which was surprising considering that eight years have passed since *Halloween 3*. And most people didn't think that one was a legitimate sequel. I mean, *Halloween 4* is really *Halloween 3*. But I don't think I'll be drawn to doing another one. I think my contribution to the *Halloween* series, frankly, was that I was able to resuscitate Michael in a believable way, bring him back and create a new family for him to terrorise. I think I'll just rest on those 'laurels'.

## GHOULASH

**JMC:** Tell me about *Bloodstone*. It just came out on video and I was going to screen it in preparation for this interview, but somebody had taken it out.

**DL:** Somebody actually rented it? Lucky me! *Bloodstone* was a horrible experience. We went over to India and none of the things we'd been promised were delivered. The production facilities were unbearable, the actors we'd been promised were unavailable, money was a constant problem – whatever clichés you can imagine about a film nightmare, this one was it. There were constant religious ceremonies, people blessing the equipment before we could start. The only good thing I can say is that no one got hurt, which was a miracle under the circumstances.

**JMC:** Have you read producer Ismail Merchant's book about his experiences making *The Deceivers* in India with Nicholas Meyer? That was a similarly nightmarish saga.

**DL:** Yes I did! Picture us with twice the problems and half the money and that's the experience we had. I didn't take my name off the credits because it would have been far more trouble than it was worth, but I don't consider *Bloodstone* a movie of mine.

**JMC:** I take it Budapest, where you shot *Phantom*, proved a lot more congenial. Why Budapest, by the way?

**DL:** A million reasons. The cost of labour is so much less over there and they do period stuff very well. They had some incredible standing sets of London streets and so on.



The Phantom uses the skin of his victims to rebuild his scarred face

We had access to one of the medium-sized provincial opera houses. It was a perfect place to get the tunnels, the sets, the opera house, the exteriors and interiors, a lot of which had already been built for other pictures. Of course, we built an enormous amount of stuff ourselves – the Phantom's lair, the opera house corridors, all sorts of things.

**JMC:** Did you see much first-hand evidence of Hungary's growing democratisation, which is so much in the news these days?

**DL:** Oh, yes, absolutely! The climate is very political, but people are not afraid to talk at all. We had a Hungarian cameraman, a Hungarian art director, a lot of our department heads were Hungarian. We formed very close relationships with all of these people and got some very personal insights into how much things have really started to open up over there.

## FUTURE PERFECT

**JMC:** What's the rating going to be on *Phantom*?

**DL:** Probably a hard R [18 in the UK]. We've got quite a few horrific

effects in the film – make-up and prosthetic effects, not optical *Star Wars* type stuff. Our Phantom skins his victims and uses their skins to create a mask to wear on his face. So we've got some pretty amazing effects. Kevin Yagher, who did one of the *Elm Street* movies and *Child's Play*, handled the effects and did a terrific job. For example, there's a scene in an alley where the Phantom decapitates a person who's after him. It's an absolutely shocking scene, but in a very good way because it totally exposes the Phantom's capabilities and it's also technically ingenious. It will be remembered, I can tell you that.

**JMC:** In some of the previous versions, there's been almost as much opera as phantom. How about yours?

**DL:** There is opera. We do a couple of sequences from Gounod's *Faust* as they apply to our story, but opera does not assume a foreground position as it has in some other versions – though I really enjoyed doing those sequences.

**JMC:** What's next on your directing agenda? A *Phantom* sequel, or something different?

**DL:** They've already got a script written for a sequel, but right now I'm so exhausted completing this one I'm not interested in anything but sleeping. I made *Halloween 4* and *Phantom of the Opera* practically back-to-back and you need a break eventually. But I do have a project that I wrote with Alan McElroy, who wrote *Halloween 4*, called *Future Perfect*. It's a future/past story, a science fiction film in the *Predator/Terminator* genre. That's the one I want to make next. But who knows? *Phantom 2* might very well intercede.

**“Our Phantom skins his victims and uses their skins to create a mask to wear on his face”**

## GHASTLY VISIONS

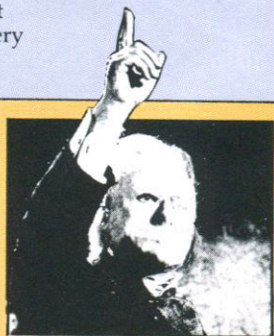
The Phantom of the Opera first tore across the silver screen in 1925 in the Universal Studios' silent movie directed by Rupert Julian. Lon Chaney brought sympathy as well as terror to the lead role and many believe that the Grand Guignol treatment and splendid visual style have never been bettered. The film was issued as a talkie, with some new footage, in 1930.

In 1943, Arthur Lubin directed a more restrained version, again for Universal, starring Claude Rains as the eponymous hero(?). This film received considerable acclaim on its release and won Academy Awards for its photography and music.

By the time the Sixties came along, Hammer Films were in their heyday and a British remake of the *Phantom* must have been too tempting to resist. They got together with Universal-International and brought their top director, Terence Fisher, to give the ghoul some serious horror treatment. But the film was not well received, despite the presence of the sombre Herbert Lom and a supporting cast of fine British character actors.

Back in Hollywood, Brian de Palma was to inject some satire into the now well-worn tale with his 1974 rock opera *Phantom of the Paradise*. Here Paul Williams plays a wicked record producer, who uses the talents of winsome singer Jessica Harper for his own evil ends. But he reckons without the interference of the horribly maimed William Finley as the lovesick ghoul.

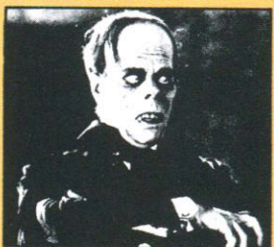
So it seems every generation of moviegoers is treated to a new interpretation of this classic thriller and, despite the huge commercial success of the Andrew Lloyd Webber stage version, it is the murky horror of the Chaney original that has been cited as having the strongest influence on the Englund remake.



Herbert Lom



Claude Rains



Lon Chaney



# UNFINISHED BUSINESS

The Exorcist: 1990, true sequel to the 1973 classic which started the contemporary horror boom, is likely to be next year's most provocative horror film. But, as novelist Matthew J Costello learned from writer/director William Peter Blatty and star George C Scott, it will *not* be a gore spectacle.

**T**he setting is the stylish-but-cosy Wyndham Bristol Hotel in Georgetown. The weather is hot, as only Washington DC can be in summer. (Well, maybe there are other places that are hot like that. But then they're not the capital of the good, old USA).

I ride the elevator down to a sub-level suite. I am accompanied by a chatty fellow with a cane (Gout? An old football injury?) He is wearing a pale blue shirt and is dressed much too casually to be one of the select press invited to this conference-cum-breakfast on the day before shooting of *The Exorcist: 1990* begins.

So I figure the guy's going to his room. Poor guy, it's in the basement. But no, he walks along . . . actually tails me, since I hurry along briskly. I don't want to arrive at the small press gala with someone who looks like my retired uncle.

I get inside the room and the friendly-if-vacuous-looking press representative says hello, checks my name off, and directs me to a table laden with fruit cups, Bloody Marys, croissants, bagels, eggs and other goodies.

And, lo and behold, the man in the blue shirt walks in, smiling and greeting everyone as though he *actually belongs*. I see George C Scott too, of course, he is to portray Lt Kinderman, and Bill Blatty the writer/director is there. The guy in the blue shirt takes a seat beside them.

And in due course he's introduced as Ed Flanders, award-winning star of USA television, most notably of *St Elsewhere*, a hospital show in the mode of *Hill Street Blues* and films (*MacArthur*, *True Confessions*).

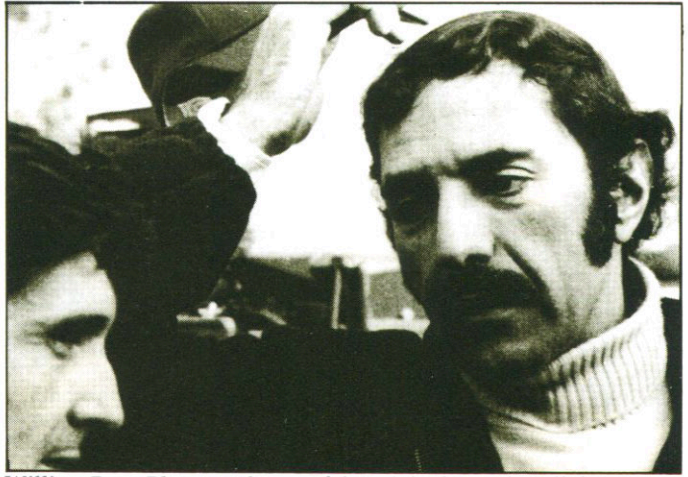
You never know who you're

likely to get in the elevator with . . .

The conference begins. A late arrival, someone from a wire service, works his way through the bank of video cameras and sits down next to me. Then she leans close and asks me, 'Who's that . . . ' indicating my erstwhile uncle.

**"The Exorcist brought horror home, and nearly every horror writer since has tapped into it"**

'Ed Flanders,' I say. I am enjoying the smug feeling of newly acquired knowledge, when a woman, from the Christian News Service I



William Peter Blatty on the set of the original Exorcist, all them years ago

believe, asks Blatty in a very concerned tone just what he thinks his film is going to say about evil . . . and its war against good.

Blatty smiles, relishing the challenge, and he answers . . . warming to a topic that he has some definite thoughts about.

## HERETICS

It's seventeen years since Blatty's book, *The Exorcist*, and the William Friedkin-directed film forever changed the face of horror. The tremendous deals made by authors such as Stephen King, the string of graphic horror films - good, bad and indifferent - can all be traced to the interest created by Blatty's work.

*The Exorcist* (Hoya Productions/Warner Bros, 1973, 122

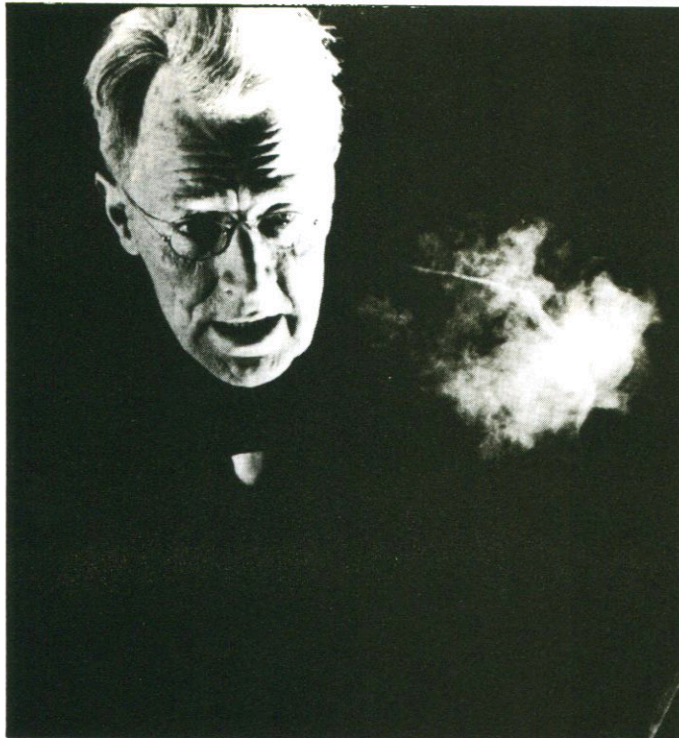
mins), by William Peter Blatty, was worlds removed from the Gothic expressionism of the Universal films of the Thirties, and way beyond anything Hammer released in its new cycle of horror classics that began in the Fifties with Terence Fisher's *The Curse of Frankenstein*.

The book (and later the film), was suffused with a hardedged reality that brought an immensely powerful, demonic evil into our stressful everyday world. No longer was it the moors of Scotland and the backwoods of Maine that were haunted. It was *your* living room, *your* bedroom, *your* little girl. *The Exorcist* brought horror home and nearly every horror writer since has tapped into its imagery, its visceral shocks, its mood of horrific realism. From the countless book covers featuring children and skeletons, to the new-wave splatter that has already become a cliché, modern horror began with *The Exorcist*.

When I read that there was to be a new film, *The Exorcist: 1990*, my interest was piqued for a

**"We rely on creaks and shapes in the mind. Your mind can produce infinitely more terror"**

number of reasons. Author Bill Blatty had nothing to do with Hollywood's confused sequel, *Exorcist II: The Heretic*. He had directed the impressive film *The Ninth Configuration*, a film that goes after some big philosophical fish. He was to direct this film, though, from his own screenplay, based on his novel, *Legion*; and it would start at the climactic moment at which the original film finished.



Max Von Sydow played Father Merrin in *The Exorcist* (1973)



Above: In *The Exorcist*, Ellen Burstyn (Mother) finds that Linda Blair (Regan) isn't quite herself today. Below: Father Merrin attempts to relieve Regan of the demonic spirit

## THE NATURE OF EVIL

The inclusion of George C Scott, Ed Flanders and Brad Dourif in the 12-million-dollar-budgeted film signalled that it had potential. But I had another reason for being interested. Blatty and I went to the same high school, the Jesuit-run Brooklyn Preparatory. He then went on to spend even more time with the Jesuits, in Georgetown University. Blatty says that he first heard the story – the basis for his novel about demonic possession – there. It was a rumour, passed along by the Jesuit

'Ministers', the young not-quite-priests of the religious order. There was an incident involving an actress . . . And a

**"It's the first time I've been scared by a screenplay in thirty years."  
George C Scott**

child . . . Something involving exorcism.

Or so it was said.

Back at the press conference, Blatty says that the story from *The Exorcist* was 'unfinished'.

*Legion* finished the story as a novel and this film will complete the cycle.

As the press throw out questions, many are directed at George C Scott. Scott says that his own interest was aroused by the script which he said was, 'beautifully written. It's the first time I've been scared by a screenplay in thirty years.' Scott's role, Lt Kinderman, was essayed by Lee J Cobb in the original film. Scott says he 'especially admired the writing in the flashback and dream sequences.'

Blatty says that the new film 'starts where the old one ends.

*The Exorcist* posed the problem of evil but only provided hints about the possible answer. The new film will look at the nature of that evil'.

## THE FALL

Unlike the original film, *The Exorcist: 1990* will not be a special effects tour-de-force. There are, Blatty says, 'almost no acts of violence. We rely on creaks and shapes in the mind. Your mind can produce infinitely more terror.' He taps his skull for emphasis. However, there is to be 'one breathtaking moment at the end of the film,' this time audiences will not be grossed out by displays of regurgitation and head-spinning. Such effects have, Blatty is surely aware, become clichés in the field.

But he is setting out to create genuine fear – and more. He speaks wistfully of his desire to move the audience. He hopes 'that the audience will be transported out of their bodies for two hours.'

Since Blatty's film will obviously deal with cosmic evil, a reporter asks him for his concept of evil. Blatty hesitates, and asks if the audience really wants to hear about it. There is some movement in the seats, people take some bites of their croissants. After some urging, he explains his idea, derived from

**"We fight against the pull of the material world, against that evil, to return to the state of pure spirit"**



reading the Jesuit theologian/scholar Teilhard de Chardin.

'The material universe is a person,' he says quietly. The television people ask him to speak up. 'And it has a name. Man has fallen, and the spiritual has become physical. That is the evil. We fight against the pull of the material world, against that evil, to return to the state of pure spirit.'

This is the battle he will be playing with in *The Exorcist: 1990*. The power of the material world against the world of the spirit.

As most contemporary horror movies are devoted to crazed slashers and endless red goo, and splatterpunk novelists substitute grue for terror, and magazines (and these really scare me) simply devote space to full-colour gore shots, Blatty – the father of it all – hopes to make a statement about the true traditions of literary and cinematic horror. Special effects aren't what it's all about. And they never were . . .

# HEX AND SEX

Series books and short stories have always been hard to sell to profit hungry publishers but, as David V Barrett discovers, they're coming back into vogue with a vengeance.

**F**or the first time in years, I'm impatiently awaiting the third, fourth and fifth novels in a series. Orson Scott Card's first two *Tales of Alvin Maker*, set in an alternative America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, are astonishingly good. Magic, of the household hex, talisman and warding variety, works; and, what's more, it's completely believable, and so is the depiction of an entire society of settlers moving west.

The first in the series, *Seventh Son* (Legend, paperback, £5.95), concentrates on the childhood of Alvin, the seventh surviving son of a miller, himself a seventh son. Alvin's particular gift is to make things, to fix things, to change things.

*Red Prophet* (Legend, paperback, £5.95), follows two Indian brothers, a war leader and a prophet of peace, as they each try to find the best way to deal with the encroachment of the white man on their land. They too have powers; they are in tune with the land, branches and brambles will move out of their way and animals will give themselves up to be killed for food. Alvin's gift is nearer to theirs than to his own people's, and he is caught in a bitter struggle between white and red.

The setting and stories are beautifully worked, but the crowning touch is the language: Card captures the natural rhythms and idiosyncracies of settlers and Indians alike. This is a lovingly-created and beautifully written work.

In contrast is the first of another series. I can't imagine anything more different, in style or quality, than David Wingrove's *Chung Kuo: The Middle Kingdom* (NEL, paperback, £7.95). This is the first of seven novels set in a 22nd century world where China has become the world power. According to the masses of publisher's hype, Wingrove has devoted years to researching this epic, but it doesn't show. He's used the

oldest trick in the book – has written a very average political thriller and put it in an exotic setting. Even this could be forgiven if the book was well-written and interesting; instead, it's cliché-ridden and turgid. To be avoided.

## BAN THE BOMB

John Brunner is best known as a SF writer, but his recent *The Days of March* (Kerosina, paperback, £5.95) is compulsive reading. Written in the literary version of bedsit and coffee bar *cinema vérité*, the novel covers the days leading up to a CND Aldermaston march in 1962. What comes over most of all is that the people putting every hour of their spare time into campaigning to ban the bomb aren't a load of left-wing loonies, as today's received wisdom would have us believe; they're a bunch of ordinary people of all ages and classes who just happen to want our planet to survive a little longer. Buy it and lend it to your friends; it might help counter the propaganda on which today's youth are raised.

It's good to see that short stories are back in fashion, and that there are so many good British writers around. It's been out for a few months, but get hold of David S Garnett's anthology *Zenith* (Sphere, paperback, £3.50), which has excellent stories by Garry Kilworth, Storm Constantine and newcomer-to-watch Liz Sourbut, amongst other good material.

Interzone collections are usually worth reading. The third anthology is just out in paperback (NEL, £2.99), while number four is in hardcover (Simon and Schuster, £12.95); both have some cracking good stories including the offerings from Kim Newman, Eric Brown and David Langford.

## MAGIC MIRRORS

If you think that the true era of the short story was the Victorian age, just possibly extending into the Edwardian era, then take a look at five collections from Equation (paperback, £3.50).

*The Magic Mirror* concentrates on Algernon Blackwood, *Bone to His Bone* on E G Swain and *The Black Reaper* on Bernard Capes; *Stories in the Dark* has tales by Jerome K Jerome and two of his colleagues, Barry Pain and Robert Barr; while *Dracula's Brood* is a collection of twenty-four vampire stories from 1867 up to 1940, including writings by Blackwood, M R James and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Read these, and see how it *should* be done.

Finding what's good and what isn't ain't easy, especially if you're fairly new to SF and

fantasy. The *Good Reading Guide to Science Fiction and Fantasy* by the collective personality of M H Zool (the Oxford SF group), (Bloomsbury, paperback, £4.99), gives a brief introduction to the major authors, picks out their most significant books and recommends other authors and titles on the basis of, 'If you like this, then you'll probably like these as well'. Some of the selections, recommendations and links are a bit idiosyncratic, but this only adds to the book's charm. Excellent value, for hardened SF addicts and newcomers alike.

## A CHILD ACROSS THE SKY

**Jonathan Carroll**  
*Publisher Legend*  
Format HB, £11.95  
Category Jonathan Carroll

**Y**ep, you read it right: giving Jonathan Carroll his own category is the easiest way of classifying his work.

I remember walking out of the first-night showing of Kubrick's interpretation of Arthur Clarke's screen adaptation of his own far superior short story *The Sentinel* and indulging in the folly of attempting to encapsulate, *succinctly*, what I had just seen, to the friends who had accompanied me. It wasn't easy. Not for any of us. Because what it meant for one, it didn't mean for another. It was a case of the gibbers.

The work of Jonathan Carroll is similarly defiant of the annoying human pastime of pigeon-holing; and people know the dangers of the pastime, which is why we have so many sub-genres, and why, after a short time, those same sub-genres acquire their own sub-genres. And so it goes on. Well, I ain't playing!

In a relatively short space of time, Jonathan Carroll has established himself as one of the most daring, most disquieting, most genuinely humanist storytellers in his field. He tells of real people and real situations coming up against a kind of cosmic wall. Carroll's world is a world not unlike that of the late Rod Sterling. It's a world of limits and boundaries, of actions and reactions, and of deeds done and prices to be paid. And sometimes, those prices come a tad expensive.

Take Philip Strayhorn, for example, the beleaguered moviemaker and co-central character of *A Child Across the Sky*, who is, nevertheless, dead before the book begins. The first paragraph – surely the finest

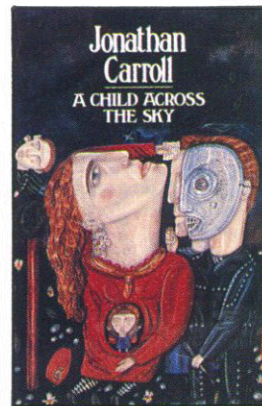
opening sentence in many years – says it all:

'An hour before he shot himself, my best friend Philip Strayhorn called to talk about thumbs.'

Philip's problem – the one that finally persuades him to suck on his gun and redecorate his patio – is that he's made a phenomenally successful series of stalk-and-slash movies, featuring an unpleasant character called Midnight. The movies have been so successful, however, that he's brought some kind of power into existence.

*Dum da dum dummm!* Sounds familiar? So it should, seeing that it has almost become the staple explanation for the kind of gory semi-supernatural mayhem which has been foisted upon us in a stream of books – with titles like *Giblets* and *Entrails* – over the past decade. What makes *Child* so special, however, is that:

1. We never quite find out what the power is, nor what it can actually do, and
2. Strayhorn contacts his friend Weber Gregston, from beyond the grave, to persuade him to remake certain scenes, thus alleviating the situation. He does this with the help of – nay, at the express request of – God himself, plus one of his angels, Pinsleepe, who is carrying the unborn foetus of Philip's and Weber's terminally



ill friend Sasha who, in turn, is carrying the unborn foetus of Pinsleepe. Weber's task is simply to edit Strayhorn's existing film footage and produce a new work which somehow returns everything to normal.

In huge blocks of text – italicised to set it apart from Gregston's first-person narrative – the deceased Strayhorn talks to the reader, describing past events which do not always tally with the versions we hear from other characters. He does the same to his friend, Weber, through the medium of video. And he's not averse to adding a bit to the tape – including a graphic recording of Gregston's mother in a 'plane crash:

'The screen went dark, then lit again on Philip Strayhorn's face. 'She was dead in half a second, Weber. One big blow she didn't even feel. I promise you that. I know it for sure.

'There's more on this tape you must see, but not now. You can watch your mother's part again if you want, but there's nothing new to be learned. That's how it happened.'

And when the shocked Gregston runs the tape again a few minutes later, there's a little bit more:

'This tape goes on and gives you more and more, Weber, as you can see.

'You've obviously tried the other two now and seen they don't work, but they will, later,

when you're ready. Like this one. The more you discover, the more the tapes will tell you.'

The result is a dazzling book, always serious and disturbingly believable, occasionally humorous – a feat in itself when one considers that many of the peripheral characters, who comprise a New York amateur dramatic society, are dying of cancer – and intensely exciting. It's a pyrotechnical display of sheer brilliance, a breathtaking communal marriage of Thorne Smith's old *Topper* yarns, David Lindsay's epic *Voyage to Arcturus* (which I've mentioned in every Carroll review I've written), Carlos Castaneda's supposedly semi-autobiographical and hallucinogenic Yaqui Indian/Don Juan fables, *Doctor Strange*, the old ACG comic stories drawn by Ogden Whitney, and Robert Pirsig's handbook on motorbikes. But most of all, it's Carroll all the way, breathing great profundities into the most staggeringly economic and eloquent prose.

'Time talks behind our back. To our face it's friendly and logical, never hesitating to give more of itself. But when we're not looking, it steals our lives and says bad things about us to the parts of us it's stolen.'

It may be years, in the general scheme of things, before the books of Jonathan Carroll find the true widespread recognition they deserve. In the meantime, it is left to the discerning reader, the unashamed romantic and the eternal child, with eyes ablaze with wonderment and questions, to discern the beauty of his work. **Pete Crowther**

naturally wants to keep such an advantage secret for a day when the 'reds' might get the upper hand, but others, including the sadistic Senator Endicott want it for their own cruel power games. The gate, however, also represents the chance of a fresh start for an increasingly disillusioned spy. He has been sent by his government to explore the gate's parallel worlds, but soon discovers that he

can leave his former life behind and start anew.

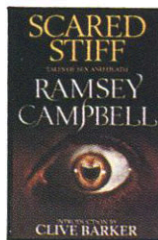
Each man is ruthless in his own right, and the gate represents their Pandora's box, where lust for life and power can be exercised without conscience. The result is a well-wrought vision of what can happen when human desires entangle with emotionless technology.

**Mark Westerby**

## SCARED STIFF

**Ramsey Campbell**  
**Publisher Macdonald**  
**Format HB, £12.95**  
**Category Horror**

**A** brave stab at a subject which most horror writers still regard as taboo, though, unfortunately, this book takes fairly traditional sex and dresses it in perverse situations.



After an upbeat introduction by Clive Barker (written, by the way, in 1986), we are treated to exhibitions of wooden sex during a witchcraft ritual, a shadowy lover from an artist's imagination, unsettling fun with a sex doll that takes on a personality all of its own, graveside love, a man's desperate attempt to achieve

orgasm and a fertility rite amongst a community whose men are sterile.

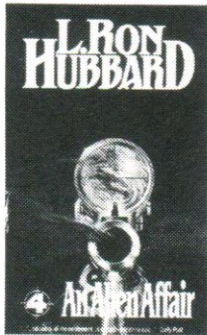
Each story toys with the mentality of sex rather than the physiology, so anyone expecting unbridled pornography is in for a disappointment. Here we have the ordinary, everyday fears surrounding sex – guilt, sterility, jealousy. Each one is framed within a well-written story which claims the attention from the word go. But, unfortunately, none dig deep into the erotic potential of horror fiction – and I'm not just talking about the obsessives amongst horror writers who feel that formula sex scenes are required in every other chapter. We're bored with such stuff and Campbell's book shows that innovative twists can be put into the sexual elements of stories or even novels. It is, however, a signpost, and cuts very little startlingly new ground.

The same cannot, however, be said of J K Potter's wonderful, unnerving, photo-illustrations which evoke the atmospheres of the stories. They are unremitting and unrepentant. They scream from the page and are picture stories in their own right.

Campbell and Potter provide a unique collaboration and I hope we see more in the UK.

**John Gilbert**

## RIGHT TARGET

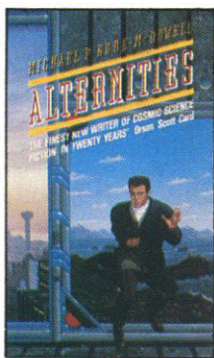


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## ALTERNITES

An alternate world scenario from a man with a very unusual name. Michael Kube-McDowell's *Alternites* (Sphere, paperback, £3.99), takes the SF movie *When Worlds Collide* and adds his very timely brand of political and military quick-step to a very believable plot.

Here we have two Earths and a gate which makes travel between them easy. The cold war between the US and the USSR on our world continues and, like *Star Wars* before it, the gatehouse to other realities is a military tool of some might.

The US President Robinson

## CRADLE

**Arthur C Clarke and Gentry Lee**  
**Publisher Orbit**  
**Format PB, £6.99**  
**Category Science fiction**

**T**he sea seems to hold a fascination for science fiction writers and filmmakers. Just this year we've seen movies such as *Cocoon II: The Return*, *The Abyss* and *DeepStar Six*, while next year we'll glimpse *Leviathan* and *Lords of the Deep*. Orson Scott Card has just released his novelisation of *The Abyss*, Matthew Costello is about to publish *The Wurm*, and now Clarke and Gentry have put out *Cradle*.

On first approach *Cradle* appears to be very similar to *The Abyss*, though much of it takes place above ground. The abyss is a rift in a coral reef and it is announced by the strange behaviour of certain aquatic animals. The big difference in

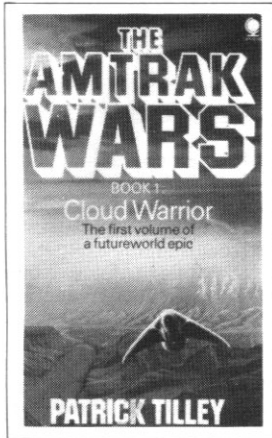
approach, however, is determined by the underlying motive of the plot. All the movies and a great number of the books have relied upon squishy monsters or cute aliens for effect. Not so with *Cradle*. Here we are promised the reason for the existence of humankind on this planet.

Who can resist such a temptation, especially when it is offered by a writing team which comprises Arthur C Clarke and a brilliant filmmaker-cum-scientist?

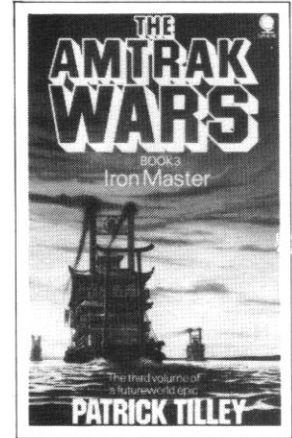
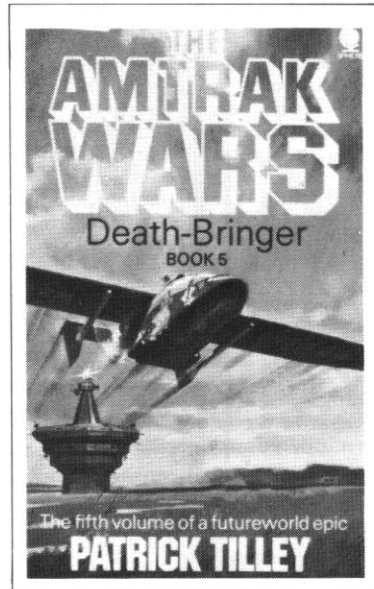
In many ways, *Cradle* is not simply a science fiction novel. It may tell a story which takes the reader into space, it may provide a logical reason for life on this planet given certain parameters, but it also provides a stunningly described glimpse of our ecology, the potential for mystery behind our seemingly explored world and the danger that we may never truly know the meaning of our lives before we destroy ourselves.

It's heady stuff and provocatively told. The authors

# THE AMTRAK WARS VOLUME 5: DEATH BRINGER

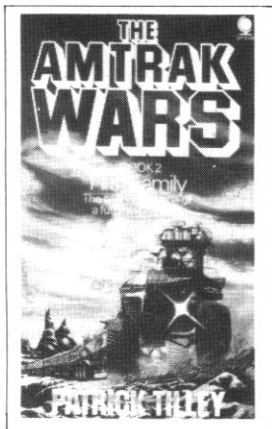


CLOUD WARRIOR

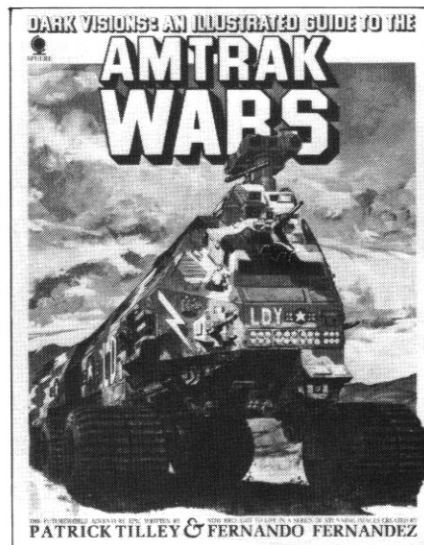


IRON MASTER

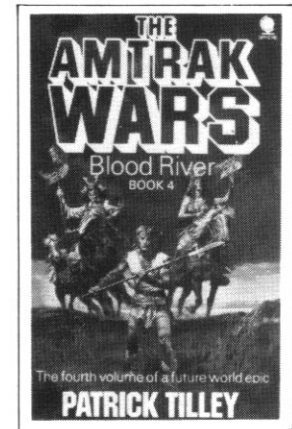
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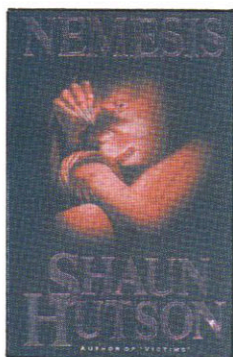
DARK VISIONS: THE ILLUSTRATED  
GUIDE TO THE AMTRAK WARS



BLOOD RIVER

have a message and are intent on telling it, no matter what else happens in the book. And yet *Cradle* is, literally, a marvellous yarn, put together by a well-matched writing team.

John Gilbert



## NEMESIS

Shaun Hutson  
 Publisher W H Allen  
 Format HB, £11.95  
 Category Horror

Shaun Hutson – the bad boy of horror. That's what they called him during his *Slugs*, *Spawn* and *Erebus* days but, as I said last year when reviewing *Victims*, Shaun's style is maturing with age. Gone are the instant,

unnecessary gropes for the gross, the killing upon killing which made his books so controversial – and so easy to throw away – in the early Eighties. Few people might own up to hoarding an unsigned copy of *Slugs* on their bookshelves but, I suspect, perhaps *Victims* and, most certainly, *Nemesis* will occupy a position in many 'read again' sections.

What's so special about this book? Well, the style is more adept, the characters are deeper and the storyline is involved in two time spans – present-day and 1940 England.

During the Second World War, biologist George Lawrenson is working on Project Genesis, genetic experimentation which should produce a race of super-soldiers. But Churchill is chilled by such work, the project is disbanded and Lawrenson disappears.

Years later, in Hinkston, England, John and Sue Hackett's young daughter is murdered and, impelled by grief if nothing else, they seek the advice of Dr Edward Curtis, a man who they believe could make a miracle happen and provide them with another child. Unfortunately, the Hacketts have just made the biggest mistake of their lives and medical war crimes, on the British side, are about to destroy what little normality remains in their lives.

*Nemesis* envelopes some fairly big themes – death, grief, cancer,

the wrongs done in the name of war and furtherance of the human race – and it will obviously draw in readers who have never touched a Hutson book. The slick new cover design will ensure that, despite the horrendous number of literal mistakes in the text.

Hutson fans, however, need not worry. The old death and destruction machine is still there, but garbed with a more mature approach. Take, for instance, the rape of the Hacketts' babysitter and the violent death of their daughter. The old Hutson would have gone into every grisly detail, but this time the author involves his readers' imaginations rather

than their guts.

There are some people who will never read a Hutson book, and yet will criticise his work – just as there are some people who will condemn National Theatre plays without ever going to see them. You can't change that: all I can say to those who are, perhaps, unwilling to read *Slugs* but might give *Nemesis* a try is that Shaun hasn't mellowed with age. If anything, his books are nastier – but he has moved into the middle ground between gore and subtlety. It's called 'entertainment'.

John Gilbert

## EXIT FUNTOPIA

Mick Farren's *Exit Funtopia* (Sphere, paperback, £3.50) opens with the line 'Marlowe lit a cigarette . . . ' and soon introduces a 'leggy looker' with a missing sister. But Marlowe is, until now, only a pretend detective. A 'leisure-out' with an IQ too high for him to be in an underclass ghetto, and a discipline quota too low for him to be employed.

The point of such a weird set-up is never explored in depth, leaving the main focus of the story on Marlowe. He soon finds the sister, and the rest of the story is basically an extended, rather self-indulgent chase. There's a fair degree of irony and humour, but not enough to compensate for a weak plot and banal characterisation.

Stuart Wynne

The plot here fragments into several different storylines which more or less come together at the end – a sequel (*Universe's End?*) seems highly likely though.

While the plot is confusing, Lupoff's alien creations are impressive and easy to sympathise with. Octopus-like creatures, electric people and a steam-powered civilisation are all featured. In short, this one is worth a look.

Stuart Wynne

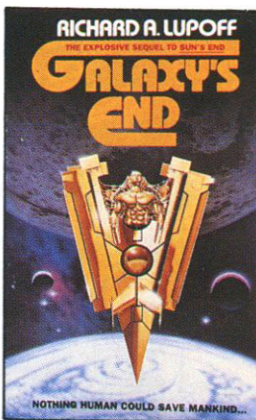
## BUREAU OF LOST SOULS

Christopher Fowler  
 Publisher Century Hutchinson  
 Format PB, £5.95  
 Category Fantasy/horror

*Roofworld* provided Christopher Fowler with the kind of task which would make many other well-known authors balk. So how to better or even equal an instant first-novel success? Fowler seems to have avoided the potential dangers of a second novel by changing format and releasing a series of twelve short stories all thematically linked by urban paranoia.

It could be said that the stories are unnaturally linked, as several of them came from the author's *City Jitters* collections, but that would be grossly unfair. All these stories belong in this collection, be it the horrors behind an art nouveau fireplace, the comeuppance of a ladies' man, the emergence of two strangely normal killers in London's West End or the desperation to stay in limbo which haunts the newly dead at the bureau of lost souls.

Several of the stories are a little uneven. For instance, the first, *The Art Nouveau Fireplace*, is rather antique in concept while *The Ladies' Man* is a little predictable. That said, most of the stories are worthy of *Roofworld*. *Safe As Houses* and the *Bureau of Lost Souls* mark the pinnacle of the collection, while the slightly



## GALAXY'S END

*Galaxy's End* (Grafton, paperback, £3.50) is the somewhat unexpected sequel to *Sun's End*, and sees Richard A Lupoff finding another catastrophe, albeit less imminent, to concern his readers. The central character is again Daniel Kitajima, an immortal cyborg who is introduced in an opening which dwells on his powers at length. He's exploring a planet in a Solar System revolving around our own, and soon encounters god-like creatures who have him whizzing into the past and into the minds of aliens.

# Toady

## MARK MORRIS

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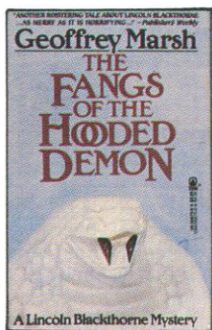
RAMSEY CAMPBELL,  
 author of *The Influence*  
 and *Ancient Images*

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clichéd horror of *Jumbo Portions* is likely to gross out even the most hardened reader. All are excellent examples of short story telling at its best.

Fowler's next novel, *Prayerdevil*, is due out next year and, if his recent performance is anything to go by, it will quickly enter the bestseller lists.

Mark Westerby



## THE FANGS OF THE HOODED DEMON

I thought books like Geoffrey Marsh's *The Fangs of the Hooded Demon*, (Tor, paperback, \$3.95), had vanished from the shelves with *The Big Book of Mysteries*.

This is a tale of the old school with an eminent, mysterious hero called Lincoln Blackthorne, who's a cross between Sherlock

Holmes and Dick Barton. In this mystery he is after a set of false fangs, crafted from rubies with an ivory bridge, which are rumoured to have belonged to the infamous vampire, Dracula – I never knew he had false teeth . . . Blackthorne needs to find the fangs before they are put to use, but his own life is in danger.

The plot of *Fangs* is unpredictable, largely because the mystery is spiced with a potion of good, old-fashioned fantasy. Which is not, however, to say that Marsh allows cliché to creep into his story. Dracula, grandly named Vlad Tepes, is the only noticeable cliché amongst some highly involved mystic machinery. That said, Linc is a highly practical investigator who, despite the constant threat of death and unusual happenings, likes tidy explanations for the most outrageously supernatural events. On the grand scale, it's a throwback to the old Victorian supernatural mysteries where even the most outlandish occurrences had logical explanations or, more mundanely, to *Scooby-Doo* – no self-respecting real ghost would be seen in that cartoon.

*Fangs* is a quick-witted, highly original, complex and manipulative story. If you like your mystery à la Sherlock Homes and your horror tinged with Machen or James, then Marsh has a treat in store for you.

Bob Rachin

## SONGS OF A DEAD DREAMER

Thomas Ligotti  
Publisher Robinson  
Format PB, £5.99  
Category Horror/fantasy

To many British horror fans who are still catching up with the genre, Thomas Ligotti may just be a name whispered in the dark haunts of a fantasy convention. In America, however, he is a critically acclaimed prince of dark fantasy whose short fiction is very much in demand, and soon, after this very wise publishing move by Robinson, he will be just as well known in the UK.

*Songs* contains some of his best fiction, first published in magazines such as *Fantasy Tales*, *Dagon* and *Prime Evil*. The salutary introduction by that other master of the short story Ramsey Campbell is quickly followed by three rather interestingly titled sections – for sleepwalkers, insomniacs and *The Dead* – each of which contains six stories or sequences of stories.

From the start you'll discover that Ligotti has a unique and unsettling style, a surprising turn of phrase and a delightfully chimerical imagination which eagerly explores any attribute of human existence, be it home life,

prison death or the writer's attitude to his craft.

His talent for picking a ripe title – such as *The Chymist*, *The Lost Art of Twilight* and *Drink to Me Only With Labyrinthine Eyes* – is only bettered by his ability to lure the reader to an expected foregone conclusion, and then to cap it with a twist of style or by pulling a rabbit out of the hat. Anything, so long as it makes you jump with dark glee at the discovery.

*Songs* is by no means a definitive guide to Ligotti's fiction, but it does provide a wealth of stories for newcomers to his art and for those who only have collections of magazines as a reference. A classic work, that can only improve with age.

John Gilbert

## THE SCIENCE FICTION YEARBOOK: TWO

The first *Orbit Science Fiction Yearbook* was greeted with no little acclaim, and *Yearbook Two* (*Orbit*, paperback, £4.99) deftly repeats that success under editor David S Garnett. Just as you would hope, its 347 pages are crammed with fiction, giving a rather cramped feel to the two reviews of 1988 SF

BURY  
YOURSELF IN  
THE LATEST

# STEPHEN KING

# THE DARK HALF

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at the back of the book.

The stories themselves, however, are all very good. Examples include Jack Massa's *Prayerware* with software to pray to, which seems all too credible, while Rudy Rucker and Marc Laidlaw's *Probability Pipeline* uses Chaos Theory to produce a surfboard which puts the Silver Surfer to shame. In virtually all of the stories it's the human dimension as much, if not

more than, the technological which provides the interest. Ian McDonald's *Vivaldi* is principally about mourning rather than space probes, while Kathe Koja's *Distances* revolves around a friendship as much as NASA's man-machine linking. Attractively presented and extremely readable this is a surprisingly good anthology.  
**Stuart Wynne**

## THE DARK HALF

**Stephen King**  
**Publisher Hodder and Stoughton**  
**Format HB, £12.95**  
**Category Thriller/horror**

Two years ago Stephen King announced that he was going into hibernation, away from public scrutiny, perhaps to recharge his creative batteries, but most definitely to have some form of a holiday. Who was he kidding? Fewer than twenty-four months later, he's produced three chunky new novels: *Misery* appeared last year, *The Tommyknockers* appears in paperback this month, and *The Dark Half* has just been published in hardback.

King has also displayed a much wider diversity in his craft during the two years in which he is supposed to have been away from it. We've had a straight thriller in

the form of *Misery*, Golden Age science fiction with *The Tommyknockers*, and now, with *The Dark Half*, a psychological chiller with a good dose of supernatural terror wedged down its gullet.

Who do we have to thank for *The Dark Half*? Why, Richard Bachman of course, to whom it's dedicated. And if you don't know who this gentleman is, well, he's none other than Steve's own pen-name. King was reputed to have killed off his alter-ego when it was discovered that he wrote five books under the Bachman banner, including *Thinner*, *The Long Walk* and *The Running Man*.

The same kind of thing happens in *The Dark Half* to King's hero Thad Beaumont, a writer of so-called serious novels. He decides to have some fun, create a pseudonym - George Stark - and

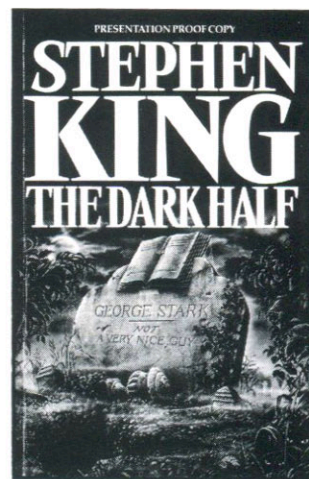
write some gruesome psychological thrillers about a killer called Alexis Machine, an anti-hero who makes Stark a bestselling author and Beaumont a very nervous literary parent.

His anxiety proves to be well-founded when his pseudonym is discovered in much the same way as King's was. This time, however, the discoverer tries to extort money for silence. Beaumont decides to go public and kills off George Stark in a blaze of glory, even going to the lengths of providing a graveless headstone for him at a local cemetery.

But Stark doesn't remain dead for long. He appears to dig himself out of his grave and goes on a reckless rampage, killing everyone who had even the slightest hand in bringing about his downfall. He also wants to start writing again, and that means trouble for Beaumont who wants to forget his brutal alter-ego and produce his magnum opus - rather like Paul Sheldon in *Misery*. But this is not just a straight repetition in plot, it contains images and symbols the like of which have never found their way into King's earlier work.

*The Dark Half* appears to be a very personal novel, written with a great deal of emotion and, to a certain degree, frustration. One suspects that King shares Beaumont's irritation with a brand name and the people who foster it with no thought to the human being behind its public face.

It is a book which marks out a new King territory, fairly small though immediately evident. Compared to his other work, it has more in common with *Misery*,



*Cujo* and some aspects of Bachman than with his overtly supernatural fiction such as *Carrie* and *Salem's Lot*. It's as though King has found a way to tie his own style to that of Bachman and has produced maybe not the best book he has ever written but certainly one which is more stylistically rounded than his earlier works, with, perhaps, the exception of *The Shining*.

There is no doubt that *The Dark Half* will be a bestseller. As has so often been stated, King could publish his laundry list and it would hit the top ten in thirty minutes - and that must rankle with a man who, like anyone, thrives on praise. Fortunately though, this critic, and probably many others, can say that King is still at his peak, despite his disappearance during the past two years. If he continues to write in this way, then his fans should remain well pleased.

**John Gilbert**

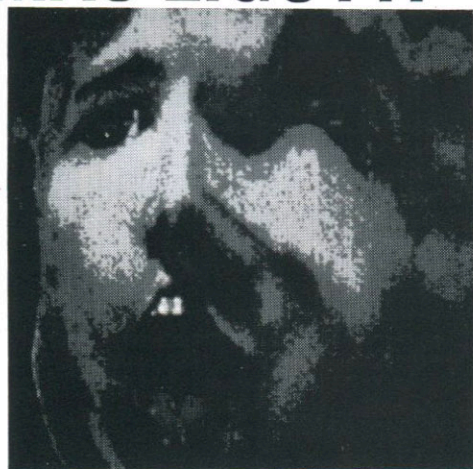
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## THE FULFILMENTS OF FATE AND DESIRE

**Storm Constantine**  
**Publisher Drunken Dragon Press**

**Format HB, £13.95**

**Publisher Futura**

**Format PB, £4.99**

**Category Fantasy/science fiction**

If you've read Storm Constantine's first two Books of Wraeththu, *The Enchantments of Flesh and Spirit* and *The Bewitchments of Love and Hate*, then this one is Cal's story; Calanthe introduced Pellaz to the Wraeththu in the first book, and was Terzian's lover in the second. If you haven't, go and read those first, then get this one.

The Wraeththu are a hermaphrodite development of humans, on a near future Earth. They're beautiful and some of them are wise, but many of the old human traits of selfishness,

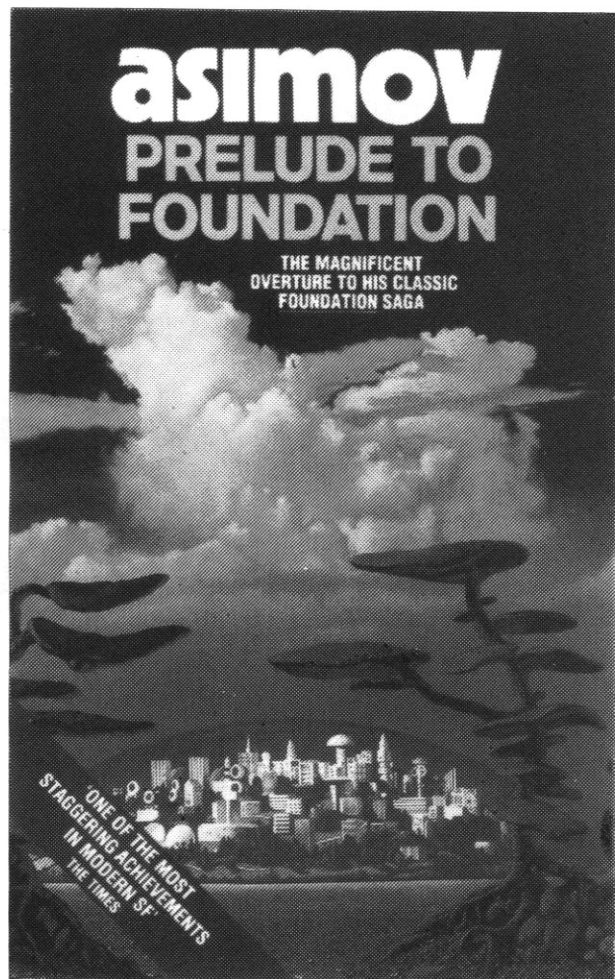
arrogance, bitterness, self-pity and pig-headed stupidity still linger on. Cal is an excellent example of this. He's lived with royalty in the past, he starts this book working as a whore, running from those who want to see him achieve his full potential, and running even more from himself. The novel is a marvellous study in character development. Cal is recognisably the same person by the end - but oh, how he's changed!

All the Wraeththu books are studies in sexuality - male and female together in one body, masculine and feminine in one mind, and in society. *The Fulfilments of Fate and Desire* takes a deeper look at what's missing in Wraeththu life, which needs Cal's disruptiveness to keep it from stagnation. This one is probably the deepest and most satisfying of the three; buy and enjoy.

**David V Barrett**



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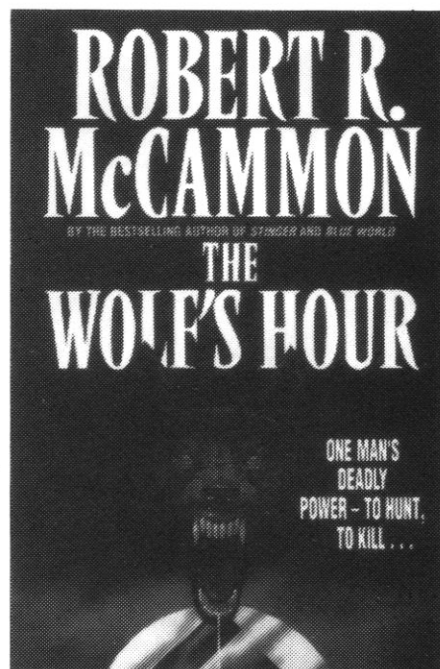
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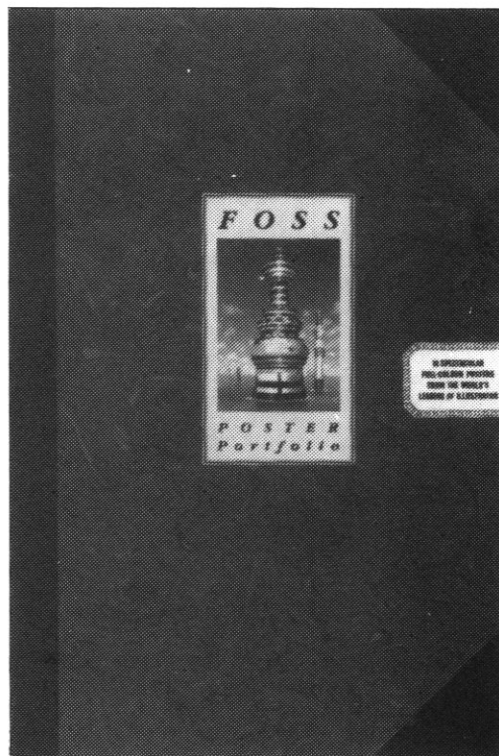
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# THE SHAPE OF SF, FANTASY AND HORROR TO COME

**GRAFTON BOOKS**



With *Aliens*, *The Terminator* and now *The Abyss*, producer Gale Ann Hurd has made her name with a string of box office hits. John Gilbert talks to the woman who delights in taking on the toughest of projects, asks her about that extra challenge and discovers what it's like to jump in at . . .

## THE DEEP END

**W**e all know what film stars and directors do and, to some extent, we know how they do it, but the producer's job is shrouded in mystery. Obviously, producers are powerful people close to the film production company and the money, but even the most ardent movie buffs can be unsure about whether the producer has any creative role to play in a project.

There must be some attraction to the job. After all, Gale Ann Hurd, producer of such movie classics as *Aliens*, *Alien Nation* and *The Abyss* and co-writer of *The Terminator*, chose to produce rather than direct. To this day, she has no doubts.

'One of the skills you need to have as a producer is the ability to have a global perspective, to be able to see how all the people fit together and create a whole. There are people whose sensibilities are geared toward that and there are people who aren't. It's something that I enjoy a great deal. It's also something that I was trained to do, because I went to work for Roger Corman [at New World Pictures].

'His is a school, not in the literal translation of the word, but very much in the sensibilities of working with Corman. You start out knowing very little and you are thrown into a position of greater responsibility than you've earned, and you either sink or swim. In the very beginning I chose producing, and I learned the skills that I needed

while with Roger Corman.'

Producing continues to take up a great deal of her time, but she also has empathy with the job of the script writer, a job which has often been seen as second-string to many film bosses. 'Writing is the hardest part. When you're a director who hasn't written the script or a producer, actor, whichever, you are following the guidelines of a screenplay and the writer is the person who has to complete that. It's a great challenge, but it

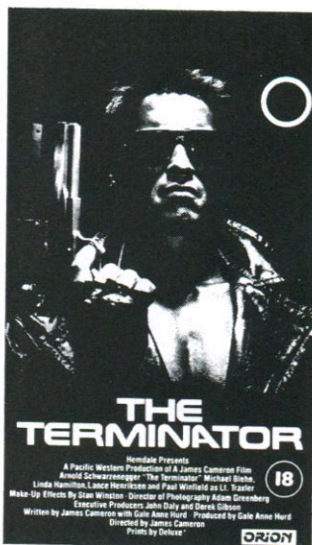
**"One of the skills you need to have as a producer is the ability to have a global perspective, to be able to see how all the people fit together and create a whole"**

also requires an inordinate amount of time and effort and, in my case, if not in everyone's case, to the exclusion of everything else. If you want to be a professional producer you have to have a number of balls in the air. You have to be juggling all the time.'

### CRAP SHOOT

Big budget film projects, such as *The Abyss*, can take several years to produce, from conception to postproduction, but when Hurd started her career with Roger Corman the budgets were miniscule and time was at a premium.

'He came up with the kernel of an idea and then it would become scripted and he would make it. And he made every one



Main picture: trouble trebled in *Aliens*.

Production has its fair share of concerns to bear and decisions to make, but none is bigger than choosing the project which you are going to spend two years of your life organising in the hope that it will make megabucks. 'Every time it's a crap shoot, you feel like you never want to tackle anything that is not going to be successful and the thing about films is that it's over in a weekend. You can work two, four, eleven years on a film and one weekend decides whether or not it's a hit. If it doesn't open big, all that effort

**"If you want to be a professional producer you have to have a number of balls in the air. You have to be juggling all the time"**

you've put into it, and all that passion, is gone down the drain. So it only makes sense to work on something that seems worth the effort.'

### ON THE BLOCK

That 'success' decision – whether it is to make a picture

that he came up with! The period of time from conception to the release of the film would never be more than six to eight months. That's a very short period of time. I haven't been on a film since that didn't take at least two years.'

The two year production schedule does not, however, mean that Hurd has a leisurely life. Most producers have a number of irons in the hotbelly of Hollywood. 'Here I am in London, eight hours time difference from Los Angeles; I was on the 'phone last night and on four different pictures I was dealing with four different crises. Two of them are in postproduction, one of them is in preproduction, one of them is still in the writing stage. So you constantly have to switch gears. That's good because you don't get stale, but at the same time it means that there is never a period of time when you are free of concern.'



Top: *The Abyss*, Jacques Cousteau eat your heart out

as a philosophical statement with perhaps less financial reward at the end or make it as a blockbuster – has to be tackled on every movie project. 'With *The Abyss*, Jim and I were in postproduction on *Aliens* here in England and we were in the position of making a deal with Twentieth Century Fox to commit to making two more pictures for them. They wanted to hear what the first one was going to be.

'We went over a number of ideas that we had discussed since *The Terminator* and the one that seemed the most unique was *The Abyss*. We pitched that in '86 to Twentieth Century Fox and they decided to give us the go-ahead. Jim wrote a very elaborate treatment, they approved the treatment and we went from screenplay to preproduction.'

Underwater movies – *DeepStar Six*, *Leviathan*, *Lords of the Deep* – have generated this year's fantasy/science fiction sub-genre and *The Abyss* was the most expensive, if not the first, of those films to be made. The Fox Film Corporation, however, already had a below sea-level film called *Leviathan* on their books and some initial logistic manipulation had to take place before

both films could go ahead.

'When *Leviathan* got the green light it was important for them to get out before *The Abyss*, because they thought that the bigger film would steal some of their thunder.'

Critical response to *DeepStar Six*, the first underwater movie released in the UK, was not too hot and the commentators have not been too polite about the rather rusty denouement of *The Abyss*. Hurd, however, is confident that, historically, her film will not be judged in conjunction with the other underwater

**"You can work two, four, eleven years on a film and one weekend decides whether or not it's a hit"**

movies. But she does admit that there were things wrong with *The Abyss* which were not put right because of the need to get it out for the peak American summer season.

'I would have been quite happy holding the film back until Christmas. When you are a victim of visual effects you don't know what things are

going to look like until its almost too late to change them. When you realise that something could be better than what you have, you always want to make it better. In the end, though, you have to make a decision in concert with the studios as to whether it's worth the effort and the money. And in this particular instance, losing a summer release date would have been a financial disaster.

'So the decision was made, 'Yes, it's not as good as we wanted in terms of what we hoped to achieve, but it tells the story.'

### OCEANS APART

Hurd admits that the final sequence of the film, in which a massive alien mother ship rises out of the ocean, was overambitious. 'We learned something that now, hopefully, every other filmmaker has been able to embrace, which is that if you want to do something that is truly magical and ethereal you have to do it at night. You cannot compete with daylight. You can't control it. The sun is far more powerful than any kind of rotoscoping or internal light source that you can create. But, at the same time, what we had hoped to achieve hadn't been achieved before, which was a visual effects sequence ending in daylight.'

Despite some shortfall in effects, the enormous efforts of *The Abyss* filmmakers are summed up admirably by Hurd. 'The idea of cheating on this film, of trying to shoot it on a smoke-filled stage, which the other films had chosen, was too great a compromise. Once we decided we were going to shoot it reel for reel, which meant wet for wet rather than dry for wet, we jumped in with both feet.

'There was no end to the problems. There was no place to shoot it, a place had to be created specifically for the film. It didn't work: even though we had the top experts in the world, both in terms of design and construction. On the first day we filled it with water it leaked. Then, once we got that solved, the water wouldn't clear – and you needed absolute clarity in order to shoot.

'Communication systems would break down, camera housings would flood. You have a whole plethora of problems when you're shooting top side.'

Shooting schedules were also unusual on *The Abyss* because of the safety factors involved in working underwater. If safety concerns arose with one scene, its actors might find themselves

with nothing to do while others were shipped in for another sequence with only a moment's notice. 'Where we shot, Gaffney, South Carolina, is a very small town and there is not a lot to do.'

### DRYING UP

Rumours from the film press seem to have Hurd's future settled with sequels to *The Terminator*, *Aliens* and *Alien Nation*. She has no hesitation in putting the record straight and admitting that there is only one sequel she would like to make. 'The only one I would really like to do is *The Terminator*, and we can't seem to make a deal so I don't think it will ever happen.'

**"Once we decided we were going to shoot it reel for reel, which meant wet for wet rather than dry for wet, we jumped in with both feet"**

'It's so fertile. There are so many ways that you could go with it. Arnold [Schwarzenegger] is very keen on doing it, but it's, at this point, extremely unlikely.'

Her other ambitious project is a film company which supports the work of first time feature directors. 'No Frills makes films for seven million [dollars] that come in under budget, that are very competently made and we will continue to make films that are a gamble.

'The one I've just finished, called *Tremors*, stars Kevin Bacon and Fred Ward, and is directed by Ron Underwood who won an Emmy for directing after-school specials for children, and it's written and produced by Fred Maddock and Steve Wilson who wrote *Short Circuit*. It's an effects film, but it's fun.'

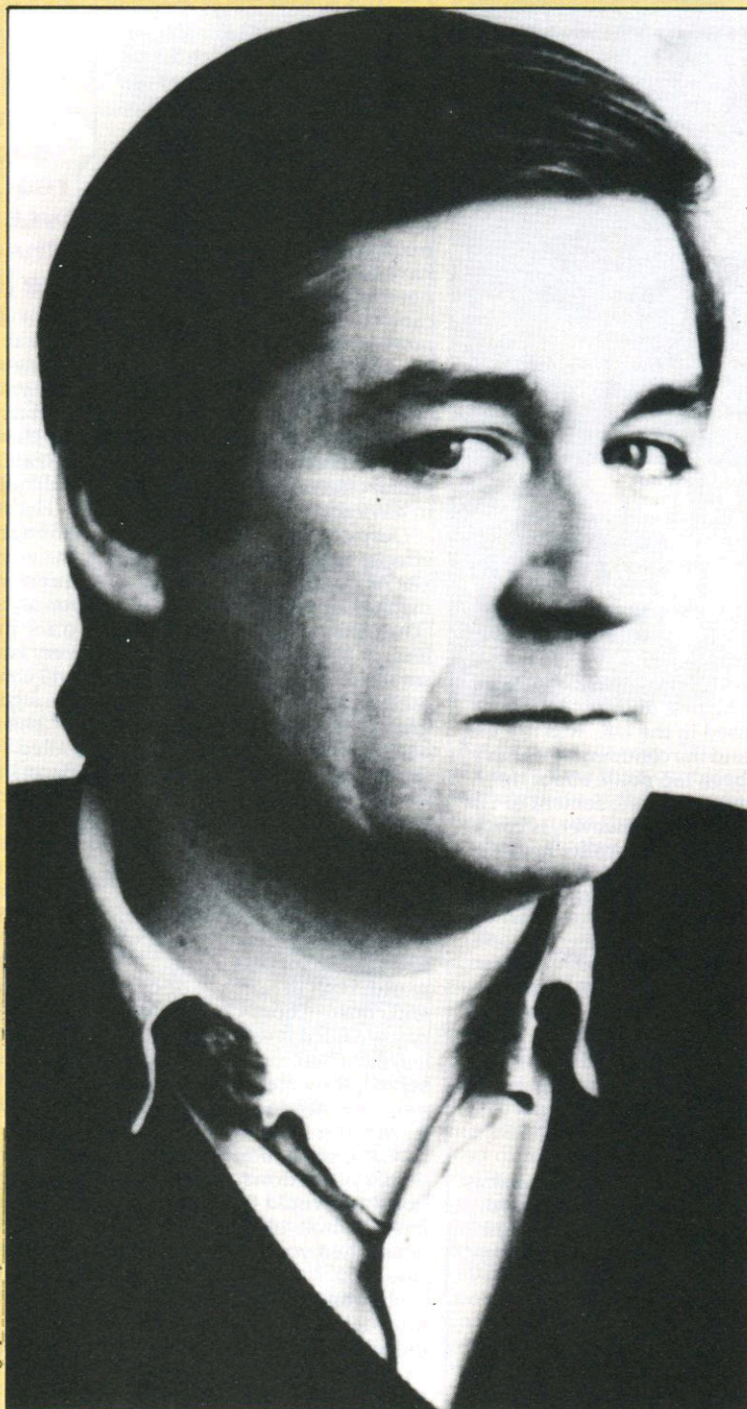
She feels that No Frills, and other independents, are important for the continued success of the movie industry when so many, 'New World, Dino [De Laurentis], Vestron were making a lot of films. Now those resources have been taken off the market and there's great trepidation with the Wall Street investors about making further investment. So you see the ranks closing.'



# AN ELEGANT WEIRDNESS

He is a hunter of the wild, the perverse, the unusual. His short stories and novels contain innovative style and a ravaged imagination. Yet, as the critically acclaimed author Patrick McGrath tells Pete Crowther, he started to write out of necessity and several of his unique characters are a synthesis of crusty old stereotypes.

"I find that, when I've thought of something rather ghastly, my inclination is not simply to serve it up and show it to you but rather to enmesh it or embed it in layers"



Photograph courtesy of Poseidon Press/ Simon & Schuster



Patrick McGrath's *Blood and Water* and *Other Tales* collection appeared in the US last year under Simon and Schuster's Poseidon Press imprint, and garnered the kind of

critical acclaim usually reserved for bigger literary names. The ubiquitous Clive Barker, for example, called his imaginative horror fiction 'a unique vision', while mainstream writer Graham Swift accurately pinpoints McGrath's affectionate hybrid of the mundane and the bizarre as 'Sinuous, savoury and sly . . . a delight in itself.'

Within the year, Penguin had picked up a slice of the action and McGrath's book – now simply entitled *Blood and Water* – became part of a triumvirate of new work launching the company's prestigious Originals paper-cover line.

McGrath's home is now in New York, which he refers to as his 'niche in this world'. He left England in 1971 with a degree in English literature from the University of London, and took up a job at a mental hospital in Ontario, at which he only lasted a year. 'After that I wanted to see North America, so I travelled to the West Coast, then right through the States,' he says in a soft and cultured English accent, totally devoid of any US inflection. 'At the end of it all, I realised I wanted to live in America.'

Talking in his hotel just a stone's throw from Harrods and a lifetime away from his early life in Berkshire, McGrath is relaxed and genuinely dismissive of the adulation his work has received. As he points out almost proudly, he only started to write because he ran out of options.

'I'd gone into the mental health field, and then I thought that I wanted to be a teacher,' he says, pointing out that he inherited from his father, the former physician superintendent at Broadmoor, the



belief that one ought to do something in society. And it was then that he realised he didn't want to work in a mental hospital so very much: he wanted to work in schools. 'It felt more attractive to me,' he says quite simply. 'And I did that for three or four years, but it wasn't working. I wasn't very good at it, basically.'

He found himself in New York and took up a position as a copy editor. 'I was editing and proof-reading . . . to pay the rent for ten years. I haven't actually lived from my writing until the last year. I did some children's book but they were only short projects. It was only when *Blood and Water* did well in the US that I was able to get a second contract which enabled me to write full time.'

So how did the break finally come? 'Well, I was writing fiction and looking for a way to get work out, and I found a cafe where anyone could read . . . it was one of those open mike situations. It was in the same part of New York as the beats and I was reading a tale one night and the editor of *The East Village Eye* came up and introduced himself and said 'I'd like to publish this story'. The story was *The E(rot)ic Potato*.

## MY STREET

The publication of *The E(rot)ic Potato* marked McGrath's debut and established his disconcerting though humorous style. The narrator is, in fact, a fly. Even this lowly insect was soon toppled from its perch as 'most unusual first-person' with the publication of *The Boot's Tale*.

The two tales date from the early Eighties, shortly after Ronald Reagan had come to power. 'It began to look to a lot of people that we were quite likely to get blown up sort of fairly quickly,' McGrath points out, if not defensively, at least in mitigation. 'It loomed large in the imagination at that time.'

One of the most beautiful stories in the book is a stark tale entitled *The Angel*. 'The setting is my apartment, my street, my block, my neighbourhood,' says McGrath. 'The precise inspiration is a quote I came upon by a French writer, Theophile Gautier, writing in 1870, I think, about the poet Charles Baudelaire. And he was saying that here was a man born in a mechanical age, a man with a soul: this, to him, was the tragedy of Baudelaire.'

'The idea somehow stayed in my mind. It occurred to me that, if one took it literally, the idea of a soul being born while the body somehow crumbled around its flame would make an interesting story. The body is like a temple to the soul . . . There's an almost relig-

ious sub-text there.

The story's backdrop of New York is a key factor of its success, and McGrath is emphatic about the city's attraction for him. 'I'm content there. I know my way around,' he says. 'I've been there seven or eight years now, basically doing the same thing. You know, writing fiction, pushing it out and trying to get somewhere with it. And I know all the negative aspects of New York. It's too large, busy, crowded and uncaring. But, clearly, if I hated it then I wouldn't be there. So, it's not so much that I like it as that I'm adjusted to it. It's very lively in the cultural sense and there's an energy in the streets . . . a vitality there, you know, that feeds you. It's nourishing and interesting and exciting. But it's also a place that you do need to get away from periodically because it can burn you out.'

## MENTAL MASTURBATION

McGrath's neighbourhood also looms large in his *Hand of a Wanker*. 'The setting of *Hand of a Wanker* is a club on the lower east side called The Pyramid Club. I'd been giving some readings there so I knew the place well. The idea for the story stemmed from my reading a biography of the writer Malcolm Lowry, a drunken, tragic figure of a man. Lowry himself was somewhat preoccupied with severed hands, and someone told him that it was because he felt guilty about masturbating. Lowry, understandably, was shocked and didn't talk about severed hands anymore.'

'But it occurred to me that I could take this little piece of Freudian nonsense one step further. 'Let's have the motivation for chopping off the hand being somebody's masturbation hang-up,' I thought. 'And let's have this club terrorised by a maniac hand that some poor wanker chopped off in a fit of guilt.' It was a lot of fun to write, I can tell you.'

McGrath's experiences growing up with his psychiatrist father clearly gave him an interest in mental instability, as he readily agrees. 'When I worked in mental hospitals I was reading a fair amount of technical psychological material and familiarising myself with the field of mental illness and its treatment. Then when I began to write, this was something I knew. It was just there, in my imagination. And I gravitated, without even thinking about it, towards writing horror fiction – but horror fiction that was based on psychology rather than the supernatural.'

In *The Skewer*, McGrath gives his obsession with mental health full rein with the disturbing story of a

man haunted by tiny psychiatrists. 'I find that, when I've thought of something rather ghastly, my inclination is not simply to serve it up and show it to you but rather to enmesh it or embed it in layers. *The Skewer* is a good example of this. The inspiration for the story came from Sheridan LeFanu's *Green Tea*. It's a lovely story about a vicar who sees a monkey in a bus that he's travelling in. When he stares at the monkey, the monkey stares right back at him, and when he tries to prod it with his stick, the stick goes right through the monkey. And then the monkey starts appearing more and more, eventually climbing up on the vicar's bible when he's giving his sermon. The monkey is screaming all kinds of blasphemies at him, but nobody else can see it because, of course, it's completely a figment of his imagination. Yet it feels entirely real to him and it eventually drives him to suicide.'

'And I thought, 'Lovely idea. Now, let's put Freud himself in instead of the monkey, and let's have somebody else telling the story: but who would that be?' And then I thought of the nephew of the haunted man, a nephew with some kind of grudge against the psychiatrist who was treating his uncle. And so there's a core story that's got other stories building up around it. That's when it becomes much more interesting.'

## PROPER TYPES

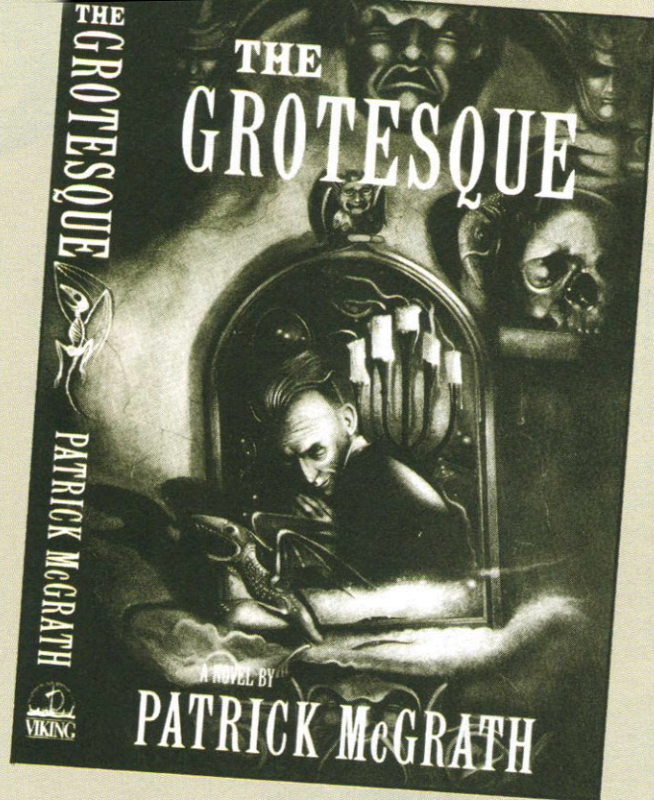
Elsewhere in the book is the tormented young priest Ambrose Syme, whose predilection for boys creates something of a problem. Syme kills young Tommy Blackburn in a moment of passion, disposes of the body and returns to his rooms at Ravengloom Public School with – as a memento – the unfortunate child's underpants, which he hides in the guttering outside his study window. The story charts Syme's attempts to retrieve the incriminating evidence before the man charged with the task of unblocking all the drains can discover his indiscretion. While all this is happening, Tommy Blackburn's body is found and brought into the school grounds.

'I wasn't happy at school,' McGrath answers when I ask if he was getting his own back in some way for his school life. 'And I did go to a school like that: Stoneyhurst, up in Lancashire. I thought I'd like to do a story about that kind of setting – it was a bleak, castle-like place on the moors – because it was so perfect for a horror story. Really Gothic.'

Despite his adoption of the US, McGrath writes with great style in English settings. In *The Black Hand*

**"I'm working from an imaginative recollection of England, so I do tend to have rather old-fashioned and stuffy people in my stories"**





of the Raj, some colonials discover an unpleasant side effect to a seemingly innocuous laying on of hands conducted by a little old man with a bald head and a loincloth and, in *The Lost Explorer*, a little girl finds an emaciated man living beneath a torn mosquito net in a tent in the garden of her London home. But McGrath's English protagonists are invariably stuffy, a flurry of ruffles and frills.

'Yes, they're definitely 'proper' types,' he says with a big grin. 'You see, I've not lived here since about 1971, and over in America I've got this idea of England that is pretty out of touch in a way. It is built up from memories, from the films I see and the books I read. Occasionally it gets sort of tested against reality when I come over here on a summer trip. But, by and large, I'm working from an imaginative recollection of England, so I do tend to have rather old-fashioned and stuffy people in my stories.'

## ENCOUNTER WITH ADULTHOOD

'*The Lost Explorer* is a story I wrote which, when I had finished it, I didn't quite understand exactly what I'd produced. I'm interested in Africa and I like stories of African explorers, stories of the jungle. I was much influenced by Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and that picture of the barbaric Congo. It simply interests my imagination, the business of Europeans in the dark continent during the last century. So, I wrote the story and I didn't quite know what I had. I knew I liked it and, after some months, I realised that what was going on there was really an encounter of the imagination. The pure imagination of the child as it meets up with a sort of reality that is personified in the father, the surgeon, the doctor, the man of medicine . . . of medical science. In a way, the imagination

encounters adulthood and science and it just shrivels up and dies. And the girl in the story gets to a point where she is no longer able to conjure.'

McGrath's pièce de résistance is undoubtedly *Blood and Water*. Coming across like a collaboration between Agatha Christie and Evelyn Waugh, *Blood and Water* is the ultimate stately home murder mystery.

'Yes, you mention Evelyn Waugh and I think that a rereading of *Brideshead Revisited* was probably behind my writing of the story. Also, I had been wanting to write a story about a hermaphrodite – I think that's a very interesting figure, you know, a creature which is both man and woman at the same time. And the idea of popping a hermaphrodite into an Evelyn Waugh story really appealed to me because they seem to come from such different areas somehow. And then I came up with this funny business of the head being chopped off – a kind of John the Baptist thing – and all of those elements kind of got pulled together. The result was *Blood and Water*.'

## PERVERTED POINTS OF VIEW

McGrath's new book, published by Viking last month, is *The Grotesque*, which he describes thus: 'It takes place around 1949 in one of those crumbling English manor houses and is the story told by a man called Sir Hugo Cole.'

'Now Sir Hugo is interesting because he has suffered some sort of brain haemorrhage that has left him completely paralysed. He's in a wheelchair and he can't move, he can't speak and everybody assumes that he's a vegetable. Well, that's not the case. Sir Hugo is watching everything that's going on around him although he is powerless to intervene – he can't even control where or how he sits in his

wheelchair. But he tells us what he overhears and what occurs within his line of vision.

'And so we have his account of what has happened since the arrival of the new butler, Fletch, who – Sir Hugo would have us believe – is an evil character and the cause of all his problems. You know, he caused Sir Hugo to have the brain haemorrhage, he's seducing Hugo's wife, he's murdered Hugo's daughter's fiancé, and he's basically trying to take over the house. So Hugo's telling us all this and we have no reason to doubt it. So we begin the book by believing him.

'But, as the story continues, we begin to detect inconsistencies. We begin to detect Hugo's biases. I mean, he's a crusty old bugger, sits in his chair and he doesn't like this and he doesn't like that. And, as we observe these inconsistencies, we realise that the truth is not what Hugo is telling us. The truth is somewhere else. Thus the reader is forced to construct an alternative version of what happened by cutting through all of Hugo's neurotic distortions of the truth.

'What I want to do is leave the reader with the feeling that we can never really get at what happened because we are all like Sir Hugo. We're all basically limited by our own biases and prejudices, and any version of reality that we come up with will always be subject to the conditions in which we view the world.

'So there is a murder story there, and there is a fair bit of sexual intrigue within this crumbling old house. And there are a number of ideas around this business of the unreliability of one's memory and one's perception of events. But I think that the main strength of the novel stands on the voice of Hugo as he emerges through his account. And that's finally what it is – Hugo's story.'

When Patrick McGrath started out, he went with who would publish him. His stories appeared in small New York magazines. 'They went out to *Paris Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Yorker* . . . but none of them was ever interested. They're still not, basically,' he adds with a chuckle, 'but there is more interest now – from better journals and publications.'

'Someone asked me in an interview recently, over in the States, 'What are you up to? What are you trying to do?' And I said, 'Well, I suppose an elegant weirdness is what I'm after.' And I suppose that about sums it up.

'I've got another novel on the go, and I've got a number of short stories, so another collection is possible, plus I've got a couple of novels in my head after that.'

So is he enjoying life now, as a full-time writer? Has he found his niche?

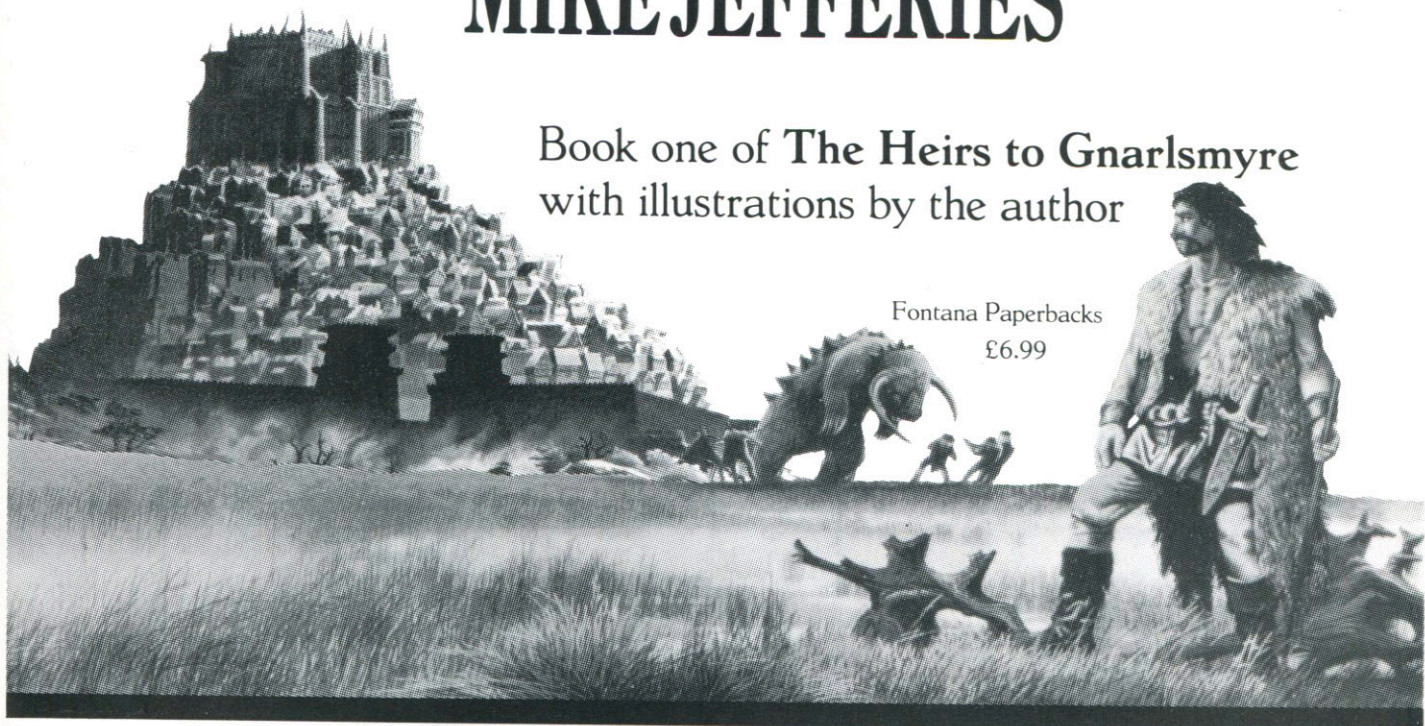
'Life is certainly much better now that I don't have to proof-read!

**"We're all basically limited by our own biases and prejudices, and any version of reality that we come up with will always be subject to the conditions in which we view the world"**



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# BAYOU BLUES

A collection of cliches, or one of today's most powerful comic book heroes? Swamp Thing co-creator Len Wein tells FEAR's Pat Jankiewicz about the chequered history of his most memorable, melancholic character and gives his views on the movie which is again about to launch ol' moss-head into the public eye.



**L**en Wein is a comic book writer famous for his fertile imagination. He is responsible for dreaming up such bizarre creations as *Wolverine*, the new *X-Men* and *Swamp Thing*.

The bushy and bearded Wein describes the moss-covered character's creation: 'I first came up with him on the subway, on my way to work. I was just thinking up mystery story ideas for the comic book *House of Secrets*, and that was

just one of them. It coincided with DC Comics editor Joe Orlando's interest in doing something that reminded him of the old Heap character (a

**"To have been able to touch people you'll never meet and affect them like that is a very gratifying feeling"**

1940's swamp-dwelling comic creature), who I didn't know about at the time.

'I submitted my story idea, it fitted in with what Joe was

interested in doing, so I wrote it. The title, the name of the character, was an accident. I kept referring to the story as 'that swamp thing I'm writing . . . ' In the end, that's the best I could come up with for a story title!

*Swamp Thing's* first appearance was an eight page story in *House of Secrets*. It turned out to be the predecessor to the one that got his own book. 'When I wrote the original, I got a lot of letters from people saying, 'I read the story, it made me cry.' To have been able to touch people you'll never meet and affect them like that is a very gratifying feeling.'

A large part of the book's atmosphere stemmed from artist Berni Wrightson. 'Berni did the short story in *House of Secrets*. We were at a party, both of us had broken up with our girlfriends and were moping around. I'd written *Swamp Thing* in that mode and I said to Berni, 'You gotta read this!' He read it and said, 'I wanna draw this,' so he did.'

Together, Wein and Wrightson made the first ten issues a strange blend of Universal and Hammer films. 'We just took the cliches and turned them on their ear. 'What can we do with this that hasn't been done before?' We worked really hard to take old ideas and make them new ideas. It was part of the challenge, that's what made it fun!

After the first ten issues, the bloom was off the rose. Wrightson and Wein left the book. 'Berni left because he had personal problems and couldn't devote the time to the book. I stayed about three issues more and started to have my own

**"I kept referring to the story as 'that swamp thing I'm writing . . . ' In the end, that's the best I could come up with for a story title!"**

problems, completely unrelated to Berni's. It was draining, it took too much out of us.

'At one time, DC talked about my taking over the regular *Swamp Thing* book again, but my argument at the time was, I didn't want to go home again. No matter how good any of the work I could do today would be, it would be based against people's memories of the origi-



Coming shortly to a bayou near you: Moss-Head Meets Egg-Head



nal book – not what it was, but what they remembered it as being.

## OUT OF THE MIRE

Without a strong writer, *Swamp Thing* staggered through a mire of lacklustre stories and low sales before a young Englishman took over the title, a writer named Alan Moore (see interview in **FEAR** Issue 3).

'I found Alan from his being in international comics. I read his earlier stuff in *Warrior* magazine, things like *Skiz* which I thought was really well done. I thought he had talent. When I met him, Alan was wearing a magenta suit that was half a size too small, spats, high socks, long hair, a tie that looked like a piano keyboard, and he was considering whether or not he should buy a monocle, he was afraid it might make him look too outlandish! That sort of defines Alan Moore.'

What does Wein think of Moore's handling of the *Swamp Thing*? 'Everyone asks me that

**"I draw inspiration from three places: the media, my personal experience, and the need to get a pay check every couple of weeks"**

question and most people don't remember that I was the editor on most of those early issues where Alan changed everything.' Wein erupts with laughter. 'Obviously I approved, or else I wouldn't have let him do it.'

'Whatever Alan did, I thought he did it marvellously. I'm the one who hired him and I was never prouder of any decision I ever made. I liked what Alan did, he had a unique view. I thought towards the end, his stuff was getting a little strange . . . I feel he's no longer a comic book writer and shouldn't be doing comics. His stuff has become an entirely different medium, but I have tremendous respect for Alan's talent and his work.'

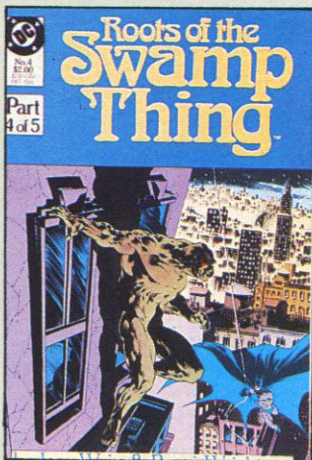
Did Alan Moore ever go too far? 'Alan did only one story I didn't like. Ultimately, the story was published under Karen Berger's editorship. It was called *The Nukeface Papers*, and I didn't feel it was very much of a story. I rejected it and that was the only thing I changed or rejected of Alan's work. He took it well. Alan's a professional. Having stuff rejected is part of the job, it's happened to me. You're working for the editor, whoever that is.'

## NATIVE ART FORM

Controversy surrounding *Swamp Thing* arose recently when writer Rick Veitch left DC Comics because his storyline for *Swamp Thing* Number 88 was rejected. (The storyline had *Swamp Thing* watching Jesus being crucified). Did Wein, like other comic professionals, think that rejection was censorship? 'No. Rick Veitch decided to quit when DC decided not to print the issue. I don't feel it was censorship at all.'

'It was exactly the same situation as my rejecting Alan's story – the company decided not to publish what the writer wrote. The company has that right.'

What's his opinion of the Mature Readers label? 'I think it's appropriate – that's why it's there. I think the biggest problem comic books have is that they're called 'comic books'. I don't think this medium has produced a 'comic book' in



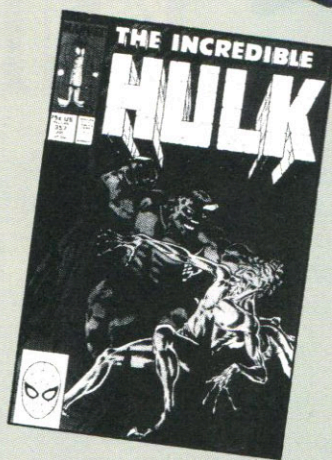
many years.

'We are graphic stories, graphic art, but we are held back in this country (America), and this country alone, from what we are capable of doing by the fact that people presume we're primarily for children. In Europe, children hardly read comic books, they're read by adults! In Japan and France there are museums that have 'comic book' work on display, treated as the art it is.'

'Unfortunately, America mistreats all its native art forms. They have very little respect for jazz, which is worshipped in other places around the world, and they do the same thing for comic books. We don't do 'comic books', there's very little 'comic' in anything we produce.'

## HAMMER AND ANVIL

Did Wein like Hollywood's version of *Swamp Thing*? 'The *Swamp Thing* movies were entirely different from the comic, but on their own I enjoyed the heck out of them!



On the first film, they flew me down first class to Raleigh, North Carolina, the location they were filming at. I spoke to Wes Craven briefly – he was busy directing most of the time.

'I got to walk around the set, sit down and talk to Dick Durock, who played *Swamp Thing*. It was strange because he was half in costume – he had the bottom half of the swamp guy and the other half was him, sitting over coffee, talking, out in the swamp.'

How did Wein become interested in comics? 'My goal was to be in comics from the eighth grade on. An art teacher told me I had talent, which I'd never heard before. I thought, 'If I have talent, maybe I can get into comics'. So I spent the rest of my high school and college career learning to be an artist. When I finally submitted my work, the comic company was much more interested in writing than art!'

Wein smiles, reflecting on his various influences. 'I draw inspiration from three places: the media, my personal experience, and the need to get a pay check every couple of weeks.'

What characters does he enjoy writing? 'Oh God, *The Hulk*. I had a wonderful time doing *The Hulk*. That's probably my longest run on any book, about four years of it. The Hulk is such a primal, emotional character whose response to everything is emotional. He's full of great rage tempered with great humanity.'

'I enjoyed doing *The Hulk*, because I could do great human stories. My favourite is called *Between Hammer and Anvil*, where the story's whole purpose was to teach The Hulk how to read and write his own name. Steve Guber (creator of Howard The Duck) took over the book and opened a story by having The Hulk break a young deer's neck . . . That was the end of my run.' Wein laughs, 'My Hulk wouldn't have done that – I had a scene where he's petting Bambi.'

## ONE MAN ARMY

What is Wein's favourite creation? 'In terms of success, *Wolverine*. The name was given to me by Roy Thomas, the Marvel editor at the time. Roy said, 'Look, I'd like to do a character called Wolverine.' I said, 'Tell me about him.' Roy says, 'Nothing. I just want to see what you can do with a Canadian accent.'

'I made Wolverine a mutant because there were rumours that Marvel might revive *The X-Men* as an international team of superhero mutants. I figured it couldn't hurt to have a Canadian mutant waiting in the wings. He's Canadian because wolverines live up there . . .'



*The Wolverine* has since become a runaway hit. Is Wein happy with what's been done with the character? 'Generally I'm happy, but I would never have him kill. I know it's part of why he's so popular; that he's a mass-murderer, but I always thought what made him a superhero was that his natural instinct is to tear your throat out and he would restrain himself!'

'That inner fight, to keep from ripping your guts out, is what made him a hero. They found it easier to have Wolverine kill people. Who can argue? He's Marvel Comic's most popular character!'

Wein details his future projects. 'I'm doing a *Captain America* story for Marvel, *OMAC: One Man Army Corps* for DC, and – it's currently in limbo – but I did a three-part *Swamp Thing* story. There are problems with the project, but it was called *Deja Vu* and was about him getting a chance to change his past, and the ramifications of what happens if you get a chance to screw around with things that should have been. Basically, it prevents Alec Holland from ever becoming the *Swamp Thing*.'

# KNIGHT ERRANT

How do you turn a traditional myth into an original modern day fantasy? John Gilbert puts the question to Stephen Lawhead, the author of *Dream Thief*, *Empyrion* and *The Dragon King Saga*, whose latest novel ends *The Pendragon Cycle*, a trilogy about the lives of Merlin and King Arthur.

**S**tephen Lawhead seems unimpressed with the rise of heroic fantasy that has taken place during the past ten years. 'What everyone seems to be chasing is the Holy Grail, Tolkien's accomplishments,' he argues, 'I'm not doing that. I respect what he did, the creation of heroic fantasy, the birth of a genre, but I'm not trying to duplicate that effort.'

Some people who have never read a Lawhead book might think that he *was* involved in that heroic duplication process, but instead he is trying to awaken something new in the fantasy and science fiction genres.

For example, when he decided to write a contemporary rendition of King Arthur and his rise to power, he could not have chosen a more difficult task. Fantasy fiction based on

**"What I was always looking for were the fresh, logical angles – and you find them in the oddest places"**

legend is the hardest to write, even when the subject matter has been explored time and time again. First there is the research: examining the often contradictory facets of a myth and the numerous commentators on the tales. Then you have to find an interesting, if not novel, way of presenting the material.

Lawhead travelled from his home in Nebraska, USA to Oxford, England, and he used the latter as a base for research and exploration.

'I didn't have a library card to Magdalen, I didn't have any kind of professorship and I wasn't at college, so I didn't have access to those kind of things. Oxford was a launching pad, but it was also good to be near the bookshop scene here in an academic town. We had access to the sorts of things that

we couldn't find any place else. So it was very much using the bookshops and then going out to the actual sites.

'What I was always looking for were the fresh, logical angles – and you find them in the oddest places. You have to do a lot of detective work. You find out a little clue, then you follow that up, that leads to something else and you follow that up. So eventually you construct a pattern of events that seems to be very plausible, and that's what I was trying to do.'

## KING, PROPHET, LAW-GIVER

With the Arthurian legend, Lawhead ignored anything that originated from medieval French, the stuff of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, but he kept an eye on anything that might be linked with the earlier English, Welsh and Cornish traditions. As a result, his characterisations of Arthur and Merlin are unlike many other filmic or literary interpretations. 'It was very hard work to keep the myth alive, even though it's in a historical period. Either you get all magic, magic realms and magic everything else or you get none at all. I wanted to do a hybrid, call it legendary history. It was something I hadn't seen done' before.

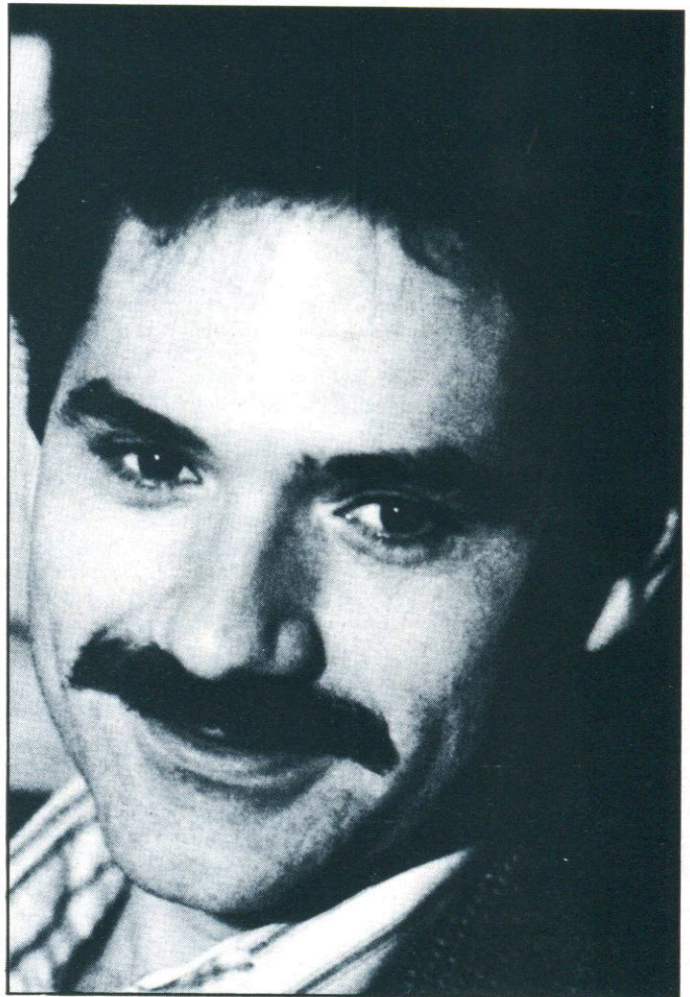
'I took very seriously the fact that these were historical people that the legends were based on. There was a kernel of history under the story somewhere and I tried to get to that as much as I could.'

The three-part structure of his *Pendragon Cycle*, or series, was largely decided by the final lines of a Welsh triad.

*Merlin was ruling the proud south Welsh in those days as king, prophet and law-giver.*

'I thought, well there are the three divisions of the book – 'King, prophet and law-giver'.

'I'd never encountered that sort of thing before. You always get the Walt Disney [version] or you get some of the later stuff with this befuddled magician figure. But to be a king, prophet and law-giver suggested a



Moses figure almost, because that's what Moses was for his people.'

## LICENSED TO ENTERTAIN

Despite the heavy research, Lawhead has produced a weighty, but lightly told, story. 'I write to be read. As a writer you get really hyped up on all the research and it is self-indul-

**"Every page I'm thinking, 'Now what is some person who's reading this going to get out of it?'"**

gent to go away and do the thing and then pretty soon toss a book back to the people who are struggling in your wake. But no, I'm with the reader virtually all the time. Every page I'm thinking, 'Now what is some person who's reading this going to get out of it?'. I do write so that I can see it. If I can't see it or hear it then the reader's not going to get a very good sense of that either.'

So, who does he have in mind as a reader for these books? 'Anyone who enjoys a good yarn. I have a paperback writer's licence in my pocket and I take it out every now and then and look at it. All it says is 'licensed to entertain'. My job is to entertain.'

*The Pendragon Cycle* is a visual series of books and the rights are up for grabs, but Lawhead has some very definite ideas about what he wants to see on the screen. 'It would be very hard to do any of these books, let alone all three, in one movie, but I can see it working in a four to six hour mini-series. You could probably get a long way then. It would take someone with a real visual skill to do that.'

Like Spielberg? 'It would take someone with Spielberg's clout and cash to tool up the project. I reckon there are any number of directors who could pull it off. For this it would be a more delicate thing I think, because it would be awfully easy to think that Arthur is only about the battles. There's actually much more in it than that. The subtleties would be easily lost, but they often are in Hollywood.'

# FEAR

## FEAR FICTION

**C**hristopher Fowler is FEAR Fiction's guest celebrity this month, with a new short story from his recently published collection, *The Bureau of Lost Souls*.

Fowler is a native Londoner who is fascinated by urban paranoia – a common theme running through the twelve short stories in his anthology.

'The stresses and strains of city life force fears to grow where none existed' he states, 'and provide a catalyst for strange events.' Vampires, ghouls, ghosts, brain-eating zombies and misogynistic slashers are not included in Fowler's vision. Instead, he presents 'twelve stories of desperate people in seemingly ordinary situations – workers in offices and friends in pubs, husbands and wives in apartments and houses. All of them the most unlikely – and therefore the most likely – people to find themselves trapped within their own personal, private visions of Hell.'

This month we also include five new stories from authors who have submitted their work to FEAR.

If you have a tale to tell, and if it fits FEAR's horror, science fiction or fantasy brief, then send it to David Western, Fiction Editor, FEAR, PO Box 10, Ludlow, Shropshire SY8 1DB. Please remember to indicate the wordage of your story (which must be typed, preferably double spaced) and ensure that you enclose a day-time phone number and a photograph of yourself.

Readers whose stories are being considered for publication will receive notification of this in writing. This notification is not a guarantee that your story will be published and, as we can only feature six or seven new stories per issue, it may be some time before those eventually selected appear in print. So please, please keep those phone calls to a minimum! Of course, if you need your story back urgently, you can contact us on the usual number.

We are obliged to remind new writers that FEAR does not look kindly upon works of plagiarism. So, if you haven't got anything new to say, don't bother to rip off someone else. Sit back instead and enjoy another fantasy-packed edition of fabulous FEAR fiction.



Prince of darkness Christopher Fowler hits the city

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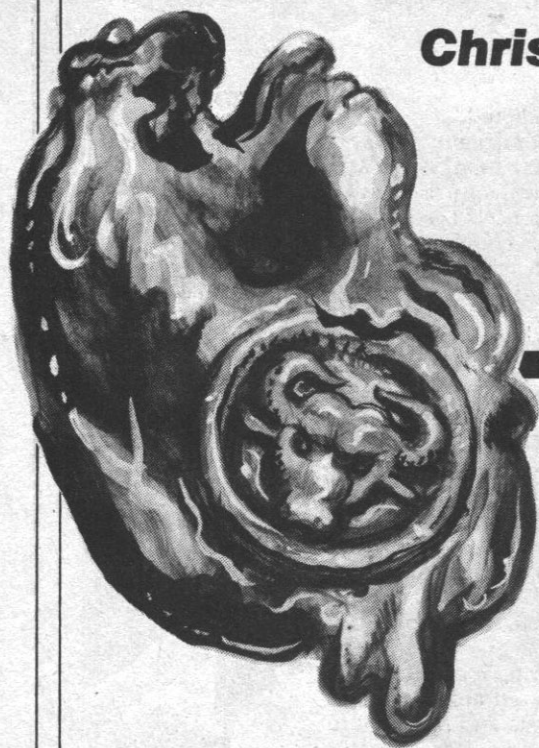
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Christopher Fowler's

# JUMBO PORTIONS



**"E**re, this chicken don't half taste funny.' Sharon squinted through mascara-caked lashes at the thing on the end of her fork. It was orange and lumpy and battered, and it was dripping grease on to Sharon's copy of *Girl About Town*.

'I told you we should have had a bloody tandoori.' Tracy looked up from her crossword puzzle and wagged the suppurating chicken chunk between her thumb and forefinger.

'No wonder you never see a bloody cat in the West End.'

'There was quite a big queue at McDonald's. I don't like to wait. Anyway, their chips are crap. Is your chicken funny?'

'It depends on what you mean by funny,' said Tracy. 'If you mean 'Am I amused by it?' the answer is no. If you mean 'Does it taste like a long-dead mackerel?' I'd be forced to answer yes.' Tracy propped her half-gnawed chicken leg against her typewriter and wiped her hands on a Supermoist Lemon Towelette. She and Sharon spent their days typing out invoices for discount furniture in the dingy little room which overlooked Oxford Street.

The work was slow, repetitive and undemanding. But then so were Sharon and Tracy, although their hearts were in the right place and we should think none the worse of them for merely being ordinary.

Their lunchtimes were usually spent in the office with a meal in a polystyrene box purchased from one of the many takeaway food outlets in the area. The pattern varied on Fridays, when instead of eating, they went with the downstairs mailboys to a nearby wine bar and got drunk.

'Of course, you *know* about takeaway chicken, don't you?' asked Sharon as she continued to stare in fascination at the object on the end of her fork.

'What do you mean?' Tracy's Birmingham accent was as spikily pronounced as Sharon's heavy cockney.

'Well, they're all battery grown, you know, like in them little wire cages, millions of 'em. And they never see the light, so they never grow feathers. And there's no room to move, so they lose the power of their legs. They just sit there, all white

and hairless, screaming at each other. And they're trained to eat from these chutes that pump fishmeal into them until they're full to bursting. That's why it tastes fishy.'

'Oh, bloody fab.' Tracy emptied the oily remains of her fried chicken carton into the wastepaper basket with a grimace.

'Only this tastes...' Sharon groped for the word. 'Funny.'

'Why don't you take it back and complain?' Tracy wiped her hands on her seat and proceeded to tear open a Toffee Crisp.

'I think I will. In fact, I think I'll go right now.' Sharon shook the dripping lump free from the end of her fork and let it fall back into the box, which was leaking grease onto her desk. Carefully wrapping the carton in a plastic carrier bag, she rose from her chair. 'They're supposed to give you sporks with the food, anyway.'

'You what?'

'You know, sporks, them white plastic spoons with jagged points on the end. That's what they're called.'

'Oh.' Tracy returned her attention to a magazine article on unreliable smear tests. 'If you're goin' past the sandwich shop, bring us back a sardine and tomato.'

Sharon pushed open the door of the fried chicken takeaway outlet and dumped her carrier bag on the counter. The little Indian at the back of the store lowered his chip basket into a tank of boiling fat and waddled up to service bay.

'Yes pliz?'

'Your chicken tastes funny.'

'What you mean?' The little Indian wiped a lock of lank hair from his eyes and peered into the plastic bag as Sharon withdrew a half-eaten piece of breast.

'You taste it.' She proffered the piece.

The Indian made a face. 'Urgh,' he said. 'No thank you. Is horrible.'

'Don't give me Is Horrible, you expect other people to eat it.' Sharon dropped the breast back into the box with a look of disgust.

'Is not my fault I don' eat chicken. Nobody else complain.'

'That's cause they're probably not alive afterwards.' She shook the carrier bag. 'I want my money back.'

'You wait here.' The Indian waddled off and disappeared behind several plastic sacks full of defrosting chips. A few moments later he returned with a sweaty young man in a vest which revealed the navel of his beer-swelled stomach.

'Wassamatter with the chicken?' he asked belligerently.

**P**erspiration, if such a delicate term could be used, dripped from his pale, chubby face.

'She say it taste funny.'

'Funny?' The podgy young man thrust his hand

**"No wonder you never see a bloody cat in the West End"**

into Sharon's carrier bag and withdrew a chicken leg. He took a large bite, chewed for a few moments and, with the delicacy of a veteran wine taster, spat the lump of chewed meat into the palm of his hand.

'The batter's off.' He turned to the Indian, who in turn looked at Sharon with embarrassment.

'You 'aven't been using the batter in the bowl above the frozen yoghurts?' The Indian nodded nervously. The fat young man rolled his eyes heavenward. 'No wonder. I could have told you that was off. You should have chucked it out before the weekend.'

'Well, it's unhygienic,' sniffed Sharon as she unstuck her hands from the glistening counter. 'That meat could be curdled. You should stick a warning on the side of the box — 'Danger: Might Be Off'.'

'Look, you can 'ave a refund if you're gonna be funny.'

'It ain't me that's funny, it's your chicken, mate.'

The Indian dropped three pound coins and four grease-slippery tenpence pieces into Sharon's outstretched palm. Tossing her spray-glazed curls at the duo, Sharon clumped out of the takeaway and off along Charing Cross Road to find a Tandoori.

The young man stared after the closing door and tutted. 'These people come in here expecting the earth.' He turned to the Indian, who was gingerly removing Sharon's abandoned plastic bag from the counter. 'It's all very well for them, all they got to do is eat the stuff, they don't have to sell it. They don't understand get with poultry.'

'Thass right,' said the Indian. 'Me, I like a nice piece of fish.'

'Well then, have a piece of chicken.' The fat young man laughed. Then his face grew serious. 'She had a nice bum on her, though,' he said.

'How's your Tone these days?' asked Tracy as she stood at the photocopying machine collecting the printed advertisements for Dralon Boudoir Stools which were popping out of one end. 'Is he still out of work?'

'No,' said Sharon, 'he's got a job on a van, deliverin'.'

'Nice,' said Tracy. 'Deliverin' what?'

'I dunno.'

'Oh,' Tracy collected her copies and carefully squared their corners. 'Still, nice though. Workin' an' that. I wish my Damon could find a bloody job.'

'How long's he been out of work now?' Sharon folded a piece of gum between her glossy crimson lips and began snapping it into shape.

'Six bloody months.'

'You should tell him. It's no good being trained up in wicker repair if there isn't the call for it.'

'Yeah I know, but — well, you've met him — there's his problem to consider.'

'What problem?'

'He can't apply himself.' Tracy stuck a ruler up her skirt and scratched the top of her thighs. 'This heat's giving me a terrible rash.'

'Can't apply himself? What, you mean he's stupid?'

'Basically, yeah. I'm gonna have to put something on this.'

Together they clumped away from the photocopying machine. 'Let's get some lunch in.'

'Good idea,' agreed Sharon. 'All I 'ad for breakfast was Fruit Crunch.'

'What's that, health cereal?'

'I suppose so. It turned the milk red.'

Sharon dashed through the rain along Oxford Street, heading for the nearest hamburger bar. When she arrived outside she was surprised to see plastic cladding draping the front of the building and a CLOSED FOR RENOVATION sign slung across the entrance. The rain was spoiling her spiky blonde coiffure, and would be bound to start leaking into her boots in a minute. Darting between the taxis, she found herself at the bottom of Tottenham Court Road, where shoppers hurried between broken paving slabs and flooded drains. Here in a no-man's-land of stereo component stores populated by listless Tunisian salesmen, there was only one takeaway within sprinting distance.

The little Indian recognised Sharon the moment he laid eyes on her. She stood at the counter shaking the rain from her hair like a spaniel, the only customer.

'Today we have good chicken, Miss. You want try?'

'It had better be good or I'll bring it back.'

The Indian tonged hot, battered chicken into a carton, added a variety of sachets and passed it to her. Sharon tucked the box under her arm and headed back out into the rain. The fat young man stuck his head out from behind the rotisserie.

'Her again? Glutton for punishment. I bet she brings it back. She'll find something wrong, you'll see. I know the type. complain about finding hairs in their soup. Real moaners.'

'She won't bring it back,' said the Indian. 'Bring it back up, perhaps. I don't know how you people can eat such rubbish. Kebabs. Fish and chips. Fried chicken...'

'Tandoori takeaways,' added the fat young man. 'Your lot's got quite a bit to answer for as well.'

The Indian gave him a cool look and returned to his fat fryer.

\*\*\*\*\*

'Now, this isn't so bad,' said Tracy with her mouth full of chicken. She sucked a huge gulp of Diet Coke and carried on chewing. Her ancient desk was littered with magazines, spilt correcting fluid and polystyrene coffee cups with cigarette ends floating in them. There was little work to do today. 'It's sort of' — she sought to articulate an impressionistic response — 'you know... less fishy.'

'Yeah, more, er...' Sharon stared at the gnarled lump of battered meat with a single bleached bone protruding from the end of it. 'More bergery.'

'Yeah, there is an aftertaste of burger, isn't there? Quite nice, actually.' Tracy peered into her chicken box as if half expecting something to leap out of it. 'I wonder why it tastes like that?'

Sharon tore the skin from a chicken leg and held it up to the light, examining it as she pondered the problem. 'It's probably just from storage.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, the chickens, after they've been slaughtered — 'cause they're killed in vast numbers at a time 'cause it's easy killing them, the chickens being very weak and unable to walk and nude form not growin' any feathers — well, after they're chopped up into the appropriate parts like breast an' wing, they get stored in huge fridges, then they get moved to smaller fridges which probably have hamburgers on some of their shelves, an' the hamburgers drip meat juices on to the chicken, probably.' Sharon sucked the chicken skin into her mouth, smearing her lipstick as she

**CHRISTOPHER FOWLER** was born in the heart of London, where he still lives and works. *Jumbo Portions* is taken from *The Bureau of Lost Souls*, a newly published collection of short stories of urban paranoia. Fowler's interest in the more disturbing and bizarre aspects of the city is also reflected in his novel, *Roomworld*, and in two earlier volumes of short stories entitled *City Jitters I and II*.

**"He took a large bite, chewed for a few moments, and with the delicacy of a veteran wine taster spat the lump of chewed meat into the palm of his hand"**

**“So what happens to the heads an’ feet an’ stuff?” asked Tracy with a sickly look on her face.”**

did so. ‘It’s all just meat, nothing to worry about.’

‘So what happens to the heads an’ feet an’ stuff?’ asked Tracy with a sickly look on her face. ‘You never see deep fried chicken feet.’

‘There’s no call for them — in white countries,’ Sharon replied darkly. ‘They get ground up an’ made into other chicken-flavoured products. Like when packet soup says ‘chicken extract’ on the side. It’s the ground-up bits no one else wants to have anything to do with. Beaks and things.’

‘You’re putting me right off,’ said Tracy, blanching beneath her make-up. ‘I think I’ll stick to sausage sandwiches in future.’

‘You’re no better off there. Cow lips and eyeballs, all squashed up in skins, that’s sausages for you.’

While Tracy visited the toilet, Sharon turned back to her deep-fried thigh and read an article on cervical cancer in *Wow* magazine.

‘Hang on, it’s slipping.’ Tony shouldered the fruit machine upright and together they lowered it from the ramp of the truck. Standing it down on the pavement with a thud, he leaned on the Formica top and wiped his brow. ‘How many more we got today, Steve? I’m knackered.’

Steve consulted his notebook. ‘Just one more. We should be through by six.’

‘We’d better be. I’m meeting my Sharon outside Tottenham Court Road tube station at six.’ Tony smoothed down his flat-top and hitched up his white socks. There was no mirror available but he presumed he still looked terrific.

‘That’ll be handy for you,’ said Steve. ‘We’re delivering just around the corner from there, to a Mr Patel.’

Tony checked that the rolled sleeves of his tight white T-shirt were still in place and prepared to shoulder the machine once more. He looked good when he was lifting things. His muscles bulged.

‘Okay, let’s get this one inside.’

After installing the machine, bolting it to the floor of the Chinese takeaway and leaving the bemused manager with a set of instruction booklets showing him how to operate the Mississippi Gambler 2000 Electronic Blackjack game, Steve and Tony climbed back into the van.

Tony checked his appearance in the rear-view mirror and quickly slid a comb over his immaculately styled square hair. He squeezed a spot on his neck, then straightened the golden Taurus horoscope symbol Sharon had given him to wear as an earring.

‘Where you off to tonight?’ asked Steve as he started the engine.

‘We’re goin’ up that new cocktail bar in Camden, opposite the market. We went there last week but we didn’t stay long cause someone got knifed. Then we’ll go for a kebab at the Chinese place next door.’

‘I’ve been there,’ said Steve. ‘They do really good curries. Real bum-burners.’

‘Yeah, there’s nothing like a good curry, is there? Mind that old dear.’

Steve shot the van over a zebra crossing and narrowly missed an elderly lady who was struggling with the wheels of her shopping basket.

‘You gonna marry Sharon, then?’

‘Nah. She wants to but I can’t at the moment.’

‘Why not?’

Tony studied his reflection in the window. ‘I’ve got a kid. From this girl I used to be at school with. Sharon doesn’t know. I keep meanin’ to tell her. Watch out for that bloke on the bike.’

‘Well, you’d better pop her a postcard. It’s quite

important, something like that.’ Steve swung the van past a cyclist, who was forced to pull into the kerb.

‘I was gonna tell her before. The trouble is, I’m still seein’ the mother.’

‘You randy sod,’ laughed Steve. ‘Go it, my son.’ The van turned into the one-way system at Tottenham Court Road, scattering pedestrians in every direction.

‘Talking of food,’

said Tony, ‘you ever had frogs’ legs? They’re great. They taste like chicken.’

‘I’m never sure about French stuff. I mean, they eat horses, don’t they? An’ that’s barbaric, to my mind.’ Steve cut into the next traffic lane and considerably surprised the driver of an invalid carriage.

‘Me, I like all them exotic things,’ said Tony. ‘Snails, they’re like whelks.’ He thought for a moment. ‘Whelks in garlic.’

‘I couldn’t eat snails,’ admitted Steve. ‘I mean, you see ‘em in the garden leaving slimy trails, don’t you? An’ when they’re cooked, they look like something you’d find up a horse’s nose.’ He pulled a face a beat a Ford Marina to a parking space outside the fried chicken takeaway which Sharon had patronised only yesterday.

‘How can you have it here when you ain’t got no power point to connect it up with?’ Steve stood up and wiped his dusty hands on the knees of his jeans. The little Indian shrugged.

‘You will have to speak to Mr Duncan. I will get him for you.’

‘Thank you, Mr Patel.’ Steve turned to Tony. ‘We ain’t gonna get this machine fixed up tonight. They haven’t got a proper junction box for it.’

Tony looked over at the dormant fruit machine and scratched his head. ‘I could put in a bit of overtime late tomorrow an’ sort it out,’ he offered. Just then, the Indian reappeared with the fat young man in the grease-stained shirt.

‘I’m Duncan, the manager,’ he said. ‘Is there a problem?’

Steve explained the hold-up, and offered Tony’s services the following evening. Duncan blew his nose on a paper serviette and agreed that tomorrow would be fine.

‘Anyway,’ said Steve, ‘it’s all fixed up and ready to go. Tony here will patch in your electrics. What time do you close?’

‘At eleven p.m.,’ said Mr Patel, ‘but you can come earlier. We’re not very busy, early evening.’

‘That’s no good,’ said Tony. ‘I’ve got to turn off your electrics, and that means turning off your fryer. I’ll get here just before you shut.’

‘We’ll be off, then,’ said Steve. ‘You got a chicken leg for us to be going on with?’

‘There’s a baby here that’s been born with its head on backwards,’ said Tracy, setting her hamburger down on a folded copy of *The Sun* and reading the headline. She carefully dabbed bun crumbs from her lipstick. ‘The doctors are blaming it on faulty spermicide. What does your hamburger taste like?’

Sharon considered the question for a moment. ‘I dunno,’ she conceded. ‘You can’t describe it really.’

‘You know what mine tastes like?’

‘What?’

‘Well, if you tore up an empty cereal packet, like into tiny, tiny pieces, and then mashed it up with Bisto for about two hours, then let it set...’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, that’s what it tastes like.’

'That's cause cows, when they're slaughtered, these great hammers...'

'Don't bloody start that again,' said Tracy. 'Why's your Tone workin' late?'

'He's puttin' in a bit of overtime,' said Sharon. 'At one of the places where he's deliverin'.'

'You don't think he's seein' someone else, do you?' asked Tracy.

'No,' said Sharon. 'He's not that bright. Can I have your ketchup sachet?'

The last customer had just left the fried chicken takeaway when Tony arrived. The night was warm, and the greasy heat in the store was almost unbearable. It clung heavily to his clothing as he unpacked equipment from his toolbox. Behind the counter, Mr Patel was cleaning down the shelves of the rotisserie. Further out at the back, Duncan was resealing sacks of frozen chips. The fruit machine sat dark in the corner. Mr Patel paused in his labours and poured himself a cup of instant tomato soup. He slurped it thickly, leaving a fluorescent red circle around his mouth. Tony sorted out his tools and carried them across to the fruit machine.

'So,' he said genially, talking to the wall as he worked, 'how long you been here, then?'

'Two years,' answered Mr Patel as he finished his soup and prepared to wash the floor in the back of the shop. 'It was doner kebab place but Greek boys got closed down by the health peoples.'

'Why was that?'

'They had a really disgustin' problem with the toilet drainage system,' called Duncan. 'Blowback. You don't wanna hear about it.'

'Blowback?' Tony grimaced and went about his work.

Presently, he looked up from the tangled mass of cable on the floor and called to Mr Patel.

'Excuse me, do you happen to know where this lead goes?'

'Sorry.' Mr Patel shrugged and continued mopping the tiles.

'What appliances have you got wired up there? How many wall sockets? Hang on, I'll come back and have a look.'

Tony raised the red Formica counter flap and let himself through to the back of the store, where Duncan was wringing a grey cloth into a bucket of filthy water.

'Mind you don't slip on the floor.'

Tony traced the cable he was looking for, and sat back on his haunches to strip it.

'This wiring's a real old mess,' he pointed out. 'I wouldn't let anyone from the council see it if I were you. Here, I've been meaning to ask you something. What do you do with all the chicken that don't get sold? Do you take it home, like?'

'Urgh, indeed we do not,' said Mr Patel earnestly. 'Chicken cooked in this manner is no good for you.'

'Funny that,' said Tony, 'you not liking chicken and workin' here.'

'It's because he works here that he became a vegetarian,' chided Duncan. 'Ain't that right, Patsy?'

'I do not like you calling me that,' said the little Indian as he angrily tossed the remaining soapy water in his bucket across the tiles.

'Me,' began Tony, 'I love a good curry, but that's...'

He never finished the sentence, because as he spoke he moved forwards towards the exposed box

of electrical circuitry, slipped on the tidal wash of soapy water from Mr Patel's bucket and fell face first into the junction box.

There was a loud bang, and a spectacular array of sparks fizzed in a halo around Tony's electrified head. His body jerked erect as the blast of electrical current from the mains supply tore through him, then he was suddenly thrown backwards with his arms flailing, like a scarecrow in a hurricane. He hit the edge of the deep fat fryer with his pelvis and fought for a moment to retain his balance, both hands flying first to his blackened face, then clawing the air as he somersaulted backwards over the rim and into the fryer with an oily splash.

Duncan and Mr Patel looked on in horror, their jaws dropped and their eyes bulging at the scene taking place before them. The fryer was built to hold three pans of chips. It was far too small to contain a human being. Unfortunately however, Tony had fallen head first, and as he fell had raised his knees so that he had entered the fat in a crouched position. Consequently, when the boiling waves subsided, all that could be seen of Tony was the soles of his track shoes.

For a moment the only sounds in the little takeaway were the crackle of electricity and the gentle bubbling of boiling fat as if popped and plopped around Tony's cooking body. Finally, Duncan spoke.

'Why didn't you turn the bloody fryer off?'

Mr Patel suddenly became aware of the extreme likelihood that Duncan would try to pin the blame on him. He began to sweat profusely.

'I was not expecting anyone to fall into it,' he said lamely. 'Anyway, you are the manager, and you are not supposed to let anyone else back here for reasons of hygiene. It says so in the company manual.'

Successfully countered, Duncan stood with his arms at his sides thoughtfully staring into the fryer while the device was turned off.

'Do you think he's dead?' asked Mr Patel timidly.

Duncan exploded into life. 'Dead? Of course he's bloody dead!'

'How can we get him out of there?'

'We'll have to wait until the fat cools down.'

Already, a delicious smell of cooking meat was filling the room. Duncan peered into the fryer once more. 'Oh Christ, he's starting to crust up.'

Mr Patel wrung his hands fearfully. 'Whatever will we do?' he asked the ceiling.

'They'll take away our licence if they find out, that's for sure.'

'But we cannot just leave him in there cooking!'

'What time do the dustmen come by?' asked Duncan, shaking Mr Patel by the shoulders.

'A little after midnight, I think. It varies.'

Sometimes they do not appear until seven in the morning.'

'Let's pray this isn't one of those times,' said the sweating young man. 'What we'll do — when you've finished jumping up and down panicking — is first of all turn the fryer back on...'

'What? This is craziness!' the little Indian screamed.

'Listen to me,' said Duncan. 'We'll cook the corpse until it's unrecognisable. Then we'll drain off the fat, remove the body and put it into one of those heavy-duty hundred-weight bags that the chips come in. We'll leave it with the other rubbish out on the pavement. If anyone opens it and looks inside, all they'll see is a jumble of burnt meat and

**“Cow lips  
and eyeballs,  
all squashed  
up in skins,  
that's  
sausages for  
you”**

batter.'

'And this will work?' asked Mr Patel.

'For both our sakes,' said Duncan as he switched the fryer back on, 'it had better bloody work.'

After the fat had been boiling for more than an hour, the air in the takeaway store was filled with the powerful aroma of overcooked meat. If he had not known exactly what was cooking, Mr Patel might have found the smell quite delicious. Instead, he could scarcely keep from regurgitating his lunchtime samosas. Duncan appeared from around the corner dragging a heavy plastic sack.

'Smells good, don't it?' he said, lifting his porcine nose in the air and sniffing. 'Almost seems a pity to waste it. 'Ere.' He nudged the distinctly queasy-looking Mr Patel. 'I bet we could make a fair bit of dosh if we changed the name of the store to Sweeney Todd's.'

Mr Patel gave him a look of utter incomprehension.

When the fryer had been turned off and drained, Duncan beckoned Mr Patel to come and take a look. Reluctantly, he came over and squinted into the grease-coated stainless steel basin. Inside, standing on his head and his kneecaps, was an unrecognisable Tony. If he had not been dead when he tumbled in, he would certainly have been battered to death by now.

'You get around one side of him,' said Duncan. 'Put your oven gloves on. I'll get around the other side and we'll lift him out together and stand him on the floor.'

'I cannot do this,' moaned Mr Patel. 'We are committing a sin.'

'Yeah, well.' Duncan tried to console his partner. 'It's a good job you ain't a Catholic. This wouldn't sound too good in the confessional.'

Mr Patel gave a pained look and donned his floral oven gloves. Then he gingerly lowered his hands over the side of the fryer. Together they lifted the body out inch by inch. They had almost got it clear of the basin when there was a cracking noise, and it broke in half. Although Duncan swore angrily, this desiccation of the body made its removal much easier, as all the fluids had been dried out and the corpse could now be broken into several pieces, mixed with the day's batter scrapings and tipped into a number of different bags. Mr Patel agreed to help, but kept his eyes screwed up tight throughout the operation, especially when Duncan cracked off Tony's deep-fried fingers and dropped them into a separate bag.

'You got all the loose pieces of batter up your end, Patsy?'

'I think so, yes'

'Good, then give me a hand with these sacks and we'll get 'em out before the dustcart comes by.'

After the sacks were secured and placed outside the two men returned to the back of the store and wiped up the puddles of grease which had formed all over the floor. As Mr Patel was mopping up the last pool, Duncan came by with the air freshener.

'Mmmm, lavender, that's better,' he said, spraying everywhere. 'You'd better put that cheesecake back in the cold cabinet or it'll go off.'

Once they had finished clearing up, Duncan and Mr Patel turned off the shop lights and sat outside in Duncan's car until they had seen the dustcart load and crush the sacks containing the hapless Tony to a pulp. Then, after promising to open the store as usual in the morning, they went home to

their beds. For Mr Patel, at least, it was a sleepless night.

Sharon and Tracy sat at their usual places in the dingy office with their lunch spread out before them. Sharon was processing a requisition form for Buffalo Suede Reclining Chairs, and Tracy was waiting for her nails to dry before starting into her box of fried chicken. She held up two cans of fizzy drink.

'Which one d'you want, Shar? Orange?' She pointed from one to the other. 'Or yellow?'

'What's the yellow?' asked Sharon as she opened her carton and removed the napkins, sachets and pork.

Tracy examined the printing on the can. "Tropical Fruit Mix," it says. Could be anything. "Produce Of More Than One Country. Made From Concentrate. Contains Saccharin."

'Causes cancer in laboratory rats, does saccharin,' said Sharon as she pulled out a chicken leg and bit into it.

'Well, we're not laboratory rats, are we?' said Tracy.

'Oh, give me the orange.'

'Did you see your Tone last night?' asked Tracy, passing over the soft-drink can.

'No. He was supposed to come round but he never showed up. Men.'

'Is he normally reliable, then?'

'Not really, no.'

'No, well they're not, are they?'

Silence fell in the office while Tracy opened her chicken box and started on a wing. She looked over at Sharon.

'Blimey, you polished off that leg in record time.'

'I was hungry,' she said through a mouthful of meat. 'Friday tomorrow. You gonna come up the wine bar?'

'Yeah, but I don't much like that house wine they have. It comes out of purple plastic barrels. It doesn't seem to have travelled well.'

'I should think it's travelled very well if it's in plastic barrels. It's probably been all over the place.'

'That's a point.'

Silence fell once more. Sharon set down her denuded chicken bone and delved into her box for another piece. Tracy drank her Tropical Fruit Mix and studied the portion of cheesecake sitting on her desk. She leaned forward and sniffed it.

'I thought that's where it was coming from,' she said. 'This cheesecake smells of lavender.'

'Probably a new flavour.' Sharon chewed on slowly. 'Now this chicken really *does* taste funny.'

'Oh Shar, you always say that. You're too bloody fussy, that's your problem.'

'No, it really does.' She carefully examined the pieces in her hand. 'And anyway, what piece of chicken makes this shape?' She held it up to let Tracy have a look. The battered piece was small and semi-circular, and rather flat.

'I dunno,' said Tracy, puzzled. 'It's shaped like someone's ear.'

'Chickens don't have ears.' Sharon peered at it more closely. Set in the bottom of the fried portion, something glittered. She carefully picked away at the batter.

Underneath, pinned through the meat, was a small golden Taurus horoscope symbol.

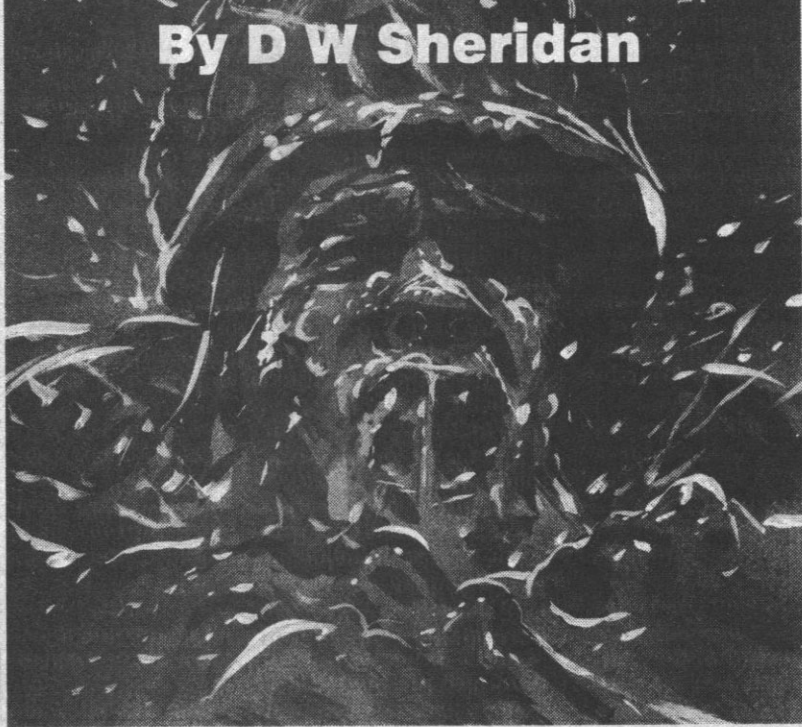
Sharon's subsequent scream was so loud that shoppers in Oxford Street stopped dead when they heard it, and even Mr Patel, in the middle of serving a customer, looked up and wondered.

**"Mr Patel wrung his hands fearfully. 'Whatever will we do?' he asked the ceiling"**



# THE MUD

By D W Sheridan



**"Danny could still remember his friend's empty eyes, looking up out of that big hole, and all the bamboo spikes sticking out of him"**

**D**anny screamed and hid his face in the mud as the bullets screeched like eagles over his head through the clatter of the relentless, driving rain. The mud, like the rain and everything else in this damned country, was warm. From somewhere nearby, he heard Penner shouting and the spitting sound of the M60. He wanted to shout out for the sergeant to come and get him, and would have done if it hadn't been for the terrible plop-plop-plop-plop of AK-47 rounds landing so close to him and sending up plumes of black mud that spattered his already filth-sodden legs. Then suddenly there was someone beside him and Danny lifted his head and saw that it was Carlisle, the big Texan.

'C'mon, Danny, c'mon, Crissakes,' the big man shouted over the sound of the rain and the gunfire. 'There's Goddamn VC everywhere. We gotta get back with the company!'

He reached down and hauled Danny to his feet, then disappeared off to the right, to where Penner was still shouting. He'd only gone a few steps when Danny lost sight of him behind the wall of falling water, the rain that did not seem likely ever to stop.

Danny lunged after him, and again he heard the AK-47s and the sounds of the bullets striking the mud where he had been lying only seconds before. He had to check the numb fingers of his right hand as he went to be sure that he still held the M16, whose scratched black body gleamed wetly as he looked at it. He remembered the first day they'd issued him with that rifle, six months before, on the day of his nineteenth birthday. Charlie and Greg and Luther had each got one just like it, and

they'd all put money down that night on a wager to see who'd be the first to get a kill. Danny had wanted that money and that glory so badly then, but it was Luther who'd got it. He'd shot a villager who'd come at him with a knife the very next day. The boy couldn't have been much more than sixteen, but he'd been an enemy, a Viet Cong soldier. That's what they'd had to tell the black man, anyway, to make him take the money, not that he'd ever lived to spend it. Three days later they'd put him on point, and he'd walked right into a 'venus flytrap'. Danny could still remember his friend's empty eyes, looking up out of that big hole, and all the bamboo spikes sticking out of him. There'd been no more wagers after that.

**C**harlie had been killed a month later down in Ben Tre, near the Mekong. The Hueys had brought them down, hundreds of Americans, and dropped them right in the middle of the action. An hour later, the choppers were back to take them out. They'd been warned about mines and booby traps before leaving, but Charlie mustn't have seen the thing in the rush. Danny had been only twenty feet from him when it blew under him, taking his legs right off. He could still remember the way the blood had fallen, like rain, like a fine mist. The helicopters returned the following day for the dead. They'd never officially told him how much of his friend they'd found, but Danny had heard someone say that it wasn't a lot. The VC had cut him up into small pieces.

What had happened to Greg, Danny didn't know. They'd been in the jungle all day, and it had been quiet with no sign of any enemy activity. By the time they came out and got back near camp, everyone was feeling just a little relieved, for there weren't many days that quiet. But then they did the count and there was one missing. They never found Greg's body, not even pieces.

That's what had happened to them all, Danny told himself, the four good old boys who'd left Baker's Heights when the draft came to do their duty for their country. And now he was the only one left, out here in the mud.

The rain became heavier, if that was possible, and Danny couldn't hear the gunfire so easily anymore, and when he did hear it, he couldn't place its direction. He trudged on through the mud, which came up well past his ankles and went down his boots. Vaguely he wondered how many bodies lay beneath the mud, how many Americans and how many Viet Cong. He seemed to see faces everywhere he looked, dead faces with big fish-eyes, staring up at him out of the stinking black morass, and it seemed to him that their mouths were moving, framing words that he could not hear over the rain; but he could see, he could see what they were saying. They were calling him, he knew suddenly, calling him down into the mud with them, down into the black world underneath the mud, from which there could never be any escape...

**D**anny screamed and fell to his knees and screamed again, his eyes pressed closed to shut out the vision. And when he opened them again, he saw that there were no bodies, no dead fish-eyes, just the strange shapes that the eternal rain carved momentarily in the mud. He waited for a moment, breathing heavily as the rivulets of water ran down his face and cascaded off the end of his nose, then pulled himself to his feet and listened for the gunfire that would guide him back to the company, if there still was a company.

After a few seconds he fancied he heard the barking voice of the M60, and even thought he could hear mad Penner shouting at the Viet Cong as he mowed them down. He dragged himself off in that direction, desperate now to find another American, another human in the warm, wet hell, and cursing himself for not moving more quickly after Carlisle.

The mud took on the texture and colour of vomit, and Danny thought he could even smell the gorge. He'd vomited often since coming to Vietnam, first because of the food and the weird bugs and viruses, but later because of the things he'd seen. He tried not to remember as he struggled forward and sank down to his knees in the sludge, but the memories had been suppressed for a long time, and had only come out in dreadfully unpleasant dreams, on nights when he hadn't been too tired to dream. Now they came back in full force, and he had to look at them all over again, every detail, all over again.

He remembered the village, out beyond Tay Ninh, that they'd been ordered to evacuate because the VC had been using it as a base and it was too far out to keep an eye on properly. They were told to bring the people into a compound that had been set up for them, and to burn what was left. He had seen it all there, the senseless murder, the mutilation and the torture.

**T**he villagers, already uneasy, had scattered when they realised what was happening, and that had been the signal for wholesale slaughter. Danny was sure that none of them had been left alive, or had made it to the jungle to disappear in among the trees. He'd seen them all die, he'd seen his own men, his own friends, shoot them in the backs and throw grenades at them, and cut their throats with machetes. All the young women had been raped, savagely raped, and then their violaters had calmly stood over them, and pumped bullets into their thin, naked forms. Danny had been sick then, for he couldn't understand how you could kill a woman you'd just made love to, even if it wasn't really love, just sex. He hadn't understood, then, because he hadn't yet seen enough to make him understand, but later the insight came to him and he learned to look at it all through hard eyes, and to squeeze the trigger when all the others were squeezing theirs, with Penner shouting and threatening to blow the brains out of any man who didn't follow orders and shoot.

The mud was above knee-level now, and Danny could hardly move in it, but worse than that were the faces he was beginning to see again, the dead faces looking up at him. For now he recognised them, all of them, and saw that all the people from the village beyond Tay Ninh were there, watching him, and all the people from other villages and other places, until it seemed that he was the only living thing in a sea of dead. And then Charlie was there, too, and Greg, and Luther, and other guys that Danny had known and seen killed, and they all seemed to talk voicelessly to him, silently calling him, calling him.

Danny cried out and jumped backwards as he saw the thing in front of him, and recognised it as a man, with an American uniform. The guy was lying face down, and the rain seemed to become fiercer and fiercer as if determined that, by its very force, it would push the body down and into the black muck. Danny could see the holes in the man's back, and the fresh blood running out of

them to be obliterated instantly by the torrent. The other faces were gone again, and only this one dead man remained. Danny reached out and pushed him over and, even through the mud on the face, he recognised Carlisle.

**T**here was nothing Danny could do but leave the Texan where he was, and continue on as best he could. It was no longer possible to walk upright, and he had to get down on his belly and 'swim' along, using the M16 as a grip in the mud ahead to pull himself forward. His mind seemed to be going numb now, and that was almost a relief for, if he didn't think at all, he could make good progress and he wouldn't be bothered by visions of faces and bodies. He'd heard of cases where men had crawled through jungles and deserts and God knows what simply by turning off their minds and letting their muscles get on with it.

A sudden noise directly in front of him brought him squarely back to reality, and he struggled to pull his rifle out of the mud. Through the wall of rain, he thought he saw movement, but he could not be sure and had no way of knowing even if it was an enemy or a friend. He thought of calling out for Penner and Lucas and Georgio, but was afraid that the answer he would receive would not be words, but bullets, hot with Viet Cong hatred, tearing into his flesh and leaving him there, broken. He feared that now more than anything; not the death, but the remaining here, in the sea of mud, the sinking. There was something about that fate that was even worse than dying. At all costs, he knew, he had to get out of the mud!

There was movement ahead of him, real movement, coming through the rain, and Danny waited to see who it was. He recognised the AK-47 with its curving magazine at about the same time as he heard the hushed voices, like the voices of old woman without any teeth, chattering and indelicately nasal in quality, then he was squeezing the trigger and the M16 was barking and spitting in his hands. He heard a cry and saw one figure fall, then there was a burst of invisible gunfire and bullets landed inches in front of where he lay. The mud they churned up filled his mouth and eyes, but he kept shooting, kept squeezing the trigger, and when he was out of ammunition his hand automatically found the double magazine, one taped to the other, and switched it around so that he had a full load again. By then the rain had washed out his eyes, but there was nothing to see. He crawled forward again until he found the body of the Viet Cong he'd shot, and another body nearby. If there had been more than two, he had no way of knowing, but even if there had, they had to be as lost as he was in the mud swamp and there was no way they could work their way around him. Nevertheless, he changed direction, veering a little more to the right than he had been doing, and continued his long, slow crawl.

The night didn't end and the rain didn't stop, despite the passing of hours and endless hours. Danny crawled a hundred miles, and then a thousand, over the sea of mud, now and then coming upon the bodes of other VC and of some of the men of his own company. He found Lucas and Georgio, waist-deep and slumped over, their bodies shattered by dozens of bullets, the way the people of the villages' bodies had been shattered. He found Penner, eventually, amid a crowd of dead VC. The mad sergeant's mouth was still open as if to shout, but the black mud was seeping into it.

**"He had seen it all there, the senseless murder, the mutilation and the torture"**

As he crawled, Danny was periodically haunted by the faces, and the harder the rain pelted down, the more real they seemed to become. Danny knew them all, if not by name, then even more intimately by mode of death. He had seen them die, and had even killed some of them himself. He had put them here in the mud. And they loved him for it. They loved him so much that they wanted to share it with him, every stinking handful of it.

When Danny had the next realisation, it was of himself screaming, howling, shrieking through the never-ending rain, while unwanted memories of oriental people with haunted eyes and hollow cheeks crowded his head. Remembering made the faces go away, but sometimes it seemed that to remember was worse, and Danny feared that he was slowly going mad. He could afford to cry now, as loud as he liked, for he was certain that no other living soul, either American or otherwise, was out there with him in the mud. He was all alone with the burden of the last six months of his life.

They were told that the people they would be shooting would be civilians, but that it was almost certain they were VC sympathetic. The Hueys were waiting, and they were not told where they were going, just that they were going and that it was going to be easy killing. Someone said that they would be down near Ca Mau, but Danny didn't think it was that far south and, as far as he knew, there weren't any strong VC areas down there. But they went anyway, to no one knew where, and when they landed the people began to gather and come over to them, as if they were their friends. And then the screams as the shooting started...

Danny and Lucas and Georgio had rounded up about two dozen old men, women and children, and penned them into a sort of corral. An army photographer had taken pictures of them while Lucas went to ask Penner what to do; his camera was still clicking when Lucas came back and made a 'bang-bang' sign with his hand. Danny had told him to go, but the man didn't listen, and they'd shot the old men, the women and the children, all except one girl that Georgio took by the hair and dragged round behind an empty hut. Danny had heard the shot a few minutes later, but by then he and Lucas had found themselves one of their own...

Danny scrambled on and on and on, and it rained, and he couldn't believe the things he'd seen and done. He knew he would remember it all for the rest of his life, if he was destined to have a 'rest of his life'. Then he would die, and go to hell, and burn forever. It would almost be a relief, to be hot and dry, even if it was much too hot, and much too dry. Anything not to be wet, and covered in warm, stinking mud.

Suddenly Danny was falling. Without realising it, he had crawled over the edge of something, a trench. He now lay at the bottom, half covered in filthy water, his M16 lost. He had not noticed the texture of the mud change, but it must have changed, for the black mud would simply have closed in over a trench like this. The mud he saw now was brown, more like the mud he knew from home, yet still it stank of death and war and killing. He looked about him and saw that there were bodies piled nearby, VC bodies, for they were not Americans. He crawled closer to see, and then realised that they were not Vietnamese either. Some of the corpses had decayed to mere skeletons

and the rain was washing the last of the black flesh from their bones, but others were more recent, and Danny could see that they were white men, westerners, but not Americans.

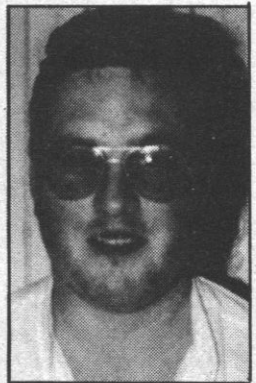
He was struck by the strange uniforms — colourless, as everything was in the rain — and the obvious outdatedness of the weapons and helmets that lay scattered about. These dead men were not from the Vietnam War! He had seen pictures of scenes like this, almost invariably from World War One. He looked at the bodies for a minute and wondered about them, then a fear descended upon him and he scrambled back up out of the trench and began moving again across the mud.

The next body he found was a German. It could have been from World War One too, but Danny thought it looked more like Prussian soldier from the nineteenth century. The uniform was black, or something like black, and the helmet was the same colour, with a pointed silver spike on the top. After that he found many bodies, all from different times and different wars, and he wondered what they had done to get here in the mud with him. He knew he was completely mad now, but in a way this was a relief for it meant that he may already have been found and brought back to a hospital, cleaned up by pretty nurses and placed between soft, white sheets. All he had to do was to wait until he woke up, then everything would be all right... Everything would be just fine...

When Danny awoke, the rain had stopped, and he was lying on his back in the mud. It was daylight, but there was a mist that moved over the mud-field like a procession of restless ghosts. Danny blinked and pulled himself to his elbows. He was caked in the mud and it had dried on him, like a new skin over his combat uniform. He was still wet through and freezing cold, and his first thought was to find his bearings and make his way back to camp. He staggered to his feet and looked about him, and through holes in the mist he thought he saw the mud, stretching out endlessly. Where was he? He stumbled forward and tripped over something half sunken — a body! The uniform was American, and Danny could see the ragged pattern of bullet holes in the man's back. He reached out a hand to touch him, but he was cold and long dead.


Almost with resignation, Danny sank his hands into the mud and heaved the body over to look at the face, and as he did so, a small noise escaped from his throat. For the dead man was himself, Danny Littlewood, from Bakers' Heights, Omaha, and there could be no mistaking it, even through the mask of black filth on the lifeless face. Danny suddenly remembered a thought he'd had: that he would go to hell and burn forever, and that it would be a relief.

As he knelt there, with his own dead form before him, the mist about him suddenly cleared, and he saw that the glimpses he had seen through it had been true — the field of mud stretched out forever in every direction, an infinite morass of black decay. Then the rain began to fall, slowly at first, but quickly it became the torrent of the night before, and blocked out all sight of anything more than a scant few feet away. Where it fell on the mud, it formed strange shapes that soon evolved into the old, familiar faces of all the dead Danny had known. And, as they began to call to him voicelessly, he screamed and knew that he would never even have the relief of burning in hell.



**DAVID WILLIAM SHERIDAN** was born in 1967 in Drogheda, Ireland; he now lives in Dublin. He spent four years working in an abbatoir, but has been writing just about full time for the past year. He has had several SF stories accepted by smaller magazines, but *The Mud* is his first published horror piece. He is currently researching a novel with a strong conservationist theme.

**"Some of the corpses had decayed to mere skeletons and the rain was washing the last of the black flesh from their bones"**



**"If they knew about the drill, John, they'd take it away from me. I'd never see it again"**

# Harry's Black and Decker

BY STEPHEN HARRIS

I was up early that Sunday morning in July last year. It was a blue, cloudless day with only an occasional half-hearted waft of breeze. I left Judy sleeping soundlessly in bed, gathered up the Sunday papers, made myself tea and bowl of Special K and went out onto the patio for a quiet half hour.

Our garage is at the back of the house and I was able to spend some time gazing lovingly at my latest acquisition — a 1968 V12 E Type Jaguar — which I'd left parked on the shingle in front of the garage. The car was in almost perfect condition and had cost me damn near eighteen thousand pounds, but it was worth every penny. It was an ideal day for cruising about in a convertible with the hood down, and I thought Judy and I might drive down to the coast in the afternoon. In the morning, I decided, I'd have to go over the Harry's.

Behind the double garage my back garden stretches for two hundred feet to a low fence, on the other side of which is Harry's back garden. Of course, it isn't Harry's back garden anymore (it belongs to a couple called Kingsley now, and they haven't talked to me much since I told them the truth about Harry) but it was his then. Harry's back garden was almost as large as ours, though his house was smaller, so it was only a matter of

four hundred foot walk punctuated by an athletic leap halfway to visit him. He had phoned on Friday afternoon, in a state of great excitement about a new tool he'd bought, and invited me round. I'd owned the Jaguar for a week by then, and Harry hadn't bothered to come over the fence to see it, so I was less than enthusiastic about seeing his new drill.

'Seen one, you've seen 'em all, Harry.' I had told him.

He insisted that this Black and Decker D154RM variable speed reversing hammer drill which he'd paid forty-five quid for in Wickes was special. I advised him to write and tell the manufacturers, who would no doubt be delighted. That was when the conversation began to turn strange. Harry's voice dropped to a whisper and he said, 'If they knew about the drill, John, they'd take it away from me. I'd never see it again.'

I thought then that there had been a mix up of some kind and Harry had been given a better drill than the one he'd paid for. I shrugged it off and promised to hop the fence and take a look at it. I didn't though; I was far too busy playing with my

E Type and I forgot — until Sunday morning, when I heard a noise like falling masonry.

I first met Harry Ferguson three years ago when Judy and I moved into this house. When Judy won the pools we thought it would be nice to move to a smart area where we might blend in. Life in our council house was getting more complicated by the day, what with the endless begging letters and visitors calling with sob stories, so we decided to move to where the money lived and we wouldn't be so obvious. What we didn't realise, until the removal van had vanished over the Ascot horizon, was that there are two kinds of people with money. The rich and the nouveau riche. We were about as nouveau as it is possible to get and, although we weren't worth much more than a million then, all our neighbours, a couple of whom were almost as nouveau riche as us, avoided us like the plague. All, that is, except for Harry Ferguson.

We'd been in the house three days, rattling around like two peas in a bucket and wondering what to do next, when we saw Harry limping up the garden towards us. At first I thought he might be a gardener no one had told us about, coming to collect his wages. He was dressed in old clothes and covered in dirt. In actual fact he'd come to welcome us to the neighbourhood by the back garden route and had fallen over the fence. Harry wasn't very physical, he had suffered from polio in his youth and it had left him with a shrivelled left arm and leg, but what he lacked in muscle, he made up for with his mind. We let him in, cleaned him up and gave him coffee and he gave us a silver hip flask as a welcome present. We spent that first morning with him, talking about the other people in the area, and he warned us not to expect to be accepted very quickly, but to bide our time. He freely gave us lots of advice which turned out to be of great value, and I decided on the spot that I liked him a lot. He took a real shine to Judy and subsequently we discovered that his wife had died of cancer a year earlier.

Although our ages and backgrounds were totally different — Harry was a sixty-five year old retired barrister, and I was a thirty-four year old ex-painter and decorator — we became firm friends. We once went out on a bender in Soho together; an episode which led to a night in the slammer for both of us plus a drunk and disorderly rap. Harry laughingly defended us the following morning and we were found guilty and fined seventy quid each.

Harry had only recently become interested in DIY, and I thought it a strange choice of hobby for someone who, on his own admission, wasn't very good with his hands.

When I heard the terrible noise I wondered if Harry was in some kind of trouble, so I put the paper down and scooted off across the lawn to see what fate had befallen him. I leapt the fence and hurried up his back garden, expecting all kinds of devastation. What I saw stopped me dead in my tracks.

Harry had a brick-built garden shed near his house. I couldn't see it from the fence because it was hidden by the low branches of a huge fir tree halfway up his garden, but when it came into view I was staggered.

I thought at first it was some kind of elaborate practical joke that Harry had taken it into his head to play on me. I stood there on the lawn, closed my eyes, took a deep breath and told myself that I'd had too much to drink the night before and that,

when I looked again, the shed would be normal.

It wasn't

The back of the shed, which was facing me, seemed to have caved in. I regarded it for a moment and told myself that this was the noise that I'd heard, the noise of the shed collapsing. It may well have been, but then the shed hadn't collapsed. It had shrunk.

The other end of the shed was still its normal size, but the end facing me had been reduced in scale. It was like looking at one of those odd perspective distortions they sometimes use in movies, when a room seems to be of normal size but if you take three paces inside you find it's only two feet high at the back. The shed, however, looked impossible. The end nearest to me must have measured eighteen inches across and twelve high and it was in perfect scale, with its tiny wooden-framed windows; a miniature version of the real thing. In spite of the idiocy of the geometry involved, this tiny rear wall fitted perfectly with the rest of the shed, the side walls zoomed down in scale and the corrugated asbestos roof tapered down steeply, its corrugations decreasing in size until they were hardly visible. It was an impossible feat of engineering, but somehow Harry had achieved it.

I went to the other end of the shed, opened the door and looked inside. At the shrunken end was Harry's — now minute — wooden workbench. All the tools on it were tiny. The four-inch vice I'd seen many times before looked as if it had come out of a Christmas cracker, except that I could see it was made of steel and as real as the old full sized vice. I had no doubt that, if I had been able to reach it, it would work perfectly. There was rack of screwdrivers down there, all shiny, new and minute. There was Harry's Weller soldering iron, still in its red plastic case but now only about half an inch square. The two hundred watt light bulb hanging from a thread of twisted flex was little bigger than a cigarette end. It had been left on and lit the small end of the shed brightly. Harry's dead wife's bicycle was in there, parked along the side wall. The rear wheel, the saddle and the frame up to the pedals were all their normal size, but the bike tapered down dramatically so that the front end, handlebars, wheel, bell and forks were in scale with the decreased size of the building.

I shut my eyes again and wondered if Harry was hiding nearby, laughing at me. But surely all of this would have been far too expensive to arrange just to make a fool out of me? I opened my eyes, but nothing had changed. I tried to walk into the shed, convinced it was all an optical illusion. A yard inside, my head hit the roof, sending a shower of asbestos flakes fluttering to the ground. I sat down on the bare concrete floor. I was horrified and intrigued. I reached out towards the vice handle and saw my arm dwindle before my eyes. My hand seemed a long way away from me and it had become small enough for me to grab the tiny handle and work the vice. I yelped and withdrew it in fear. When I had worked up enough courage to look at it, I was surprised to find it unchanged. It was still my hand, the nails were broken and a little dirty, and the palm was greasy from contact with the vice, but other than that it was unchanged.

I reached in again, watching curiously as my hand shrank, picked up the soldering iron case and withdrew it, expecting it to get bigger as I drew it towards me. It remained tiny and sat in the palm



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**"I sat down on the bare concrete floor. I was horrified and intrigued"**

of my hand for a full minute, refusing to grow. I fumbled with the case and opened it. The soldering gun was in there, along with its little lead and miniscule plug. I pulled it out, telling myself that it must be a brilliant model; even the trigger moved. Then I had a brain wave. I reached back down into what I now thought of as the 'warp', plugged the iron into the little socket and squeezed the trigger with my tiny fingers. The iron grew hot almost at once, and a little wisp of flux smoke arose. I could smell it with my normal-sized nose.

I staggered up the garden and hammered on Harry's back door. There was no reply so I hammered again, twice as hard. My mind was asking me urgent questions only Harry could answer, so when he still didn't appear, I let myself in. The door was open and I assumed that if Harry had wanted privacy he would have locked it; besides, I had a sneaking suspicion that he might need help.

He was sitting in his lounge. Not on the three piece suite he'd bought at Harrods, nor on the low coffee table upon which he would sometimes perch and watch television close up — his eyes weren't what they used to be. He was sitting on the floor in the middle of the room, with his new Black and Decker D154RM reversing hammer drill clasped to his bosom and a beatific expression on his thin, grey face. The drill wasn't plugged in; I checked that immediately. The lead was trailing across the floor.

Harry didn't seem to notice my arrival, he just gazed into the distance, lost in his own blissful thoughts. I checked my arm, just to make sure it wasn't quietly dwindling away.

'Harry,' I said gently. For all I knew he might have been sitting there since he phoned me on Friday. It looked as if Harry had gone over the edge.

'Harry,' I said, 'are you all right?'

He looked up at me, the weird expression on his face vanished and was replaced by surprise. He looked ten years older now, the grey age came flooding back with his awakening, wrinkles formed above his raised eyebrows and around his eyes.

'Oh hello, John,' he said, looking from me to the drill he was cradling and back again. 'I didn't hear you come in.' He struggled to his feet, and put the Black and Decker down on the coffee table. He still looked a little stunned.

'Are you all right?' I asked again. 'How long have you been sitting there?'

'Only five minutes,' he replied in that clipped courtroom voice. 'I was doing a bit of thinking.'

'I'll say you were, I thought, wondering what it was that had entranced him so.'

'You're not ill or anything are you?' I persisted.

'No, certainly not,' he replied, 'I've never felt better.'

There was something odd about his expression, and I suppose I should have realised then that he wasn't being completely truthful with me. With all the mind-bending stuff that had happened so far, I didn't realise the significance of these two suspect statements until much later.

'That's the special drill then, I suppose,' I said, nodding towards the table.

'The very same.'

'How about telling me what's happened in the garden then?' I prompted. He obviously wasn't going to tell me anything unless I asked.

'Ah, the shed you mean?' I did make rather a mess of it, didn't I?' He smiled.

'It has to be one of the greatest optical illusions I've ever encountered. How did you do it?'

He gave me a strange look and said nothing for a time. Then he spoke.

'I think you're going to find this rather hard to believe, old chap. It's not a trick at all. That really is my shed out there. The back end has been reduced in size. I didn't expect it to...'

'You're kidding, surely!' I cut in. 'You're not really trying to tell me that your shed — the one in the back garden, I mean — is the real one. It's impossible.'

Harry held up his good hand to silence me, reached in his pocket and extracted his cigarettes. He plugged one into his thin-lipped mouth, offered the pack to me and said, 'See that over there on the hearth?'

I nodded. It was toy building block about the same size as the cigarette packet Harry had just thrust back into his cardigan pocket. It had a hole in it big enough to put your little finger in.

'Go and get it for me, would you old chap?'

He was smiling slightly and I couldn't work out why. What did this have to do with the shed, and why was Harry being so obtuse? I went over to pick up the brick, but I misjudged its weight completely and it slipped through my fingers and fell to the floor. The tiny thing was so heavy that it ripped the skin from one of my fingers as it fell.

'Ow, shit!' I shouted, examining the damage to my hand. 'Why is it so heavy?'

Harry was still grinning, but he also looked worried. I think I'd confirmed his worst fears. Looking back, I can see why he was so keen on me going over there that Friday; he thought he might be losing his mind. I understood how he felt. I suspected the same about myself when that little concrete block slipped from my fingers. This was getting a bit too much for me.

'It's a real concrete building block,' Harry said lightly. 'Pick it up again. Only this time pick it up as you would a full-sized concrete block. And mind you don't drop it on your toes.'

My mind was well and truly boggled. It just wasn't possible for anything the size of a cigarette packet to weigh as much as a concrete block. I bent down and grabbed it firmly, hefted it off the carpet and, believe me, that little thing really did weigh as much as the full-sized item.

I laid it back on the fireplace and looked at Harry questioningly. I wanted him to burst into laughter and slap me on the back, say that I was really fooled that time, wasn't I, and hows about a shot of Scotch. I wanted all this lunacy to be over, it had gone far enough. I thought about making some lame excuse and rushing off.

'It shrank,' Harry said, taking a drag on his Senior Service and exhaling the smoke through his nose.

'How?' I pleaded, wishing that I'd gone back to bed, wishing I hadn't heard the damn shed collapse.

'On Friday,' said Harry slowly, 'I got home with the drill and wanted to try out the hammer action on some masonry. I put a masonry bit in the drill — see the hole in the block? — and bored into it. What you see is the result. The block shrank.'

'You did this just by drilling it? It isn't possible.' I felt weak. I distinctly remember thinking that I was going to faint, and my hands were trembling like a pair of jellies.

**"Harry sighed, and then spoke: 'I think you're going to find this rather hard to believe, old chap'"**

'I didn't believe it either, old chap. I phoned you because I wanted a witness to its capabilities. When you didn't turn up I managed to convince myself that it hadn't really happened. Not bad for a lawyer, especially as I still had the impossible evidence in my shed. Well, I ignored the block — hid it in the garden, in fact — and put the whole episode down to approaching senility. As long as I couldn't see the block, I reasoned, it couldn't have happened. So much for mind over matter! I had myself so convinced that I had no qualms about using the drill this morning. I wanted to put a hanging basket on the shed wall; I drilled — the shed diminished in size. I came indoors to try and sort myself out, see if I could work out the reason for it.'

'You're telling me that every time you drill a hole with that thing, the object you are drilling shrinks?'

'I've only tried it twice, John. For all I know, it may not happen again.'

'But what if it does?' I was terrified. 'Get rid of it Harry. Take it into the garden and bury it or something!'

Harry looked offended. 'I couldn't possibly do that, old bean. We've discovered something here. We're onto something.'

'Hold on. Don't start dragging me into this. I want nothing to do with it. It's bad news.'

What did he mean 'on to something'? Was that why he looked so pleased with himself when I got here? I had to ask.

'So have you managed to work out a reason for this?'

Harry smiled.

'Have you been inside the shed?' he asked. 'It really is a most interesting phenomenon.'

I nodded and told him about the soldering iron.

'So,' I repeated after a long pause, 'what's the reason for it?'

'Well,' he said cagily, 'I haven't worked out a reason for it, but I have several theories about what the effect might be. Before I explain any of them, I'd like you to witness the drill in action. Just to verify it and prove to me that we're not both going crackers.'

I didn't like the way he kept saying 'we', but I must admit that, despite my misgivings, I was becoming intrigued. It didn't seem dangerous; my arm had suffered no ill effects from being reduced to toy size, and Harry seemed quite reasonable and lucid. In fact, I was getting quite excited.

'Listen Harry,' I said. 'I'll agree to this demonstration, but I'm not altogether happy about it. We don't know if it'll put us in any danger, do we? And how long does the stuff you drill stay small? I suppose it will return to normal size eventually, won't it?'

'I don't think we'll be in any danger, old boy. I've done it twice and suffered no ill effects. But as for the shed and the concrete block returning to normal size, well...' he shrugged, 'it's a bit difficult to say. You see, when you bore a hole, something comes out of it. It's as though a sort of gas were escaping; you hear a slight hiss and you can smell lemons. It seems to me that, when you make a hole with this machine, you let out some of the life force of the object you have drilled, and it decreases in size accordingly.'

'But bricks aren't alive,' I said, wondering if Harry had gone over the edge after all.

'All right,' he replied, obviously prepared for my scepticism, 'look at it this way. When I drilled the

block, its integrity with the world as we know it was shattered for some reason. It didn't belong here anymore; or at least a part of it didn't, so it slipped away to... who knows where? Another dimension, I expect. Not all of it was affected though, but since it lost something, it had to decrease in size to compensate.'

'Clear as mud, Harry,' I said.

'Einstein could probably have explained it.'

'Only Einstein has slipped away to another dimension too, hasn't he?' I muttered.

'Let me show you, and you can see for yourself,' Harry said.

He picked up the drill which was fitted with a quarter-inch bit, and made for the door. As I followed him out to the garden I mumbled something about calling in the authorities. Harry refused point blank, and looking back on it, I can see why. I didn't know what he had in mind then, so I just trailed about after him while he rigged up the extension lead from the socket in the garage (the one in the shed was shrunken and neither of us wanted to put our hands back into that tiny place) and pulled the cable out into the garden.

He stopped in front of the huge fir tree and plugged the drill into the lead.

'You're not going to shrink the tree?' I asked incredulously.

Harry shrugged. 'Why not? Can you think of a better demonstration? It keeps the sun from the house too. I've been meaning to have something done about it for ages. Now I can do it myself.'

How could I argue with that kind of logic?

'How tall would you say it is?' Harry asked, indicating the uppermost branches with the drill.

I looked up. It looked beautiful to me, all that greenery against the blue sky, and I wished Harry wasn't going to ruin it.

'I dunno,' I said. 'Twenty-five feet? Thirty?'

'At least,' Harry said, bringing the drill down and pointing it at me like a gun. I shivered. 'We'll soon put paid to that, won't we, old boy?'

His voice was chilling; gleeful and a little bit crazy. He dropped onto his knees and shuffled up to the exposed trunk, holding the drill with both hands, right hand on the grip and trigger, the shrivelled left one on top, just behind the chuck. He placed the bit against the bark then looked at me.

'Ready?' he asked.

I nodded, backing off a pace in order to leave myself plenty of room to run if the tree should come tumbling down on us.

Harry pulled the trigger. The drill screamed, splitting the Sunday morning silence. It took about four seconds for the length of the drill bit to sink all the way into the bark. Nothing happened. Harry stopped drilling, whacked it into reverse and extracted it. A drop of sap oozed from the hole in the tree. Harry turned to look at me. His withered, aged left hand nervously picked the wood shavings from the flutes on the drill bit.

'Nothing happened,' I said. I felt like laughing. How could I have ever believed him?

'Maybe it's because the tree is still alive,' he said. 'I haven't drilled anything living with it before. It obviously doesn't work on...'

His voice tailed off, and that was when I smelled lemons. I looked at the small hole Harry had made. The sap was bubbling and popping and bubbling again. Some sort of vapour was being released into the air from the tree trunk; I could see it shimmer

**"I distinctly remember thinking that I was going to faint, and my hands were trembling like a pair of jellies"**

for a short time after it burst from the bubbles. It was gone in a fraction of a second.

The tree groaned as though the branches were being tortured by a high wind. It started to squeal and crack and I shouted at Harry to run, sure that the branches were going to start falling. Harry scrambled away, leaving the drill behind. The slender boughs began to tremble and wave, and needles fell in their thousands creating a carpet of darker green on the lawn. I took another step back, my eyes fixed on the tree. It looked as if a giant pair of invisible hands had grasped the trunk and were trying to uproot it. There was a terrible creaking noise which sounded as if every fibre of wood was being torn apart simultaneously. Harry was shouting something at me, but I couldn't hear him above the noise. He was pale-faced, but he looked delighted.

With a jerk, the tree shrank a foot. Quite out of character for an ageing lawyer, Harry gave one of those rebel yells the Americans are so fond of.

The tree quivered, groaned a protest and spasmodically reduced its height by another foot or so. Then it quietened down and diminished smoothly, both in width and height. When it settled with a gentle sigh it was as tiny and perfect as a bonsai tree. My mouth dangled and my eyes boggled. I looked at Harry. He was nodding and smiling sagely.

'D'you think it still weighs the same as it did before we shrank it?' he enquired.

'Chop it down and let it fall on your foot — you'll soon find out,' I said.

Then I turned and walked away.

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I didn't take Judy to the seaside that afternoon. I stayed at home and got well and truly plastered. I told Judy what had happened. She went to investigate and came back frightened and in tears. Harry hadn't answered the door to her, so I assumed he was doing some more serious thinking.

We went to Bournemouth on Monday, but neither of us really enjoyed ourselves although we both pretended we did. Try as I might, I couldn't forget what Harry had done to his shed and to that tree. It seemed terrible that any mortal should be able to do such a thing, but I couldn't help myself wishing I could see it happen again.

I spent most of Tuesday sunbathing in the back garden, ears cocked towards Harry's for the sound of a Black and Decker. He knew more about it than I did, that was certain. Why else should he have been so matter of fact and happy about the strange effects the drill had? He hadn't told me the whole story, obviously. And I thought he was planning something. I was worried about Harry's sanity, but Judy was more concerned about what Harry might do with the drill next. Suppose he took it into his head to use it on a person? Or on himself?

On Wednesday morning, after a sleepless night, I couldn't contain my curiosity any longer and told Judy that I was going to leap the fence. I asked her to come too, but she refused.

Harry was sitting in a deckchair between the dwarf fir tree and the shed. The extension lead was out and so was the drill. I spotted it straight away, lying there in the grass, all blue and inoffensive.

'Hello, old chap,' Harry said warmly. 'I've been awaiting your return. I wanted you to be here for the next step.'

'Next step?'

'I was wondering what might occur if we were to try and drill nothing.'

'How can you drill nothing?'

By way of explanation, Harry picked up the Black and Decker, pointed it at the sky and thrust it forwards.

'You're intending to drill the air and shrink the universe are you?' I asked tartly.

'Steady, old chap. No need to get on your high horse. I'm not intending to do anything very terrible. I've given this a lot of thought, and I'd like you to help me try it. I don't think

it will have a detrimental effect on anything.'

'Then why wait for me? Why didn't you do it alone?'

'Actually, I did have a little go earlier on. I want to try it with a bigger drill bit.'

'You mean you drilled thin air and something happened?'

Harry nodded. 'Yes, it was most peculiar. I wanted you to see it.'

'Okay, show me,' I sighed. Whether I liked it or not, I was hooked. We were pioneers of some kind, Harry and me, plumbing the great unknown and to hell with the consequences. I wanted to know; I really ached to know what would happen when we drilled the air.

Harry picked up the drill, came over to where I was standing and pointed it at me, holding it level with my eyes.

'Watch this,' he said cheerily.

For a dreadful moment I envisaged him turning the drill on me and thrusting it into my head, giving my brain an escape route it would have to follow. I took a step back.

'Don't go too far away, old chap,' Harry said reassuringly. 'You won't be able to see what happens.'

Harry pulled the trigger and the drill whined into life. Slowly he pushed it forwards. Instead of coming nearer to my face, the drill bit seemed to decrease in length. Harry pushed gently until the drill bit had vanished entirely except for a small part of the plain shank which was now all that protruded from the chuck. He took his finger from the trigger and the drill stopped. The silence was ear-shattering. He looked at me and grinned.

'Where did the bit go to?' I asked, astounded.

Harry shrugged. 'Into another dimension?'

He was still holding the drill in the air, firm and steady.

'What I want you to tell me, John, is this: can you see the point of the drill?'

I shook my head.

'So the bit has definitely vanished. It's gone somewhere else.'

'Yeah.'

'But you can still see the shank?'

'Only a little of it.'

'Now tell me this,' said Harry deliberately, 'at the point where the shank becomes nothing — where the flutes used to start — at this point, can you see a cross section of it? Like what you would be able to see if we were to saw the drill bit in half?'

I looked closely. The drill bit just ceased to exist an inch from the chuck. I positioned myself directly in line with it so — even though it was only a small drill bit — I would be able to see the end of it. I couldn't. I expected to be able to pinpoint the area where the drill pierced the air and see what was inside the bit, but all there was

**"I looked at the small hole Harry had made. The sap was bubbling and popping and bubbling again"**



was thin air. When I lined myself up with the bit, I couldn't see any of it at all. I suppose it stood to reason really; after all, when you drill a block of wood, you don't expect to be able to walk around the back and see a cross-section through the drill. But, of course, wood is opaque, air isn't, which confirmed to us that the drill really had penetrated the air and disappeared into another dimension.

'Come round here,' Harry said, 'so you can see what happens when I pull the drill out.'

walked round to stand beside him and he tugged at the Black and Decker. Whatever he had drilled into was clamped tightly around the bit.

'It tried to seal itself up again,' he said, putting the drill into reverse and withdrawing it.

I watched in amazement as the drill bit lengthened and was whole again. Harry put the drill down, leaving a sixteenth-of-an-inch hole suspended at eye level in the air. But this wasn't just an ordinary hole, it was a hole in the fabric of the universe. A wisp of vapour issued forth and vanished and an odour of lemons pervaded the air. We both stood and stared at the hole, dumbstruck. Within ten seconds it had sealed itself up and vanished.

Harry turned to me, a queer look in his eyes. 'What's through that hole?' he whispered urgently.

'Whatever it is, it's bound to be bad news,' I said pessimistically. Who knew what might come pouring out of there if it got half a chance?

'I don't think so,' said Harry, 'I think it has to be good news. How do you feel?'

'Terrified.'

'No, really, think about it.'

I thought.

'Good, I suppose.'

Harry nodded. 'I feel it too. Alive, jumping with energy — exhilarated. I feel like a twenty-year-old.'

I had to admit I felt the same.

'Nothing collapsed, did it?' Harry asked. 'Nothing terrible happened to the universe?'

I shook my head.

'So why don't we drill a bigger hole and see what transpires?'

I really wanted to say no, to argue and point out that we had no idea what awful thing might be lurking in that next dimension. But Harry knew I wouldn't be able to, because I'd been bitten just as he had. Even if I had refused, he would have gone on alone. And even if he did screw up the universe, I'd know about it soon enough. So I decided that I might as well stay put and be the first to witness Armageddon, if it was coming.

He wandered off into the shed, walking in a jaunty way I hadn't noticed before, and returned with a three-quarter-inch bit (equipped with a reduced diameter shank to fit a half-inch chuck), the chuck key, and a little blue box which he slipped into his pocket. I assumed that these things must have been stored at the full-sized end of the shed. Harry fitted the big bit to the drill and invited me to try it.

I was trembling with excitement when I pulled the trigger and eased the drill forwards. It didn't go in as easily as I'd expected; it was like drilling a hard wood — teak or something. Air was certainly more resistant than I'd imagined it to be. The drill screamed, I pushed, and that thing bored right into reality and out the other side.

Shavings of the substance I was drilling flew from the bit, tiny tear-shaped chips, like the

clearest glass. They fell onto my hands, leaving tingling spots.

When Harry told me to stop, I wiggled the drill, then let it go and stepped back a pace, marvelling at it hanging there, suspended in space.

Harry chuckled and told me to take it out before the hold shrank down on it. As I bent to put the Black and Decker down, I saw the puff of vapour again and smelled the smell.

His new hole was large enough to see through. On the other side, the light was different. Harry was up there, his eye pressed to the hole, before I had a chance to move. He stood there for fifteen seconds, not making a sound nor moving a muscle. When he turned back to face me, he looked a young man, much the same as he had when I'd seen him in a trance inside his house. His skin seemed to have grown healthier, his eyes were bright and lively, the lines of age had receded a little. He was smiling blissfully.

'Take a look,' he said.

I went over to that portal into another world and peered in. A cool draught was blowing through the hole. It was lemon scented and made my eyes water slightly. There was a landscape; green fields, hills rolling away to a crystal sea. The light had a luminous, sparkling quality it didn't possess on our side. There were no shadows, and I couldn't spot the sun anywhere. It looked good over there. I wanted to swim in that clear blue sea, breathe that pure air. I took my eye away, put my nose to the hole and took a deep draught. I felt young and fresh and energetic.

I turned to Harry and his garden. Even though the sun was shining and it was a lovely day, it seemed dull and coarse this side of the hole.

'Where is that?' I asked.

'Heaven?' Harry replied.

He went back to the hole, but it was puckering and closing.

'Okay, that's it for today,' he announced. 'I want some time to think.'

He started to roll up the extension lead.

I stood and watched him pack up. There were so many things I wanted to talk to him about, but he ignored me; his eyes were glazed and he appeared to be lost in thought.

I went home and told Judy all about it. She called me a liar and forbade me to go over the fence again. I asked her what difference it made if she thought I was only lying, and she didn't answer. For her, the matter was closed.

I lay out in the garden all afternoon, worrying about what it all meant. In the early evening I heard the distant whine of Harry's Black and Decker, but by that time Judy and I were locked into our own private world, and nothing else meant anything at all.

Judy went to London to see her accountant the following day, and I broke my promise to her the moment I could no longer hear the thrumming of the E Type's exhaust.

Harry was in his garden as usual. He was stripped to the waist and was breaking a paving slab with a fourteen pound sledge hammer. I watched it rise and fall as I walked towards him. He was putting his whole body into the action, raising the hammer far above his head and bringing it crashing down.

He stopped when he saw me approaching, and stood up straight, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. He looked lean and strong, like a young building site worker.

**"Harry turned to me, a queer look in his eyes. 'What's through that hole?' he whispered urgently"**

'Hello, old chap,' he called. 'Thought I'd make a crazy paving path.'

He was smiling and happy, his wasted arm that had been attacked by polio fifty years before was now the same size and shape as the good one.

I realised what had happened.

He'd put it through, into that place.

'What was in that box you had in your pocket yesterday?' I asked.

'A hole saw. Two-inch.'

'You put your hand through last night, didn't you?'

Harry nodded, wiggling his fingers at me, then he flexed his biceps. He looked as strong as an ox.

'So what's next on the agenda, then?' I asked.

'I don't really know,' he replied, leaning on the hammer handle as if he'd been doing it all his life.

'What conclusion did you come to last night? You know, with all that thinking you had to do?'

'I've got cancer, John,' he said. 'You didn't know that, did you?'

I was stunned. I felt like crying.

'Don't worry, old chap, there's no way you could have known. I've been keeping it quiet. No point in broadcasting it, is there? It's my lungs, y'know.'

As if to prove his point he pulled his cigarettes from his trousers pocket and lit up.

'Can they cure it?' I said hopefully. It doesn't matter if they can't, I thought, if he breathes the air from the hole, he'll soon recover.

'Anne — my wife — died of lung cancer.'

**T**he smile fled from his lips and suddenly I knew that he really missed her. He looked empty. At least sniffing that other air had made me more observant. I hadn't noticed until now how lonely Harry was underneath all his bluster. The memory of his wife seemed to be giving him more pain now than any future cancer ever could.

'Y'know what I think?' he said. 'I think that Anne is over there somewhere. In that other place. I don't know where or what it is, but I think she's over there.'

'How do you know?'

'I just feel it. Look John, I've been without her for three God-awful years. Now they tell me I've got cancer and there's a good chance that I'll get better if I can stand the treatment. Why should I bother to get better? I'm lonely and I want to be with my wife.'

'Then you think that that is Heaven over there?'

'I don't know what it is, but I'm sure that Anne is there. Look at it my way. I can have an agonising death and perhaps join my wife, or I can take an equally agonising cure and be lonely for ten, maybe twenty, years. Or I can...'

'You can cut a hole big enough to get through.'

'You've got it. I'm going across, John.'

'What if it isn't...?'

'I know it is, you know it is. So why not? I'll be saving myself a lot of pain, won't I?' He smiled again.

'When are you going?' I asked.

'I thought now would be as good a time as any. Want to help me?'

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He swaggered back to the house as though he hadn't a care in the world, and returned with the Black and Decker. He had a circular saw blade in the chuck this time, and I knew then that he'd planned this all along. Harry wasn't the type of

person to do something without having planned it thoroughly. The crazy paving exercise must have been an idle test of the hole's healing powers; something to do while he waited for me to come and help him. He needed someone to witness his mysterious disappearance, to know where he had gone and why.

He was beaming as he handed me the drill.

'One thing I'd like to make clear,' he said. 'On no account must you follow me. I don't think you would be able to get back. This is not for you. I need your help, but under no circumstances can you cross with me.'

I nodded, held the drill near to the ground and pulled the trigger. The saw blade bit and the shavings flew. I cut a six-foot high vertical, then a three-foot horizontal and started to saw back down the other side. The lemon breeze wafted out as I brought the saw lower, and it occurred to me how lucky Harry was to be going. I wanted to go too.

When I had finished, I pulled the saw back, then thrust it at the air between the cuts. It connected solidly, and the air collapsed, leaving a jagged opening, like a sardine-can lid, into the other dimension. The smell of the sea mingled with the lemon odour, and the good air rushed from the doorway and out into my world. It looked so bright and new in there.

**H**arry grabbed my hand, squeezed it, dropped it and stepped forwards. I put the drill down and followed him, but he turned and shook his head, then stepped through. There was a gentle sigh as he did so, and I felt a burst of energy wash over me. When he turned to face me he wasn't the Harry I knew and loved, but a younger, more carefree man with a full head of black hair and a smooth, lovely face.

'Goodbye John, old chap,' he said. 'Thanks for your help.'

He turned and walked away. I called after him but he didn't look back. I took a pace towards the doorway, intending to enter that place myself. I would go too, I would be with him and whatever else was in there. But I couldn't cross the threshold. An invisible sheet that wrapped itself around me like cling-film prevented me. I charged at it, bounced off and charged again. Then I lost consciousness.

I woke up in the sun lounger in my own back garden and was appalled to realise that I had only been dreaming. I leapt the fence and knocked on Harry's door. Either he wasn't at home or he was doing some more of that thinking and didn't hear the door. I went inside, but he wasn't there. The tool shed and the fir tree were as they had always been before their strange transformation. There wasn't a Black and Decker drill in the house, nor in the shed nor the garage.

No one ever saw Harry again. Everyone assumed that he'd had debts of some kind and had done a runner — gone abroad, probably. That was typical of the people round our way. All they ever think about is money.

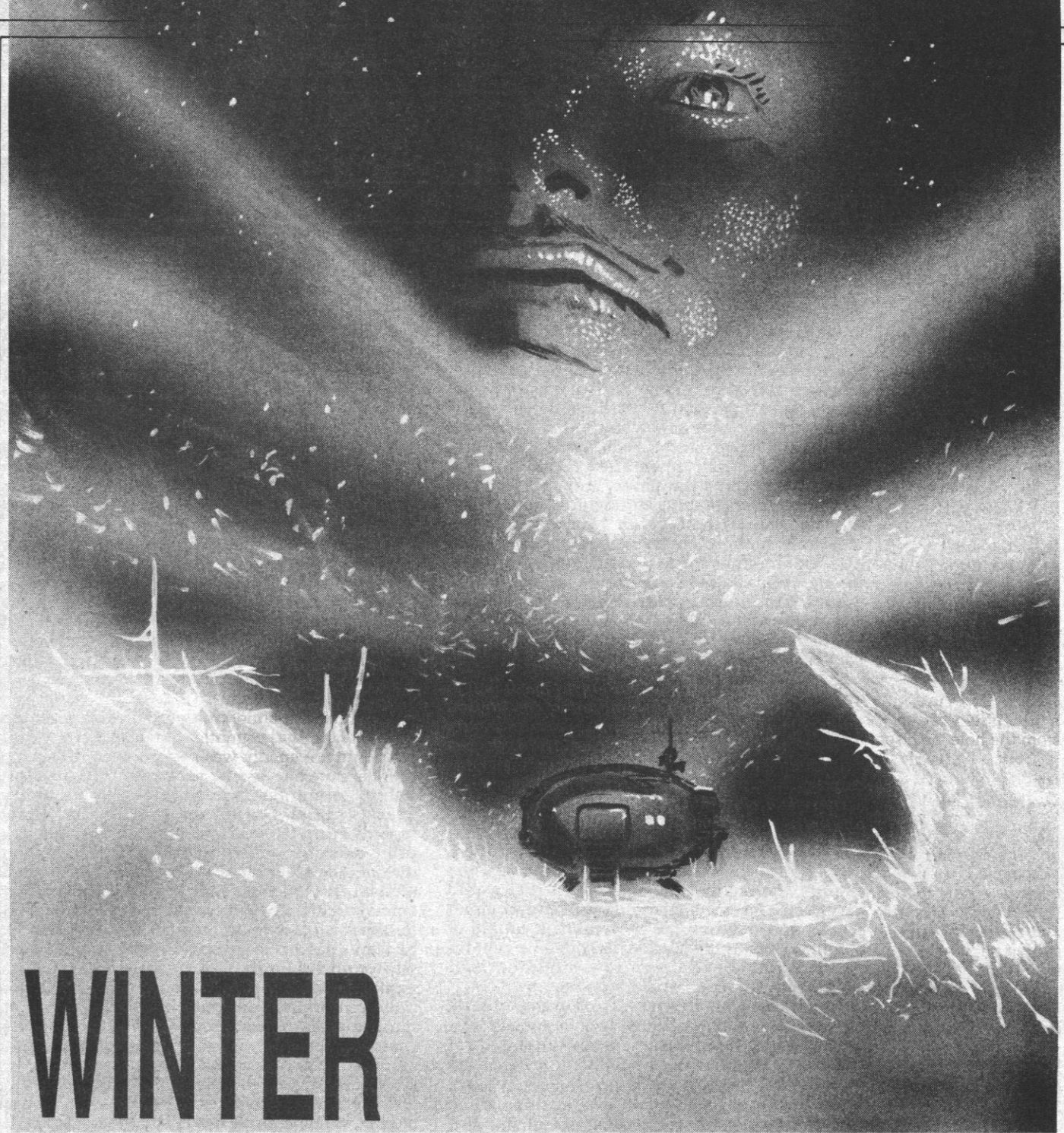
I might have believed it too, if it hadn't been for one thing.

**S**everal weeks after Harry's disappearance, when I'd more or less convinced myself that it had all been a weird dream and that Harry really had run away from bad debts, I found something in my garden, near the fence I don't leap anymore.

It is a miniature concrete building block with a hole in it just big enough to put your finger in.

And it weighs as much as a full-sized one.

**"Shavings of the substance I was drilling flew from the bit, tiny tear-shaped chips, like the clearest glass"**



# WINTER ON AUBARCH 6

BY DAVID RILEY

**T**he life module landed with a subdued thud in the lush, rubbery vegetation that bordered on the swamp. Steam rose in violent spurts from the retard jets as they suddenly cooled in the moist fronds they had crushed. The hiss of vapourised water cut through the croaks of hidden wildlife that otherwise filled the heavily scented air, and the larger of the twin suns the planet circled started its gradual dip beyond the rim of the horizon, its dark red disk distorted by the atmosphere into a pear-shaped ball. The smaller, harsher, blue-white dwarf that provided most of the remaining light stood out, almost directly overhead, like a hole burned through the sky by a white-hot needle; a needle which would, within seconds, permanently and painfully impair the eyesight of any creature incautious enough to glance at it.

Inevitably, evolution had provided what wildlife

crept or crawled through the swamps and forests of Aubarch 6 with a thickened, opalescent extra lid which instinctively closed the instant a creature raised its heads from the ground to face that vicious orb. Some inhabitants were blind already, like the razor-jawed, twelve-foot worms that coiled their boneless bodies through the primitive undergrowth.

Arrach Gudgeon knew all this from the emergency data manuals provided in the module. As soon as he landed on Aubarch 6 he started to read about it, even before he bothered to pay more than cursory attention to the automatic scanners that gave him an all-round view of the planetary scene outside. Safe inside the stasis controls of the emergency landing craft, Arrach was in no hurry to step outside. Tranquilliser pills (taken to calm him down after the panic-filled instants between jetting away from his doomed transporter and escaping through the atmosphere of Aubarch 6), had given him a feeling of somnolent lethargy. He knew that this would pass soon enough, but for now he allowed it to flow through him. Somewhere on the far side of the planet, the flaming fragments of his Excelair Transporter would have already been scattered into starry oblivion, blasted by the Union Cruiser only minutes after his escape from it.

He was under no illusion that his escape went unnoticed, but he knew that, even with the sophisticated detection equipment the cruiser would be able to use to search for him, it would still be little better than searching a desert for one particular grain of sand, even if that grain stood out against the others black against white. It would take years. Perhaps decades.

Too long.

Especially since they knew he was trapped, unable to lift off in something as small as a life module. Especially since most of its fuel would have been consumed in landing here and wouldn't be able to carry him far — perhaps a couple of hundred miles at the outside, provided he kept his altitude and speed down to a minimum and avoided any unnecessary stops on the way.

Arrach eased his helmet off and dropped it on the floor behind him. Though well designed for its purpose, the life module was not intended for comfort; even if it could, if necessary, be used for a long period of time, providing recycled food, water and air, and medication covering everything, even the most serious accidents. His command seat converted at the touch of a button into a sleeping couch. It also converted into a toilet and bath and could be used by the medication equipment for a wide variety of operations. Arrach preferred not to think about this just yet, even in the luxury of an induced calm.

And complacency.

He sat up with a jerk.

What could he be thinking of? It was all very well theorising about the problems of them finding him here, but if they detected his flight through the atmosphere it wouldn't take them long to plot his probable course to the ground. And with that, a reasonable idea of just where he would be. If he didn't put at least a couple of hundred miles between himself and here before they decided to close in, he'd be trapped. And cooked.

He shuddered as he remembered the roaring heat of the molten walls of his transporter, just seconds before they were about to burst in under the fire of the cruiser's laser cannons. His hair had

writhed like snakes about his head as the temperature soared, as if he'd been thrown at a furnace. A furnace that screamed with an ear-splitting screech of metallic agony. Sweat popped about his forehead, though it was adrenalin, not the scorching heat of the attacker's guns, that induced it now.

Arrach pressed for the manual control stick, grasped the plastic hand grips and signalled for the engines to start up again. There was a judder as the rockets ignited, thrusting the tiny space craft inches from the clinging swampland. He glanced at the scanners, increased their scope to check for the cruiser, saw nothing to alarm him — yet! — then brought the craft in a lazy arc above the branches of the peculiarly interwoven trees that all but covered the swamps. The fuel gauge indicated that there was less than an hour's reserve left, even at a couple of hundred miles per hour, but he didn't dare hold back. Not until he'd put as much distance as he could between him and this place.

Aubarch 6, the sixth planet of the two star system Aubarch, had only been visited once before, more than two hundred years ago, by an interstellar survey expedition, according to the data manual. Nothing of commercial interest had been found either here or on any of the eight other planets of the system, the rest of which were either sterile cinders, too close to one of the suns, or cold, icy nodules of frozen gas.

All the planets circled their suns on eccentric orbits that took them from one extreme of temperature — radiation — to another. Aubarch 6 was the only one which spent most of its time in a habitable temperature zone — given a hardy species of life. During the short period of six months every ten years or so, when the planetary orbit took it to an icy winter of frozen carbon dioxide, the plant life died, then was reborn from seed when the temperature rose once more. What animal life there was bored deep into the ground to hibernate. Arrach's computer told him that he had another three years to go before the next winter was due, though he knew that his life module could keep him alive through the most rigorous temperatures this planet could throw at him. Provided he could put up with the cramped confines of the living space inside it.

Arrach tensed as he guided the space craft over the trees. The thought of spending the next few years tied to this module and having to live most of the time inside it was far from beguiling. It wasn't much better, in fact, than being sent to a penal colony. And if he didn't manage to get off and had to spend the rest of his life here, it was worse. At least penal didn't normally last for more than ten years, apart from in exceptional cases. And he hadn't done anything that bad. Quite.

A warning blip made him nose dive through the trees, slowing quickly to a couple of miles an hour, till he found a small clearing to hide in. The blip grew larger on the screen. The video monitor showed it as a bright silver dart in the sky, a tiny splinter of steel. As he enlarged the image, he made out the gleaming shape of the interstellar cruiser circling the planet more than five miles up.

Arrach knocked off all but the minimum amount of power in the module to avoid detection. He'd gone nearly fifty miles from where he landed. Was that far enough to deter them from searching too long, he wondered? The cruiser seemed to hang stationary in the sky. Its sensors would be searching the ground for him now. To detect

**"If he didn't put at least a couple of hundred miles between himself and here before they decided to close in, he'd be trapped. And cooked"**

anything, though, its beams would have to pick him out exactly. And with the low power output from the module now, they would only do that with their beams narrowed down to a few feet. It would take luck, a fantastic amount of luck, for them to find him that way. Their only chance was to use a broad-beamed search and hope that he was still trying to get away at full speed, in which case his power output would stand out in their detectors like a beacon.

Now would they know if he'd landed intact. Under the impact of the blasts they'd been directing at his transporter when he jettisoned, it was luck alone that allowed him to get away undamaged. The slightest hit would have rendered the module unstable. And an unstable life module crashing through a planet's atmosphere at a speed not far short of ten times that of sound was a death trap. For all they knew, he might have burned up on entering the atmosphere or crashed into the landscape below and been scattered across it in undetectable fragments. The swamps could absorb even the most violent crash with frightening ease.

His heart beat louder, partly from fear and partly from hope, as his mind tumbled over the arguments for and against his chances of having made good his escape. His doubts about what he would be able to do next to get away from here once the cruiser had gone, he kept rigidly back — for the time being.

For once, though, his hopes seemed to have better foundations than his fears. After slowly surveying the desolate swamps for the best part of half a Terran day, the cruiser suddenly started to rise once more till it blinked out of sight in a dazzling burst of proton drive that would carry it back into deep space again: 'Killed whilst attempting to escape' imprinted across his record in its data log, no doubt, he thought.

A tense smile spread across Arrach's lips as he watched the scanners trace his pursuer's departure. Alone at last, he knew now that he would have to stay here for at least a year before sending out the first distress call for rescue. Less than that, and they might still pin his presence here on what happened today. Longer, and he could legitimately claim that this had nothing to do with him, that his transporter had malfunctioned and exploded in space and that he was forced down here in his life module to escape incineration twelve months after the fugitive they had attacked was killed.

No court would condemn him, not on the evidence the police could provide — not if they were to believe that he had voluntarily hidden himself away on this planet for twelve months before making his first call for help.

Twelve months.

Of solitary...

It was a high price to pay for smuggling. But it was still a lot less than what the court would exact if they caught him now. And at least, with the reprocessing facilities on board the module, he wouldn't exactly starve.

Arrach asked the computer to check for any faults in the life support systems, if there were any, the sooner he found out the better. Even when he sent out his distress calls he couldn't rely on an instant response. It could take months, even a year, before a passing transporter, cargo liner or interstellar police cruiser picked it up. Several minutes later, he read out the results. It seemed that the laser blasts directed at his transporter had

done little damage to the module — any real damage would have already resulted in his death, so this did not surprise him. What did was the indication that some damage had been sustained by the food reprocessing equipment. Quickly he asked for further information. Without food, he would starve in a matter of weeks — perhaps before any help could arrive, even if he called for it now.

Arrach's lips drew back in a grimace of relief when the computer showed that the reprocessing equipment was still serviceable, though its efficiency had been impaired to the extent of 82 per cent of its normal capacity. Which meant, he supposed, that his own waste products would have to be supplemented by additional inputs of animal and vegetable matter from outside. Arrach laughed. In the middle of a fertile swamp, steaming with life, that was no problem, not on a planet with an even higher oxygen content in its atmosphere than Earth.

During the next few months Arrach settled into a routine. In the morning he meticulously bathed and shaved, then ate his breakfast — reprocessed egg, bacon, sausage, tomato and mushrooms, followed by a piping hot cup of coffee. Preprogrammed, the computer enabled the reprocessor to reproduce these with exact precision. Perhaps a shade to perfectly, he thought, after the fourteenth or fifteenth day, when he decided to vary his choice a little. After breakfast, he usually left the module to explore a section of swampland surrounding it. Sometimes he'd move the module to drier ground, but he wanted to conserve what fuel it had for the time being. Just in case.

Using a hand laser, he shot any of the larger wildlife that seemed threatening to him, though there were really only the swamp worms to worry about. What he killed he cut up and used in the food reprocessor, though a large proportion of what he put in was disposed of as waste by the machine because of the high content of toxic elements present in the life forms on Aubarch 6. Fortunately there was no shortage of wildlife — or plant life for that matter — and he could make up through bulk what was lost through toxicity. And the extra work helped to give him a purpose in life, to concentrate his mind as week followed week with a relentless uniformity which all too quickly dulled the novelty of the landscape, and even the alien splendour of the sunsets, when wide bands of red and white — of reds like burning, gaseous blood and of whites so brilliant that their harshness had a bluish, electric quality to them — merged and spread across the sky, as the contrasting rays of the suns battled in the over-heavy atmosphere in a fiery display of light.

In the afternoons, he usually had a light lunch, after which he read from the stored memory banks of novels. Over two hundred titles were held by the computer. On a passing whim when he brought the transporter he'd requested a cross-section of twenty-first century westerns — A P Oddy, Shane McBride and Hooper Tennyson. In the evenings, he took a last stroll round the module, then returned for some dinner and a beaker of wine while he relaxed to a film — from a wider cross-section of genres than he'd thoughtlessly chosen for the books — on his monitor.

Compared to ocean going mariners stranded in lifeboats three centuries ago in pre-Atomic days,



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**"His hair had writhed like snakes about his head as the temperature soared, as if he'd been thrown at a furnace"**

**"Grey patches started to touch the topmost leaves, like a ghostly sprinkling of ash"**

he knew he was in something not far short of luxury. Like all things, though, this was relative. Lack of human companionship, cramped quarters and a uniformity of lifestyle soon took away some of the flavour he had enjoyed over the first few weeks of his stay on Aubarch 6. It was not long before he began to wonder how he could manage to keep on going like this for a year. Perhaps more than anything, used though he was to long periods of travelling by himself through space, he missed the company of women. Like most space-goers he was a loner — his parents divorced when he was ten and he hadn't seen either of them for the best part of a decade. Two failed marriages of his own had left him with an aversion to any permanent arrangements and his friends were few and rarely seen. Even so, for all of that, he was no misogynist. And he was human enough to enjoy company and a bit of variety now and again.

What made it worse was the fact that he was deliberately holding himself back from calling for rescue. All it would take to sound the prerecorded May Day message, was the touching of two buttons. But he had decided to hold back for twelve months. His reasoning for this was sound. It would save him from a long and brutal term of imprisonment. Even so, it was hard, as the weeks passed into months, till even the momentary excitement of shooting up a swamp worm grew dulled.

Arrach had only served Penal once. That was when he was in his early twenties, not long after his first divorce. He was living on Oregon 2, trying to make enough money to buy himself passage to one of the less civilised star systems where there were more opportunities open to an enterprising mind like his own. He'd still been naive enough then to be drawn into a deal with an Oregon dope-peddler called Orifax Myers, little realising that he was being set up as the fall guy. Myers salted away both shares and slid quietly away while Arrach, not suspecting a thing about what was really going on, walked straight into a five year stretch. That was on Penal Settlement 15. Not the worst, but not the best either.

With this in mind whenever he felt tempted to give way, he managed to wait through ten months of his time on the planet. Once he'd passed the halfway point, he began to find it easier, as if the days were starting to tumble past now with increasing speed, as the target date loomed closer ahead. It was at this time, though, that he started to notice a change in the swamp life which, in its own subtle way, gave him a feeling of unease.

The hitherto lush vegetation that reached up on every side to an impressive twenty or even thirty feet, with fronds as thick as his waist and so vividly coloured that they looked as though they'd been freshly painted with a heavy hand in iridescent greens and blues and reds, began to look frail and withered. Grey patches started to touch the topmost leaves, like a ghostly sprinkling of ash. Day by day, the greyness spread and soon it became obvious to him that it was the leaves themselves that were turning grey. Grey and brittle. A fine rain of dust from the disintegrating leaves speckled the air, as they crumbled and floated down to settle across the sphagnum-like moss that grew in bloated mounds across the swamps.

Arrach noticed the air seemed colder now, with a hint

of frost that lingered longer each morning, along

with a ground mist that spread through the swamps in cold, grey tendrils. Fewer swamp worms were to be seen as the chill became deeper rooted.

Alarmed, Arrach checked the information in the data manual again. When he had last looked winter wasn't due for two years yet; this the manual confirmed, along with details of the depths to which the temperatures would fall, when life on the planet would to all intents and purposes disappear to leave a frozen sphere of liquid gas and rock-hard soil, a sterile waste that would dramatically come to life once more when the six months' winter was at an end. What the manual didn't say was what autumn was like, nor for how long it went on, as the planet's life forms gradually withered and died away or went underground. Nor did it say how soon the plants would die and the animal life start to become scarce — so scarce, in fact, that a full day's search would more often than not produce nothing.

Feeling warm within his insulated pressure suit, Arrach trekked further each day in his hunt for worms. The twenty foot fronds had quickly shrivelled into hollow husks as brittle as dried clay, their bright colours fading almost overnight into a uniform deathly grey, like dirty snow. Dead plant life, humped in deceptively solid-looking hills and mounds, blocked his way. It also became clear that living creatures were perilously scarce about the swamps, since every passing body left its mark.

Concerned at the shortage of raw materials for the food reprocessor, Arrach decided to shift the module further south in the hope of finding fresh reserves of food. Then, close enough to his twelve month deadline, he switched on the May Day beacon and hoped for a speedy response. Even so, he knew that things were becoming desperate.

Arrach flew the module as far south as it would go. When the warning blip showed that he had virtually run out of fuel, he selected a suitable spot on the ashy tundra and landed. The module settled slowly onto the thick vegetation, but when Arrach stepped out he saw that it was dead — frost-bitten and dry — and it crunched beneath his feet like brittle finger-bones. A cold wind sighed across the wastes, strengthening ominously as if it was only the herald of worse to come. Shivering despite the protection of his suit, Arrach retreated into his module.

Autumn had arrived. An autumn to make autumn on Earth seem like the high point of summer.

While winter — a grim, bleak, six month winter — was still on its way; the first real tastes of just what it would be like were not yet even hinted at.

With no further raw materials on hand for the food recycler, Arrach had to rely on a steadily diminishing supply of food. And it didn't take him long, even without the aid of his computers, to work out that he would very soon be in serious trouble.

He was reluctant to face just how serious this was, even so, and it was a while before he could bring himself round to programming in the details to find out just how much food he had. The harsh truth shocked him. Even on short rations, he would exhaust what food the reprocessor could supply within a month. After that he would starve.

Unless he was rescued first. Even at his most optimistic, he had no hope of being rescued so soon. On an out-of-the-way system like this it would be six months, probably longer still, before

he could reach anyone. In six months, though, he'd be dead. A dehydrated, mummified corpse, perfectly preserved in the bacteria-free environment of the module.

Rankling at his fatal cleverness in delaying so long before making his May Day call, Arrach fell into a fit of depression. For a week he did nothing but brood, totally convinced that he was irretrievably doomed. His eyes gazed vacantly at the monitor screens, where his one hope seemed to lie, waiting for the glimmer of an approaching spacecraft.

Finally pulling himself together with an effort of will that all but exhausted him, Arrach decided to make a sustained attempt at finding some way to keep himself alive for as long as he could.

His only real problem was that he had to give himself time.

That was all.

But how?

Six weeks later this question had grown to monstrous proportions as the first pangs of starvation began to bite at his stomach. He had searched for as far as he could in a day, and had found nothing but crisp, dead, disintegrating threads of vegetation —

all that remained of the mossy grasses that had grown in abundance in this area only months ago. Icy winds had brought the temperature plummeting down towards zero, then down even further, but nowhere near as far as it would drop when winter set in. The real winter. Arrach wasn't concerned about this; he would be dead a long time before then unless he found himself something to eat.

He ceased to go out once it was obvious that he was wasting his time and energy. Now he rarely ventured from his couch; there wasn't room enough to move around much inside the module in any case. He lay there, watching movies or reading, but his attention wandered and his thoughts turned introspectively to ponder his fate, and the growing ache of hunger in his stomach.

His salvation, when it came, was an accident.

To begin with, he didn't even realise that he had already bitten upon a possible solution to his dilemma, not while he was chewing the hard skin at the edge of his fingernails, gnawing with an unconscious tenacity which only made itself obvious to him when he felt a burning sensation of pain and realised that he'd bitten deeper than he should and drawn blood. For a moment he stared at the chewed finger with a vague comprehension of what he had been doing. The blood from the wound trickled hot in deep red beads that dripped onto his trousers for a minute or more before he moved. Then Arrach was overwhelmed by the thought that had suddenly struck him.

His mind flashed back over a story by a popular twentieth (or was it twenty-first?) century writer he had once read. It had been about a man stranded on a barren island with nothing but a horde of heroin. To save himself from starvation, the man used the heroin as a pain-killer while he carried out minor pieces of surgery on himself — cutting off a foot, then another foot, then a bit of his leg, then another bit, eating what he cut off to keep himself going for a little while longer as he waited for a passing boat to rescue him.

How much could a man consume of himself and live?

That was the question.

Motivation and will were the answers found in the story. But Arrach knew better. There were also the means. A man with a scalpel and a crude, pain-killing drug could only do so much. But a man with a highly sophisticated medication couch could do an awful lot more. His stomach clenched involuntarily, but his thoughts were racing ahead with crystalline clarity. Nothing so dramatic as a foot. Not yet. There was a lot inside the body that he could do without first. The spleen, his appendix, one of his kidneys, one lung, probably a lot of intestine and a few other bits and pieces too. Fed into the food recycler, they would be returned to him as anything he wanted, their origins hidden completely. Retrieved from his waste products they could be recycled several times over until finally they diminished to negligible amounts and he would be forced to replenish them with further raw material.

He knew that the medication couch could follow his pre-set instructions while he slept in a drug-induced oblivion.

So sharp was his hunger, that the thought of a good square meal, even at the expense of a few bits and pieces inside him, made his mouth start to water. No pain, no danger, just a nice long sleep while the machinery did the rest, putting right afterwards what it had done and patching him up with an efficiency few human surgeons could surpass.

A few more weeks of life. That was what it would bring.

A few more weeks of hope.

*He never even felt a thing.*

A week later, he felt hungry again, and the pleasure of those few days of food were already a dim memory.

Arrach knew that he would have to repeat the process. The success of the first operation filled him with confidence. The machinery was efficient, moreover, it was safe. It would follow any order he fed into it with infallible ease. Perhaps this time he could leave a bit more discretion to the machinery, since the information already stored inside its memory bank was far greater than his knowledge of his own anatomy and it would know better than he did what parts it could safely remove from him. He would have to ensure that certain parts of him were left untouched, like his arms and legs, his eyes, ears, nose, teeth, tongue and his genitals, too, since it might well assume that these were expendable.

When he awoke he felt different. For an instant he was paralysed with terror, certain that something had gone drastically wrong. He was even too frightened to move in case he found that the machine had amputated his arms and legs, despite his instructions. Even the best equipment could go wrong at times, his mind screamed at him in an almost paranoid panic.

Something had to be missing though, he told himself. Just what this something was he didn't know. Something useless, something he could well do without, something he wouldn't even miss. Something surplus to requirements, he thought, with a cold-blooded and desperate attempt at humour. Graveyard humour. His stomach muscles clenched and unclenched with nervousness as he slowly moved his arms and legs and eased himself up on the couch, feeling about his body with dread tingling in the tips of his fingers.

It was only when he looked in the mirror that he noticed the change. At first he thought it was in his

**"How much of himself could a man consume, and live? That was the question"**

eyes — in the way that they focussed — since his head looked narrow and flat, as if the top of his skull had been sliced off, a bit taken away and the top put back on again and sewn into place.

**H**is hands leapt up to his hairline and traced the tell-tale stitches that trailed across the shallow dome of his skull.

Surplus to requirements.

The phrase returned to mock him. The most nutritious part of the body. Much of the brain was, in fact, surplus to requirements. What the machine must have done, he supposed, was to take away those large sections of brain tissue he didn't need, together with any surplus bone needed to house them, then it had resculpted his head to fit what was left, even thought it made him look like a Neanderthal ape man reborn in the twenty-fifth century. He felt across the tiny dome of his skull — so impossibly small...

He groaned, horrified at the obscene intelligence that stared back at him in the mirror from a head that looked too shallow even for the brains of an ape.

A gentle hum sounded from the food recycling machine.

A stab of pain in his stomach reminded him of his hunger.

A hunger that could now be appeased...

Whether it was the shock of what had already been done or whether some small part of surplus brain tissue that the machine had removed contained his last inhibition against going any further, or whether desperation at the imminence of starvation drove him to it, the next few weeks saw even more drastic operations to replenish his stocks of food. Now that his looks — such as they were — had been shattered by the re-arrangement of his skull, Arrach was less scrupulous about losing other, hitherto inviolable parts of his body. The next to go were his feet, now useless to him, trapped as he was in the cramped space of the module as frozen winds wailed across the planet surface outside. As always, the medication couch remoulded the parts that were left so that they had the appearance of naturalness. Neatly rounded, pinkish stumps temporarily ended his legs just below his knees, before he allowed the machine to remove the rest.

His mind, like that of an obsessed anorectic, began to take a perverse pleasure in studying the shrinking of his limbs. Whether more of his brain was removed in future sessions on the couch he didn't know, though something inside it had either been cut away from him or had snapped.

**B**efore long, he sacrificed one of his arms and most of the fingers of his remaining hand, since he didn't need all of them. Just as he only needed one eye, one ear... and most of his nose, ear lobe, lips and buttocks were surplus as well.

Bit by bit. More and more. So painlessly. And so beautifully patched.

His mind marvelled at the perfection of the surgery performed by the machine on his body.

So overwhelmed was he by the bizarre fascination of it all that he even forgot after a while why it had started, wondering instead just how much further it could go...

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The landing craft followed the May Day beacon through the sultry atmosphere of Aubarch 6. The tumultuous plant life that had erupted from the thawing earth was ablaze with colour. Though invisible beneath the towering fronds that had

engulfed it, the life module had been tracked down easily because of its incessant call for help, picked up in deep space over three weeks ago.

In fact Lieutenant Nadler only saw it as his own craft slowly settled beside it, crushing the luxuriant vegetation to one side.

'Watch out for swamp worms,' the voice of his commander warned him over his helmet intercom. 'Keep your gun handy. They're fast and dangerous, even if they haven't any eyes.'

'Okay, commander.'

Nadler climbed out and cautiously lowered himself to the ground. The life module had come through the planet's winter remarkably well. Its painted metal shell was badly scratched, but what damage there was seemed only to be superficial, the kind of wear and tear he would have expected.

'No reply yet, commander,' he called back over his radio.

'If there is anyone left alive in there. They might have been killed hunting for food. Or starved. Those craft don't carry enough supplies to keep going for long, even with a recycler. Six months, a year at the most. Our records show that more than a year has elapsed since the beacon was first switched on.'

'There's still a chance, sir,' Nadler added, though he hadn't much hope. If anyone was still alive in there they would have surely made some signal by now. He stumbled through the coiled roots of plant life to the entrance bay, and operated the opening control panel. He stepped back, gun held ready, as cool air wafted out of the module and the door slid open. The pale light from inside contrasted oddly with the richness of Aubarch's deep red sunlight. For a moment Nadler hesitated. Reassured by the absence of any movement inside the module, he climbed up the short steel ladder and stepped into it.

'Nothing here, commander,' he said, surveying the interior. His fingers relaxed their grip on his gun and he prepared to climb across the command seat to switch off the beacon. Its red warning light blinked on and off, as it must have done for over a year. For how much of that time had it been signalling uselessly, he wondered, the occupants of the life module being already dead?

**A** sudden movement caught the corner of his eye. He spun round, startled. Horrified at the unexpected hideousness of what he saw crawling across the cabin towards him he cried out and fired an erratic stream of laser blasts towards it. Sparks zinged from the metal panels behind the creature, filling the repurified air of the module with acrid streamers of smoke. Despite the inaccuracy of his shots, one of them hit it, flinging it back in a twitching, howling mass of agony. Nadler's finger clenched hard against the trigger as he fired again, incinerating the creature's chest in a coruscating halo of heat that melted the metal panels behind it, exposing, then burning, the wires underneath in belches of smoke.

'God, oh God!'

'What is it? Nadler! Answer me! What is it?'

The harsh voice of his commander cut through Nadler's panic.

'A swamp worm, commander. Nearly got me. Waiting here. Ready to pounce. The bastard!'

He kicked the dead body of the creature; its short, thick, limbless body and featureless head were almost human in outline, though it had no nose or ears, only a slit of a mouth and one dead glaring eye, set queerly off centre on its head.

**"Sparks zinged from the metal panels behind the creature, filling the repurified air of the module with acrid streamers of smoke"**



Our first US reader story...

# SO THE DEAD WALK SLOWLY

By  
Jeff Vandermeer

**T**he sea spills dark and dangerous over the shore's lip, sucking up stray light from beach-side condos and hotels. Hiram Alexander stumble-runs out of the water: a Stravinsky lashed by the flaming reds of passion, nonstop and rewindable. He reaches dry land, almost falls.

'Thank God,' he splutters, seaweed draped across his shoulders like mink.


The next words erupt from his mouth, accompanied by salt water.

'That Goddamned, motherfucking son-of-a-bitch is dead. Dead!'

The man's limbs are wrinkled, as if twisted by a taffy machine, and his hair is a wet mop-head. The tuxedo, stained green and waterlogged, has lost its bow-tie; lodged in the droopy ruffles are anemones, coquina. The silk pants will shrink when dry, and the shoes — Hiram discarded them when his yacht blew up. Perhaps his clothes would have lasted longer if he had not been so close to the Gulf Stream and its shadow, the Sargasso Sea. For hours after he dove over the side, burned and in shock, he kept himself afloat by lying atop the thick mat of weeds. He has no recollection of working his way free from the current, but at one point he vaguely remembers going under. The memories of flailing out, of being trapped in the weed, are distant and fading.

Eyes sloshing in their fish-nibbled sockets, Hiram glares at the shoreward wall of lights, the Quality Inns and Sea Slumber Motels, the bar lounges and miniature golf courses. Around him, ghost crabs gather, drawn to one of their own. Hiram drops rags of wet flesh when he walks and these scavengers eat him in whatever amounts he allows.

Luck and determination have deposited him halfway between his two largest hotel acquisitions:



**"Roger inserted a blade in his razor and worked silently, almost enjoying the feel of a sharp edge against his throat"**

the Hilton and the Don Cesar, the twin pillars of Florida's St Petersburg Beach. The Hilton resembles a fat Apollo booster rocket stuck upside down in the sand. To Hiram's right, the Don Cesar rises like a museum, a Spanish mission, the pink stucco flawless under soft lighting.

Hiram strokes his chin with one rotting hand, eyes narrowing to slits. Where would Roger celebrate? He considers the question, then shrugs and heads for the Don Cesar. Intuition tells him he's right.

'Your ass is grass,' Hiram Alexander announces to the world.

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The toilet flushed and Roger 'Your ass is grass' Alexander, wearing only a white beach towel, turned to the mirror. He had taken a shower, but beads of sweat already collected on his brow. He put it down to humidity, choosing to ignore the steady hum of the air-conditioner. Roger inserted a blade in his razor and worked silently, almost enjoying the feel of a sharp edge against his throat. It steadied his hands, forced him to concentrate.

Steadiness was the order of the day. He had to appear both grief-stricken and in control. The funeral itself had been a near disaster; he had come off too cold. Now, with a board meeting on the agenda, he had to keep the old man's cronies off-balance, on his side. No need for a stink. The Coast Guard, inside sources assured Roger, was ready to write off the explosion as an accidental fuel leak.

He frowned into the mirror. Heredity had been kind to him but environment had not. The nose might at one time have been handsome, but it had been broken and healed crooked. A pale scar ran across the left cheek. 'Ya not gonna kill the ladies, man,' the fifth floor janitor had said once, 'but you sure as hell is gonna scare 'em.' Still, his raven hair, emerald eyes and firm chin rescued him from the oblivion of plainness.

The toilet rumbled with faulty plumbing, a low burbling *so...* Almost syllabic. Almost speech.

*So...* A tic in Roger's left cheek began to work in and out as a phrase bubbled up from memory. It was a phrase he had tried hard to understand when younger and laboured to forget when grown up. *So the dead walk slowly? They still catch up in the end.* A guest had said it after Roger's mother died — at the funeral, with the rich kid tag-alongs and the older mafiosi types crowded around. There had been a sense of carnival that day, a sense of celebration waiting to break free. Hiram did not disappoint, downing beers and dancing with women long into the moonless night. Roger could still feel a hot, pulsing knot rise in his throat, remembering. Rosa dead and Hiram dancing.

Roger sighed, guilty about not feeling guilty. The bastard deserved whatever he got, he told himself. Hiram, the pseudo-intellectual, the man who counted money among his friends, had run his business with a low animal cunning, not scholarship. To Roger, it was an outrage that his corpseless coffin rested next to his mother's. The penthouse, resplendent with tokens of Hiram's existence — paintings, records, papers — had been swept clean. Now only a photograph of Rosa, from a rare, smiling moment, remained. In the picture she sat at the piano, playing, perhaps, a piece of Stravinsky or Mozart. She had loved both, her face solemn and cold for the Requiem Mass, breaking into laughter when she missed a key. When he

looked at the photograph, he could almost see Hiram's shadow, somehow hovering, waiting to dispel the smile beneath the emerald eyes.

Roger returned to shaving; the slick, silver blade shook in his hand. No, it was his hand that was shaking. He bit his lip. Hiram was ten days' dead, along with his crew — for which Roger was desperately sorry — but still he could not get over it. He had seen the remains of the yacht when it had been tugged in; the delicate spray of blood on white paint, the ragged edges where the metal had been sheared off. The whole business had been more violent than he had imagined it.

He brought the razor to his throat — and slipped, gouging a tiny goblet of flesh from his neck. It stung. The blood trickled down his chest and dribbled into the sink. The dark streak, the pain, mesmerised him and, somehow, braced his confidence. Roger watched the porcelain turn red.

After a while, he began to get dressed.

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Hiram has an epiphany of a morbid kind. He enters the Don Cesar through a service door, feet scuffing the carpet, crunching ghost crabs under his tread, and comes face to face with a mirror.

'Mary of Saints!' he hisses.

Though he lays no claim to divinity, his reflection is hazy, almost incomplete. And he can see — really *observe* — that ribs stick through patches in his tuxedo, that his skull has peeled back the flesh concealing it. He notices details: the ring on his left index finger clicks against bone; his eyes are soft-boiled eggs, soon to lose any illusion of solidity. His hand rises to touch his face — the grinning teeth, the open wound of his nose — but he quickly drops it, as though ashamed. This... this is a farce, a nightmare. His reflection fades, but another thought takes hold and the edges of his body fan out in sharp detail.

*Roger killed me? He killed me. Me! Jesus Christ on a stick!*

He cannot remember the evidence by which he convicts his son, but he is a fanatic concerning its accuracy. Roger is responsible.

With Stravinsky winnowing its way into his flesh, the Fire Bird his theme song, Hiram strides down corridors, brushing past hotel guests; they shiver from a sudden chill of fear across the smalls of their backs, and he is gone.

The crystal chandeliers, the gold-leaf chairs, other decorations worthy of Versailles — he has seen them all before and now is thinking... burning... thinking. His jaw bone, truly set, juts through the insubstantial flesh. Rosa would not have approved of revenge, and this is why her spirit does not haunt him.

Roger's penthouse lies on the fifth floor. Hiram formulates a plan. By the time he reaches his son's quarters, he is muttering, 'Knick knack, paddy whack,' aware that he no longer needs to breathe, but he does so out of habit. He knocks at the door. When there is no answer, he cracks a splinter of bone from his little finger, picks the lock, and enters...

Roger's tuxedo-clad reflection in the mirror was joined by a tattered parody. Roger screamed, spun around, and stared into his father's eyes. His heart pounded a message into his arteries and veins: *My father, father my, my father, father my...*

When the corpse broke into speech, Roger heard nothing. He watched the paper-thin lips move, but

**"So the dead walk slowly? They still catch up in the end"**

heard nothing.

Can this possibly be real? He thought beneath his panic. He watched as a tooth, fixed by gristle, came loose, fell onto the tiles and soon became covered with ghost crabs. Their presence, moving with purpose and as one, frightened Roger as much as the look on his father's face. A spark of obsession had wrenched the already-twisted features; the fact that it was there at all convinced him that: *This is my father.* Dad? Hiram? Surely the man would slough off his half-burnt disguise and appear, alive and full of venom, but at least *alive*? Then the code broke, a phrase ripped from Hiram's lips, perhaps Roger had placed it there: 'So the dead walk slowly.'

The sweet smell of rotting flesh began to fill the room. Suddenly, focusing on that phrase, Roger was no longer afraid. He felt a tinge of anger, his mouth tightening, eyes rising to meet Hiram's.

Rosa must have walked slowly, one leg lacerated by a broken bottle, when she went down to keep her appointment with death — on the rush hour highway, slammed between two cars. She must have known what she was doing, despite the absence of a suicide note, and Roger knew who had driven her to it.

'What about my mother?' he said, voice rough, a tightness in his throat.

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Hiram trails off into silence. He recognises the dark gleam in Roger's eyes (he has seen it in his own), and scowls, skin stretched taut.

'Rosa? What does Rosa have to do with this?'

Memories, shaken and stirred by the surf, desert his flesh, but he remembers her. Rosa of the raven hair, just like Roger, though with more fragile sensibilities. He had treated her with a firm but loving hand.

'What do you think Rosa has to do with this?' Roger says, mimicking Hiram's tone.

Hiram retreats from Roger's contempt, backstepping in a bizarre dance which Roger copies. They enter the main room. It has a bar, a dumb waiter, a Steinway, and spotless windows which open out onto the beach and the skyline.

'Here,' says Roger, tossing a framed photograph at Hiram. 'Remember?'

Hiram catches it, a finger bone is neatly flensed in the attempt. On glimpsing the woman's face in the photograph, his anger loses its hard-edge and becomes diffuse. The portrait drops from his hand, glass cracking on the carpet. He gasps and slouches — aware of his son's face above him — and falls into a chair, set back but facing the water. Roger follows and stands over him, his face set with business-merger firmness. All of this is going dreadfully wrong.

'Knick knock, paddy whack,' Hiram whispers, 'tear out your bloody bones, this old man has come on home.'

He knows now that old nursery rhymes, though twisted and horrid, will bring no measure of revenge. Roger is not afraid.

His son shakes his head. 'The words are wrong, father. The words are wrong.'

Father. The ghost crabs, the surgeons who help him to misremember, gently sever tissue. He is younger, much younger, bouncing Roger on his knee. The child giggles and Hiram croons nursery rhymes as they play: 'Papa's gonna buy you a mockingbird, and if that mockingbird don't sing,

Papa's gonna buy you a diamond ring...'

The room is airy and bright and Rosa reflects this when she enters, fresh and smiling, the ring on her finger less than one year old. She kisses him lightly on the cheek, the scent of lilacs and lilies on her breath. She sits at the piano. *What should I play?* Stravinsky. Only Stravinsky. *Again?* Yes. *Again, then.* She smiles, brings her fingers to the keys. The fingers flutter and the music begins. They laugh as Roger looks on with wide, blank eyes. *Poor mockingbird.*

Yes, yes, he thinks. *That is the way it was.* How can his son betray him? Roger has moved to the window and Hiram, glancing up, sees the straightness of his son's back, the guarded shoulders. A hint of the Fire Bird lilt behind his eyes and he glares at Roger. His son turns to face him.

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His son turned to face him and thought, my father makes a laughably grotesque ghost. Laughable, perhaps, but Rosa had tried to escape him through death and here Hiram was, dead, but still in a strange way living.

Roger held an empty glass in his hand; if he grasped it tightly enough it steadied his shaking. His throat dry, breath harsh, he said what he wanted to say.

'She loved you.'

He sat down close to the window, staring out across the coastline, Hiram at his back. Clouds crossed the moon and, below, the surf flashed green-white. A storm lingered somewhere on the horizon.

He glanced over at his father, hands clasped in front of him. 'She loved you. You. You were grotesque.'

Roger could see the skull beneath the flesh as the head swung towards him. The voice, when it came, was low, clear and controlled.

'Grotesque? You murdered me! I was alive in the Sargasso for three days. No chance. No chance at all.'

'You killed my mother. So I decided to kill you.'

Hiram did not hear the whisper, the rasp. He rose from his chair. 'Your own father! Explain that to me!' He jabbed his chest with an index finger. The tip crumbled to dust. So did part of his breast bone.

Roger stifled a mad, mad smile. His father was falling apart.

'You old bastard,' he said, almost laughing. 'I tried to love you.'

He watched Hiram's reflection in the black window glass as the apparition approached. It looked impossibly tall, a distorted photographic negative. Roger grimaced when wet bone slapped against his shoulder; when the hand clamped so hard he couldn't be sure that the crimson ooze surrounding the clasp was Hiram's and not his own.

He tried to rise, and failed.

'Stop it!' he gasped.

Hiram did not stop. Roger shut his eyes and moaned, body jerking.

'Why did you have me killed? Was it the money?'

The grip tightened and Roger, crying now, opened his eyes and shrieked. The lights beyond the windows swirled, his hands felt like wooden blocks on the chair arms. Through the



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**"He had seen the remains of the yacht when it had been tugged in; the delicate spray of blood on white paint..."**

agony, images came, clear as glass, of the times he had spent locked in the closet, the sounds (slap of flesh, crack of bone), all the things he had, all the senseless toys and cash gifts for grades, and the huge, empty house on the hill where their arguments and Hiram's violence could echo and reach only a boy's ears. (Sometimes the closet would open, *very* quietly.) The police never bothered the eccentric wealthy, especially when their palms were greased. (His father would be standing there, trembling with rage.)

*You hurt me.* He thought as Hiram's reflection bent over him. *Me, not mother.* The thought was a scream in his mind, a wretched, selfish pain he had never recognised before. *Me not Rosa.* But he couldn't bring himself to say it, not feeling the closet all around him, not feeling that the violence had started again.

'Why shouldn't I kill you?' Hiram's breath stank of salt.

Still he couldn't say it. 'You... Killed... Rosa.'

Roger gritted his teeth, waiting for the blow he knew must fall, that had always fallen before.

But instead, Hiram's grip loosened.

'No...'

Roger wrenched away, stood up and faced the spectre; his jaw clenched as he repeated the words.

'You killed Rosa.'

The innocent, stricken look on Hiram's face was almost comical.

'She committed suicide. I did all I...'

'You killed her,' he repeated, his left arm limp by his side. 'You have no heart.'

As though possessed, Roger stepped forward and punched his father in the chest. Bones snapped, and Hiram fell backwards. Roger's hand withdrew, pulling out... nothing but seaweed, dead fish. Roger held up the debris.

'I loved you,' he said, voice trembling. 'But you have no heart.'

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Hiram screams, and searches with a shaking hand, pushing aside ribs, lungs.

'No!'

His left eye pops from its socket as he realises his son is right: he has no heart. Crazy, enraged, he smashes against a side table. He sees Roger, and then Rosa, smiling up at him from the photograph on the floor; he moans and scrabbles at his second eye. It comes loose and the crabs fight for it when it rolls to a stop on the carpet. Now blind, he sees better than before.

'I — no! I didn't *do* anything to her,' he screams. 'I swear it! She made me.'

But he sees his wife, her face purpled with bruises, tear-stained, clutching the locket he gave her at their wedding, and for the first time he feels shame.

Drowning. He is drowning all over again, choking on the weed and bile, on salt water. Vaguely aware that he is still in the Don Cesar, his eyelids flutter and his arms flail out for support, but they

find none. His legs pump, trying to touch bottom, any bottom, before it is too late. Finally, he feels solid ground, his eyes flicker open, and he realises that he is twenty fathoms below the surface. His shrieks leave him in bubbles, pop up under gray skies and explode in tiny combustions of sound.

Enough, he thinks. Enough. Hiram understands

why he has been called from the sea, from the weed and weightlessness. He understands the true nature of horror now. A sickening-sad grin spreads across his face. Mozart's Requiem Mass takes the place of Stravinsky, his body is heavy with water and fatigue. He stares in the direction of his son, the feelers of the ghost crabs guide him as effectively as a cane.

'I'm sorry,' he says in a hollow voice. He can feel the hole where his heart once beat. He can feel the tiny vibrations of the ghost crabs as their hearts go *thudder thump, thump thudder.*

'I'm sorry.'

Flesh deserts him ever faster. Claws stab, pinch and saw.

Hiram shuffles to the door, collapsing in on himself, and says, without turning back, 'She made... I never... knew. Never thought.' His voice is thinner than the wind rising on the sea. He raises his head to catch a hint of salt in the air, thinking: *This old man is rolling home.* Then he is out the door, crabs with him.

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Roger was alone, mouth open, hand clenched around the glass. Shivering, and shaking his head, he poured gin. The liquid sloshed over the rim and trickled onto his hands. He sighed, drank, shuddered, and drank again, before lowering himself into the window seat.

He did not know how he should feel. Happy or sad? All he knew was that he ached all over. He slumped in the chair. A dream — he would label it a dream if it were not for the powdered fingertip on the carpet, the carapace of crab, the agonised throbbing of his shoulder blade.

He laughed — a crazy giggle — downed the gin, and then refilled his glass.

He watched the storm forming over the coastline. Far below his window, palm trees, caught by the light of the Hilton and Don Cesar, bent and swayed. Soon it would be dawn and frigate birds would knife their way through the rough weather. Perhaps at dawn he might find the strength to tell the truth — to tell the authorities that he had planted the bomb on Hiram's yacht.

**S**ighing, he picked Rosa's picture up from the floor and set it back on the table.

Tomorrow, he promised himself, he would visit his father's corpseless grave and place a wreath there — and on Rosa's, of course. He would do that much.

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Hiram Alexander stumbles towards the water. The ghost crabs have abandoned him. Now it is the wind that scrapes and whips pieces from his body. Requiem Mass drags through his head, slowly dissolving into memory, and memory crumbles into grains of sand. Knee deep in the sea, he pitches forward, bones separating one from the other and disintegrating. The bones will drift, then sink to the sea floor. Squid will make a home of his collar bone. Eel will hollow out his spine. A thousand protozoa will feast on his marrows.

If Hell exists, Hiram will be there. All that he hopes, with the fiercest hope his remaining cells allow, is that Rosa will not be there with him.

Then his skull — tossed this way and that by the currents — tumbles to the bottom of the ocean, and is soon insensate and picked clean.

**"The ring on his left index finger clinks against bone; his eyes are soft-boiled eggs, soon to lose any illusion of solidity"**



# THE TOP FLOOR

BY SARA J TOWNSEND

**"There  
seemed to be  
something  
irregular  
about the  
place;  
nothing I  
could put my  
finger on,  
but..."**

*For Aaron Solomon and Ian Allen, who first heard about it, and Paul Raines, who lives on the fourteenth floor*

**W**hat's so funny?' Tony asked, a puzzled expression on his face.

He was sitting in the battered armchair in our living room, watching me roll around on the settee in hysterical laughter.

'You are,' I replied, when finally I had managed to calm down. 'You're such a comedian, Tony old pal.'

'I'm serious,' Tony said.

'So, you taking your mum with you when you go, then? Or are you just moving out for the weekends?'

'You don't believe me, do you?'

'Tony, you and me have been best friends for how long now? Ten years?' I was still sniggering. 'In all that time you've never done the shopping, or the laundry and you've never washed the pots. How are you going to manage on your own? You won't find beans on toast in a recipe book, you know.'

Tony smiled and leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head. 'I've decided I need my own space — you know, parties every weekend, that sort of thing. I want to be able to sit and watch the match in peace with a couple of cases of lager, bring home a different girl every night. Women like a man with his own place. They like the swinging bachelor image.'

I smiled. 'So you're an expert on the fairer sex now are you, as well as the independent life?'

'Romeo Tony-o, that's me,' he grinned.

'I bet twenty quid you won't last a week.'

Tony stuck out his hand. 'All right, you're on. Twenty quid.'

After a moment's hesitation, I duly shook it.

'You really are serious about this aren't you?'

'I've already found somewhere,' he replied cockily.

'Where?' I asked, unable to take in all these little surprises at once.

'It's a flat on the other side of town. A bit out of the way, I suppose, but a very good price. I went to see it last week, and signed the papers then and there. I move in on the first of October.'

'I still think you'll be back home by the seventh, with a bag full of laundry and a junk-food complexion.'

Tony smiled confidently. 'We'll see about that,' he said.

I lost my twenty pounds. Tony phoned me a week and a half after he had moved in.

'Why don't you bring the money round Friday night,' he suggested. 'Then you can see the place for yourself. I'll get some booze in and a couple of videos.'

I was curious to see Tony's flat. He'd been pretty secretive about it so far. So after work on Friday I grabbed a bite to eat at McDonald's, and headed over to Tony's. He had given me the address and directions over the telephone. It seemed strange to me that I recognised hardly any of the street names. I had lived in the same relatively small town all the twenty-two years of my life, and I thought I knew it inside out. But once I had turned off Caroline Street, I was completely lost; only Tony's directions, written down in my own scribbled handwriting, made me continue my search.

Finally I found the right place. It was an old, drab block of flats, part of a small estate comprised of shabby buildings, tiny alleyways and cobblestone roads, hidden amongst the trees just off a quiet country road that didn't seem to be part of the town at all. I drove right past the turning before I noticed it was there.

I parked my ten-year-old Ford in the pot-holed car park and sat there for a minute gazing up at the building and wondering why in God's name Tony had taken a fancy to such a depressing place. The block towered for twelve or thirteen floors, the exterior was brown, dirty and neglected. Uniform windows crawled up each side of the building in parallel lines, behind which could be seen tattered curtains or Venetian blinds. Rusted balconies, with washing lines hung across them or children's

tricycle wheels poking through the railings, were arranged in a column up one side. There seemed to be something irregular about the place; nothing I could put my finger on, but...

I got out of the car, taking care to lock it (the area didn't look all that safe to me), and walked over to the building. The noise of traffic on some distant motorway was faintly audible, but apart from that, everything seemed to be rather quiet.

As I reached the lobby I saw a large, middle-aged woman pushing a pram with two young children by her side. She was trying to heave her belongings, kids and all, through the lobby door. I helped to hold it open for her and she thanked me with a mumbled, 'Ta, love,' and stepped outside. The two children giggled between themselves as they raced for a battered red Escort in the car park. I let the door fall shut and walked down the corridor to the stairs.

I don't like lifts. Once, when I was five years old, I got stuck in one. I was in there for three hours, alone and scared and enclosed, before somebody heard me yelling and came to my rescue. I have never forgotten that feeling, and ever since then I have tried to avoid lifts wherever possible.

The ground floor corridor was carpeted with a faded, red nylon carpet that absorbed the sound of my footsteps. The doors of the flats were dark brown, rectangular stains on bland coloured walls. They lined both sides, and I felt as if I was walking past cells in a prison, not people's homes.

The building was completely silent. A phrase from a school text floated lazily into my head: 'The silence was deafening.' I had never paid much attention to that particular phrase before; it had seemed a silly contradiction to me. But it described that corridor perfectly. The silence was so overpowering that it drowned out everything else.

I reached the stairwell at the end of the corridor and started to climb up to the ninth floor. I reached flat number 912 without seeing or hearing a soul, and by then it had struck me as very odd that the building was so dead. It was a Friday night, after all. Surely I should have heard a radio, voices behind a door, seen somebody on their way out to the pub, or a party?

I raised my fist and rapped on the door. The noise resounded through the silent corridor. I shivered involuntarily.

'Damn it, Tony — where are you?'

I knocked again, and stared at the drab wooden door, willing it to open. It stubbornly remained closed. I compared the number on the door with the one on the piece of paper I pulled out of my pocket. Tony had said number 912 over the 'phone, and that was what I'd written down, that was the number on the door in front of me. It was the right flat, and Tony knew I was coming. So where the hell was he?

Could it be that he had forgotten? I was beginning to feel a bit of a prat standing there in the middle of the corridor staring at the door and I was just thinking about going back to my car and waiting for him there, when I heard someone call out from the end of the corridor. It was a female voice, very clear and distinct, and it said, 'Paul!'

I whirled around, startled by the sudden noise and by the fact that someone in this strange place knew my name. Then I saw a girl walking towards me. She was small, a bit on the thin side, with long legs encased in tight-fitting jeans. She moved gracefully, almost appearing to float along. She

**"I whirled around, startled by the sudden noise and by the fact that someone in this strange place knew my name"**

had pale blonde hair that hung limply to her shoulders, and she appeared to be about nineteen years old. She looked at me expectantly, as if she was waiting for me to say something. She obviously knew me, but I couldn't recall ever having seen her before.

'Er... hello,' I said awkwardly.

'Hello,' she said pleasantly. 'What's up?'

She halted a foot away and gazed at me intently. I noticed that her eyes were strangely fascinating. They were a very light blue, small and dull, almost lifeless. Her face was unhealthily pale.

Er... my friend... I gestured vaguely towards the door. 'He invited me round, but he's out.'

'I'm sure he won't be gone long,' the girl said. She was still staring at me, and I could feel myself sweating. It was as if she could see right into my soul. 'But if you don't want to wait out her in the hall, you can always come up to my flat for a while. Oh... my parents are home,' she added quickly.

I blinked and stepped back, not sure whether I was more surprised at the sudden invitation, or the fact that she seemed to have picked up on the rather unipious thought that had just crossed my mind.

'My brother came home today you see and...' She trailed off uncertainly. 'If you'd rather not, that's all right.'

'Well, it's just that Tony'll probably be here any minute, and I should wait here, so he knows where I am,' I mumbled.

She shrugged. 'Well, if you change your mind, you know where to find me. See you later, Paul.' She headed towards the stairs.

'Wait!'

All of a sudden I found myself calling after her.

She paused and turned around.

'Where can I find you?' I asked lamely.

The smile she gave me looked out of place on such a sickly face.

'The top floor, of course,' she said sweetly.

'Of course,' I said uncertainly.

I watched her as she vanished from sight. Then, after a moment's hesitation, I went after her. To this day, I'm not exactly sure why.

I started to climb the stairs. As I passed the twelfth floor, I started to wonder just how far up the top floor was; it couldn't be much further, but still there were stairs stretching up above me. The building hadn't seemed all that big from the outside—but then again, I thought, things aren't always what they seem.

As I started up the next flight, my trainers made a dull thud on the strip of grooved rubber which covered the metal steps. When I was almost at the top my foot caught in a big hole in the rubber, and I stumbled. Three steps later, the staircase stopped short in front of a door. Scratched in the peeling grey paint which all but covered the door was the number 13 in large and careless characters.

I reached out to put my hand on the metal handle. As I touched it, a mild, electric charge coursed through my body, and I drew my hand away quickly. After a moment's hesitation I replaced it carefully. Nothing happened. Uneasily, I opened the door.

I started down the corridor cautiously, almost afraid of disturbing the ominous silence. Suddenly the air was split by a terrified scream, and I stopped dead. I stood there motionless for a brief moment, wondering whether to stay and find the

source of the scream or run like hell.

The scream came again, and I realised that it was coming from behind the next door along. Something compelled me to take a few more steps forwards. I was now able to read the number on the door: 1313.

As I stood there staring stupidly, the door flew open. The girl I had encountered downstairs was clutching desperately at the door jamb, her pale eyes wide with terror. Behind her a hulking figure loomed, a tall heavy-set man with wild, tousled hair. He had the appearance of a young man with the exception of his eyes, which were strange, crazed... and very old.

'Paul!' the girl cried out. 'Help me! Please!'

She reached clawed fingers out to me. The man behind her had one muscular arm tightly around her waist, and he hauled her roughly away from the door frame. They stood in the doorway for a split second, like a freeze frame from a horror film, the girl helplessly flailing her arms in terror. Her captor wore a look of maniacal fury and he held aloft a large kitchen knife. A thick red fluid dripping from it slowly, spreading a dark stain across the threadbare carpet of the corridor.

I remained rooted to the spot, unable to do anything but watch in helpless terror as the man brought the knife down and swiftly lopped off the girl's head. It rolled across the floor, like some bizarre and gruesome football, and came to rest near me, the dead eyes staring up at me in terror, lips parted in an eternal scream.

I stepped back in horror, and stumbled over something else on the floor. I turned quickly to see what it was. Pieces of bodies and dismembered limbs were scattered all over the hallway. A sea of blood spread slowly across the carpet and flowed down the walls. The blood came from nowhere, everywhere, and the more I looked the more there seemed to be.

The killer staggered into the hallway, dragging the girl's decapitated body with him. He dropped it to the floor and gripped the knife in both hands. He was glaring at me wildly, and from deep in his throat came a low growl. As he took one more thundering step towards me, I found the power to break free of my paralysis. I turned and fled down the hallway.

I took the stairs two at a time, half-running, half-falling all the way down to the ground floor. I never looked back to see whether or not I was being followed. I tore along the ground floor corridor. Tony was standing by the lift, a shopping bag full of groceries in each hand.

'Tony!' I yelled breathlessly. 'Where the hell have you been?'

He looked at me in surprise.

'I just given a friend some help with the groceries... her old man's got the car. She bought me twelve cans of lager as a thank-you. Say, mate, what's with you? You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'Something a lot worse.' I grabbed my friend's arm. 'I saw a murder, Tony. Several murders. A maniac up on the thirteenth floor. There are bodies all over the place. We've got to call the police!'

Tony was staring at me with an odd look on his face.

'Paul, what are you talking about? We don't have a thirteenth floor.'

'I was up there just now! He hacked a girl's head off, I saw him do it! Then he came after me — I ran all the way down!'



**SARA J TOWNSEND** is nineteen years old. She was born in Lancashire and has spent eight years in Canada. Since her return to England last year she has been living in Kent with her fiancé. She has been writing stories ever since she learned how to form words, but this is her first published work.

**"Suddenly the air was split by a terrified scream, and I stopped dead"**

**"It rolled across the floor like a bizarre, gruesome football and came to rest near me, the dead eyes staring up at me in terror, the lips parted forever in an eternal scream"**

The lift door slid open with a business-like 'ding'.

'This building only has twelve floors,' Tony said as he stepped into the lift.

'What do you mean...?' I followed Tony into the lift, too worked up to remember my phobia.

Tony pointed to a row of buttons inside.

'Look here. This is the last button. Number twelve. There isn't anything after that.'

'I tell you, I saw it,' I insisted. 'Just look at those buttons. There's a space above the twelve, as if there used to be a button there.'

'But there's nothing there. Look, maybe you got the floors mixed up.' Tony pressed button number twelve. 'We should check it out.'

'What are you doing?' The lift door closed on my cry of anguish. 'Suppose he's still up there!'

'If there are bodies up there, we should call the cops,' Tony replied.

'So you're double checking,' I said angrily. 'You don't believe me. Is that it?'

'I never said that, Paul. I just want to see for myself, that's all. Why would you lie,' he added hastily, 'we're best buddies, aren't we?'

I said nothing. The lift seemed so enclosed all of a sudden, as if the walls were moving in. I kept my hands pressed to my sides, my eyes glued to the light which moved slowly across the scale above the doors. Five. Six. Seven. I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck rising. The lift was so small. I was five years old again, crying and alone in the lift. Eight. Nine. Ten. Time stood still. *Please come and get me Mummy, I'm so scared.*

At twelve, the lift stopped and the door opened. A feeling of relief rushed over me when I realised freedom was at hand, but this was only brief; a new fear gripped my heart. Tony was already outside the lift, looking up and down the corridor. He gave me another odd look.

I stepped out and cautiously and looked around. The corridor was as silent and empty as a school in the middle of August.

'Believe me, Tony, it was the thirteenth floor, I'm sure of it.'

And I'm sure there's nothing up there! Tony called after me angrily as I headed for the stairs. 'Now can we please go back to Carrie's flat before the bottoms fall out of these Goddamn bags?'

Ignoring him, I strode through the doorway to the stairwell and stood staring at the stairs that stretched above me. I pointed to a step halfway up.

'See there!' I called out to Tony, who was coming up behind me, muttering furiously to himself. 'That step, there. There's a hole in the tread. I remember because it made me trip. Just after that, I came out onto the thirteenth floor.' I walked up the steps, and straight into a blank wall.

I stared incredulously at the peeling paint on the concrete patch that had, a minute before, been a doorway. Then I looked back at Tony at the foot of the steps, his arms laden with groceries and an annoyingly passive and sympathetic look on his face.

'I tell you, it was here!' I shouted angrily. 'There was a door leading to a corridor right here! I walked through it! There was a man chasing me with a knife — I ran back through the doorway and all the way to the ground floor. There were bits of bodies lying all over the floor — oh God, you have to believe me!'

'Paul,' Tony said delicately after a pause, 'you haven't... been... have you? I mean you didn't... take anything?'

All of a sudden, I was furious. Furious at my friend, for even suggesting such a thing, furious at the door that suddenly wasn't there, furious at the part of myself that was doubting it had ever been there in the first place.

'Hell, Tony, I thought we knew each other better than that. If you can still think things like that, well then I don't know what I'm doing here!'

Tony turned away in embarrassment. 'Look, I... ' He decided to change the subject. 'Carrie's going to be wondering where her shopping is. And I have to put this stuff down before my arms fall off.'

Tony headed down the stairs to the fifth floor. I followed him. Neither of us spoke and Tony didn't once look back at me.

We were met at the door of number 502 by a short, dark-haired woman in her late twenties. 'I thought you'd got lost!' she said to Tony as we went into her flat.

'Sorry it took so long. I ran into my friend downstairs.' He looked at me. 'Paul, this is Carrie.'

'Hi,' I said, holding out my hand.

'Paul,' she said faintly. As she shook my hand she gazed at me for a moment with a strange expression on her face and I thought I saw a flicker in her eyes, almost like vague recognition, old memories long-forgotten stirred up and rising to the surface. Then it was gone, and she was smiling at me.

'Pleased to meet you. I hope you weren't waiting long. Tony very kindly gave me a lift to Safeways. My husband is working late.'

'Carrie!' Tony hollered from the kitchen. 'Where should I put all this stuff?'

'Excuse me,' Carrie smiled. She gestured through to the lounge. 'Please make yourself comfortable. We'll be with you in a minute.'

I wandered through into the other room. It was small but cosy; in the centre and facing the television set was a settee covered with a faded, flowery fabric. In the far wall, behind the settee, a curtained door led out onto the balcony; in another wall there was an entrance to a hallway which, I presumed, led to the bathroom and the bedrooms. A bookcase and a set of shelves covered the wall to my right. A stereo cabinet adorned the wall to one side of the hall entrance and an electric fire, glowing brightly, was fixed to the other.

I walked past the bookcase, and absently started to look at the ornaments on it, while I was waiting. There were a lot of porcelain figurines and pottery items and, since they were displayed artistically instead of practically, it was easy to tell that Carrie and her husband didn't have any children. Another piece of evidence supporting this fact was that the photographs on the shelves were not of children. There was a wedding picture, in a brass frame, of Carrie and her hubby in all their finery; but another photograph, a smaller and older picture, was far more interesting to me than anything else in the room.

In this picture stood a teenage Carrie, dressed in a long pink dress and glowing with joy and a zest for life that comes with adolescence. Beside her stood another girl in similar attire. She wasn't quite so thin and pale as I remembered her, and her hair looked shiny and healthy, but there was no mistaking the person. Standing beside this school-age Carrie of years ago was the girl I had met in the corridor not half an hour before.

I grabbed hold of the photo with both hands and stared at it, dumbfounded. Carrie and Tony



came into the room.

'Carrie and Graham have been helping me out since I moved in,' Tony was saying. 'It really helps if you get to know people straight off, particularly since we're miles from anywhere here.'

'I've put the kettle on,' Carrie said. 'Would you like tea or coffee, Paul?'

I looked up, suddenly registering that I was no longer alone in the room, and handed Carrie the photograph. I found myself searching for words.

She looked at it and smiled sadly. 'That's me and my best friend, Lisa Killan, on the night of her eighteenth birthday party.'

'Tony, that's her!' I exclaimed. 'That's the girl I was talking to while I was waiting for you!' I turned to Carrie and proceeded to tell her the same story that I had, brokenly, described to Tony. As the tale unfolded, Carrie's face grew paler and paler.

'Hey Carrie, are you OK?' asked Tony.

Her face was ashen and she sat down, sinking slowly into the settee. For what seemed like ages she didn't say a word. When she finally found her voice, it was a monotone, like a robot's, and it sounded chilling.

'I first moved into this building as a child, with my parents. There was a thirteenth floor then.'

Tony stared at her. 'What — what are you saying?' he said shakily.

Carrie continued as if she hadn't heard him. 'Lisa and I were school friends. She lived on the thirteenth floor. It was a poor and a large family. She had several brothers and sisters, including one older brother, who was committed to a mental asylum. He was prone to very violent temper tantrums, and was taken away one day after he attacked one of his teachers. They decided he was uncontrollable. He was... away for quite a long time. Then they decided that his condition was improving and they let him come home for a weekend visit.' Carrie shook her head slowly. 'He wasn't better at all. He became violent... who knows why? Perhaps he was angry that his family had deserted him and had him locked away, perhaps it was just a childish argument that caused something in his head to snap. It doesn't matter why it happened. It just did. That weekend he brutally murdered his entire family. He hacked them to pieces and left them strewn all over the corridor. Really grisly; apparently Lisa was decapitated.'

'The police were called in, and David was taken away again. Everyone else who lived on the thirteenth floor was evacuated, and, to comply with the wishes of all the building residents, the floor was walled up. I don't think they ever got rid of all the blood... it must have been a horrible mess. After that, nobody wanted to live on that floor anymore. Maybe it was superstition, maybe it was out of respect for the Killans. Perhaps they wanted to leave them in peace after their gruesome and terrible demise. In any case, the building has had twelve floors ever since.'

'About the time I got married my parents decided to move, and Graham and I simply took over the flat. We were trying to establish our life together and it was the cheapest thing for us to do at the time. So I've lived here most of my life. Longer than anyone else here; most people who were here when it happened moved out soon after. Now I don't think about it. It was a terrible shock, and I suppose my mind just blocked it out. That photo of me and Lisa is up there, but I don't think

about it. I'd almost forgotten it ever happened.

Until today...

Then something odd that I'd noticed earlier suddenly became clear.

'I thought this building was odd when I looked at it from the outside and I've suddenly realised what it was. It looks out of proportion. There's one less row of windows than there should be'

'They were all bricked in.' Carrie smiled faintly. 'It sounds so corny, like a cheap horror film. Friday the thirteenth, number 1313, a deranged killer and all that. But that's just the way it happened.'

She was silent for a moment longer. Then she emitted a strained, choking laugh. 'It's Friday the thirteenth today, isn't it? October the thirteenth. Do you want to know something else? It all happened eleven years ago today. Friday the thirteenth of October, nineteen seventy-eight.'

There was a stunned silence.

'So I saw something today,' I managed finally, 'that happened on a past Friday the thirteenth? I walked down a corridor that has not existed for eleven years?'

'There's one more thing,' Carrie rose, and pulled an old photograph album off one of the lower shelves.

'When I first saw you, Paul, the resemblance disturbed me. But I shrugged it off as a coincidence.' She sat on the settee, flipping through the pages.

'Resemblance?' I repeated, mystified.

'Between you,' Carrie rested the open book on her knees, and stabbed at a photograph with her index finger, 'and him. Lisa's boyfriend.'

Tony and I leaned over to look and we gasped simultaneously. In the picture a young man straddled an amusement park dinosaur, a sheepish grin on his face, the wind blowing his longish blond hair around. It was uncanny. I could have been looking at myself. Tony looked at the picture, and then at me. He looked back at the picture.

'It — it's unreal!' he stammered.

Carrie nodded in agreement. 'I was rattled when I first saw you, Paul. He was about your height, too, and probably your age when — when it happened.' Her voice faltered.

'He was involved in this, too?' asked Tony.

'He lived at number 912,' Carrie said slowly.

'That's my flat,' Tony said in a low voice.

'On the day that Lisa and her family were killed, her boyfriend was going up to see her. As far as we could ever figure out, he arrived just in time to see the end of the massacre. He was murdered as well.'

'My God.' I looked at Tony's terror-stricken face, and then at Carrie.

'That's not the end of it, either.' Carrie stood up and gazed at me. 'Lisa's boyfriend was called Paul too.'

'Jesus Christ.' I sank onto the settee as the terrible comprehension of it all hit me. 'History was repeating itself? Ghosts, a floor that doesn't exist... and me. What about me? I was supposed to die, wasn't I? This other Paul, who looked just like me, died on this night twelve years ago. Was I supposed to die as well?'

'I don't know.' Carrie's voice was barely a whisper. Her face was as white as chalk. 'Will anyone really be able to explain what happened?'

We sat there in Carrie's living room, the three of us, all silent, numb with shock, as the words floated wraith-like in the air above us.

'I don't know.'

**"Pieces of bodies and dismembered limbs were scattered all over the hallway"**





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## BELL, BOOK AND CANDLE

It's the Halloween season again, a time when publishers come out of hiding to push horror books, when conventions start to swing and the stars of ghoulish films haunt the airwaves. It's also the perfect time for me to spout forth about fandom and the expectations of a minority of hero-worshippers who feel that their particular gods – be they writers, directors or actors – must fit in with their demands.

I refer, in particular, to the Stephen King novel extract which we published last month. No problem with that: everyone seemed to enjoy it and told us so. But I did receive several, rather unsettling letters which set me thinking about what fans should reasonably expect from their heroes or heroines.

One writer thanked us for the extract but then went on to say: 'When are you going to run a new Stephen King interview? Is he in hiding? Does he care about his fans any more? And isn't it about time he did something for his British fans?'

If I had decided to publish the letter in full, the reply would have been something along the lines of: 'Surely Stephen has done something for his fans by releasing a new and fairly hefty book! What else do you expect from the man?'

It is to some degree incumbent upon film stars and those who put themselves into the limelight to do chat shows and generally make an appearance at any convenient moment. But what about authors, be they novelists or scriptwriters?

Until recently, Hollywood's writers were perceived as the lowest of the low, an attitude which grew out of the old silent movie system where... well, you just didn't need them! The moguls, directors and producers were the important people. They ran the show and often created the little scenarios (or the big ones, where *Birth of a Nation* was concerned) from which the films were made.

Now, however, the writers are up there with the stars because, without them, there would be no movie. They are often expected to show up and postulate on their latest production and generally say – to the press – what they would like to be involved in next.

Great! They should receive the accolades with the best of

them, and that's generally what is happening in the fantasy field. More signings, more chat shows, more discussions about the genres. After all, the writers are the mouthpieces of this genre.

But the phenomenon I've begun to notice in the industry, amongst a small clique of fans, is that the more these personages do, the more they are expected to do. Writers are quickly becoming the next stars. They cannot go into restaurants without the threat of being spotted, they *must* sign books on demand, they *must* go to this or to that place and, once there, they *must* stay and chat for more than a while.

Most fans, it must be said, are fairly goodnatured about their interests. They – like me and many of the people who write for FEAR – have an interest in one or more writer, but they don't go to signings like some kind of soccer thugs, they don't demand an instant audience and, when they don't get it, go away with a grudge which will stop them buying a particular author's books for a very long time.

Some writers I've talked to enjoy the publicity but admit that the constant fan demand can cause problems. To some it's as if the moment the bell strikes to announce their literary success the demand for more personal appearances increases and they won't get any peace again until the big G snuffs out their candle. That is often the reason why writers do not attend even the biggest conventions or fan events. They're either too busy writing their next novel or are too worried about what they see as the constant pressure of fandom.

Occasionally even writers have private lives and can be shy of large gatherings. So, for those of you who get your undies in a twist about missing your fave author at signings, just remember the writer's point of view. Take it from me: in dozens of interviews, I've heard it stated often enough.



John Gilbert

## FORBIDDEN FRUIT

Halloween comes to **Forbidden Planet**. Britain's biggest chain of specialist horror, fantasy and science fiction shops is holding an open fancy dress party at its Cambridge store at 5.00pm on October 27. The competition for the best-dressed ghoul is likely to be stiff but, we're reliably informed that this year shop staff have a hankering for **Freddy**. Make him your alter-ego, and you could win a prize.

The Planet also has Trick or Treat plans for October 28, when it will be offering videos, books and the odd mag or two. Turn up, be clever and you could collect some goodies.

Back in London, the big day is October 21 which marks the anniversary celebrations of *Marvel's Dr Who* magazine. Series producer **Jonathan Nathan Turner** and **Sylvester McCoy** – the latest incarnation of the Doctor – will be there leading a mass signing session.

Also on that date meet the pair of authors who write under the pen name **Jonathan Wylie** and have a chat with veteran special effects wizard **Ray Harryhausen**, who is also turning up for a signing. Sounds like a busy day for **Forbidden Planet** with plenty of action for book, television and film fans.

## GOREFEST FROM ETERNITY

*Blood Feast*, the controversial OTT splatter movie made by **Herschell Gordon Lewis** in 1963, is to be turned into a very graphic novel by **Eternity Comics**.

The story centres around **Fuad Ramses**, a mad cook and devotee to an ancient Egyptian devil-worshipping cult. His plan is to resurrect the spirit of an Egyptian princess by slaughtering young women, hacking them to peices and serving them up as haute cuisine.

**Stan Timmons** is illustrating the project with a script from **Jack Herman** – who is a big fan of Lewis' work. 'I read that Eternity was doing *Plan 9 From Outer Space*,' says Herman. 'I called them up and said if they ever secured the rights to a Lewis film to let me know.' The result is likely to be written in blood. A lot of it.

The same is true of the ambitious Eternity Comics' adaptation of **Bram Stoker's Dracula**. The company is producing a four issue miniseries with full-colour covers from **Clarke Hawbaker**, **Dale Keown** and **Neil Volkes**. The interior artists are **Robert Schnieders** and **Craig Taillefer** who are joined by scriptwriter **Steve Jones**. Jones says, 'American popular culture has canonised *Dracula*, imprisoning the Count with a bat-winged cape, widow's peak and the inability to pronounce



'w's.

It's time to return to the original source material and reclaim the character, portraying him as he was meant to be.'

More information from your local comic store or Eternity Publishing Inc, 1355 Lawrence Drive, Apt 212, Newbury Park, CA 91320-1309, USA.

## GOOD OMENS

Terry Pratchett's first collaborative novel will be published in May of next year by Gollancz.

The book, entitled *Good Omens* was written with longtime friend and author **Neil Gaiman** and promises to be a success, as both writers are well versed in humourous fantasy.

Prolific **Pratchett** needs no

introduction as the author of Corgi's bestselling Discworld novels, while Neil Gaiman is a long-standing contributor to humour magazines *The Truth* and *Punch*, co-author of *Ghastly Beyond Belief* (with Kim Newman) and writer on the top-selling comic books *Sandman*, *Violent Cases* and *Black Orchid*.

Neil describes the book as, 'a story about heaven and hell, Armageddon, Adam Young the Anti-Christ (aged 11) and his three friends Pepper, Winsledale and Brian'.

The original idea was devised by Neil but ditched after he had written a mere 5,000 words. Then, eight months ago, Terry Pratchett contacted him and said he wanted a break from the Discworld novels and asked if Gaiman wanted to collaborate on a novel. The result was auctioned on September 21 with the hardback rights going to Gollancz and paperback rights purchased by Corgi.

**COMING SOON IN FEAR: An interview with Neil Gaiman.**



## DADDY DEAREST: THE FINAL FRONTIER

*Star Trek* fans will be fascinated to know that **William Shatner's** daughter, **Lizbeth**, has written the definitive guide to the new *Star Trek* movie, *The Final Frontier*.

Published by Titan Books at £5.95, it contains a very personal account of the making of the movie, together with 16 pages of photographs. It also gives a daughter's eye view of the man behind Captain Kirk recollected through childhood and adult life: how he coped with the demands of directing a movie in which he was also starring and giving the lie to some of the press speculation about her father. It also reveals secrets that all Trekkies will want to know - about the series, the films, the Enterprise, her voyages and her future. The book marks the launch of the movie and will go on sale on October 23.

**COMING SOON IN FEAR: An interview with Lizbeth Shatner.**

## HOLY SELL-THRU!

*Batman* is to be released in November at £14.99! Can it be the same **Tim Burton** movie that we all know and love?

Warner Home Video - they say yes. **Michael Keaton's** caped crusader is leading a range of fantasy films which will drop straight from theatrical release onto budget-priced video. The move was started this month with the release of *Rain Man*, starring Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise, and is not just a test run, according to a Warner Bros spokesperson.

They intend to put out each video with two different covers, one for the retail market and one for rental shops. Instead of buying the tapes for a wholesale price of approximately £50.00, rental shops can hire the product for a mere £1.00 a week, thus making big profits. The differences in sleeve design will ensure that unscrupulous firms do not buy retail product for rental.

Other titles included in the video bonanza are *Licence to Kill* and *Lethal Weapon 2*. The low-pricing of video already works well in the American market but the UK market is much smaller and the long term effects of the move remain to be seen.

## WHOSE HORSE?

We would like to point out that **Mary Stanton** is the author of *The Heavenly Horse From the Outer-Most West* and not **Freda Warrington**, as written in the news pages of last issue. We wish to apologise to both for the error.

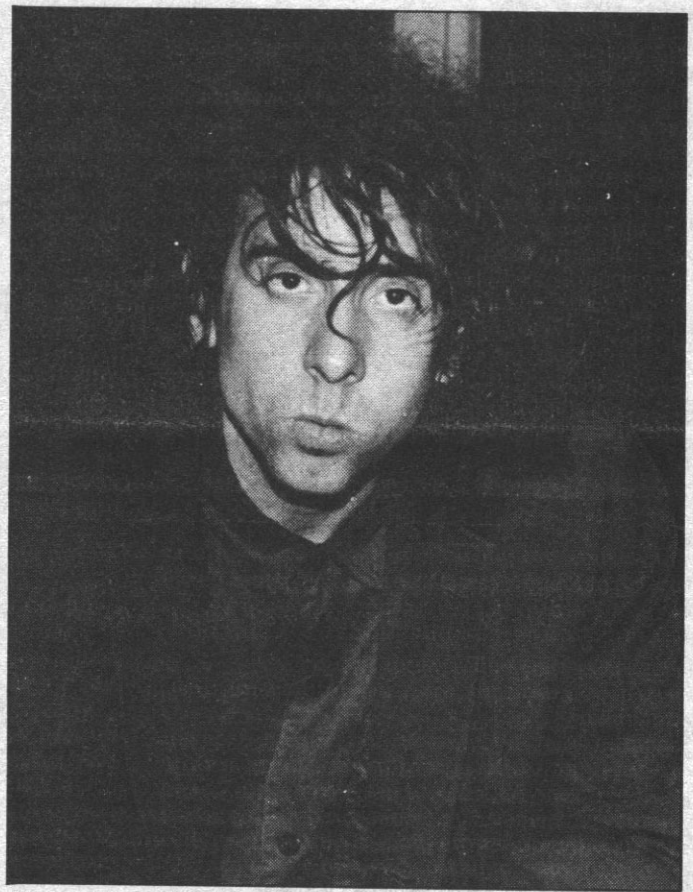
## SLEAZE MARKET

The well-named **Hollywood Sleaze Company**, purveyor of just about everything to do with the horror genre, has set up shop in the basement (where else?) of Kensington market, London. On offer, a wide selection of horror magazines, models, videos, specially designed T-shirts, masks and props for horror films.

Mask designs include juicy rubber depictions of **Freddy, Webster, Possessed, The Ripper** and, of course, **Freddy Krueger** for £29.99. You can also purchase a Freddy Glove for £16.99, a moving hand for £14.99, a rotting skull for £24.95 and a brain for £9.99 - hmmm, cheap. The editor's already on his way there.

T-shirts and baseball caps - *I Drink Your Blood*, *Corpse Grinders*, *2000 Maniacs* and *Mary Jane* - are all at £4.99 and most are imported from the States.

Mail order details are available from 35 Severns Field, Epping, Essex, CM16 5AP, or you can go along to the shop which is at Kensington Market, Kensington High Street, London, W8.



**Tim Burton: batting for another 240 million dollars**

## WILD LAUNCH

The second volume of *Wild Cards*, the series of shared world books created by George R R Martin is to be launched by Titan books on October 19, priced at £3.95.

Similar in concept to the *Thieves World* anthologies, *Wild Cards* begins when a virus creates the superpowered Aces and disgriged Jokes, the deadliest of enemies who people an imaginative post-war history. Meet **Jet Boy** and ace pilot and boy wonder, **Fortunato**, a master of Tantrick magic, **The Black Eagle**, thunder-throwing champion, **Puppetman**, a futuristic politician and **The Great and Powerful Turtle**, a mild-mannered hero.

All are involved in this series of books which combine comic thrills with science fiction and fantasy. The books have already piped the half million sales mark in the States, the *Wild Cards* now have their own computer game, and there's a film in the offing. Book Three, *Jokers Wild*, appears November 12.

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## ROGUE RETURNS TO 2000AD

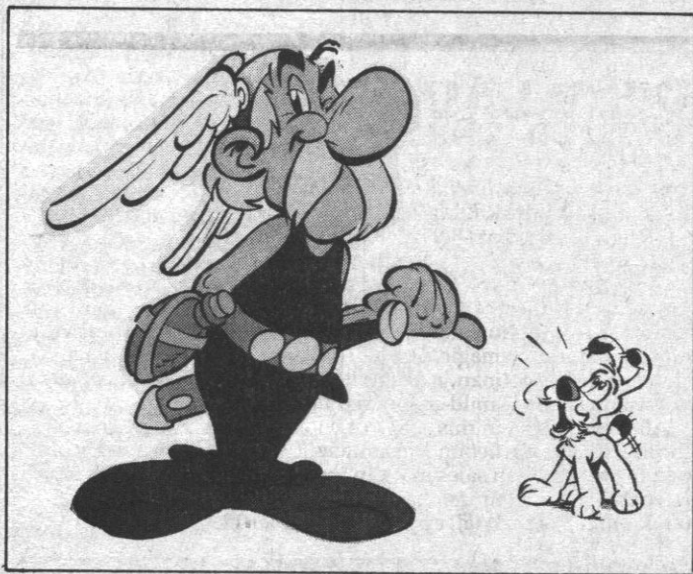
Cult British comic book *2000AD* gets a revamp this month when some of its most prestigious characters return in new stories.

As of Prog 650, *2000AD* will contain five stories designed to introduce newcomers to the comic which was launched in 1978. **Judge Dredd** starts a series by **Johns Wagner and Higgins**, **Zenith** (a crossover between pop music and superheroes) is by **Grant Morrison** - **FEAR** interview soon - and **Steve Yeowell**, while **Dave Gibbons** and **Will Simpson** bring back the classic comic hero **Rogue Trooper**, who is also about to become a Warner Bros film star.

Add to that a new strip from **John 'Hellblazer' Ridgway** and **Keef Ripley**, together with a new **Slaine** story by **Pat Mills** and **Simon Bisley** and you've got one hell of a revamp, and it's still priced at 40p.



A page from Finley-Day and Wilson's original *Rogue Trooper*



## ASTERIX ANNIVERSARY BRAWL

**Asterix the Gaul** is about to celebrate his thirtieth anniversary with the launch of a new cartoon movie called *The Big Fight* from Palace Pictures.

For those of you young enough to remember, Asterix was created thirty years ago for a French magazine called *Pilote* by **Rene Goscinny** and **Albert Uderzo**. He is a mighty Gallic man who takes on the advances of the Roman invasion of his country almost single-handedly.

Since his inception, Asterix has featured in twenty-eight books of which more than 180 million copies have sold worldwide. He is also the star of a fairly aged cartoon series and even has a Disney-style theme park dedicated to him in Paris, France.

The movie has already been acclaimed as the most ambitious cartoon film ever. It was produced in conjunction with the **Don Bluth** (*An American Tail* and *The Land That Time Forgot*) Studios in Ireland with much of the work done in Paris. Look out for it on October 20 - just in time for those half-term holidays.

## ALICE ON ELM STREET

**Alice Cooper** is to play **Freddy Krueger's** brother in *A Nightmare on Elm Street: The Dream Man* according to sources close to New Line, the company responsible for the *Nightmare on Elm Street* film and television series.

The promise of a sixth Freddy film was made just after the fifth movie, *Dream Child*, opened in the States, but, due to an apparent drop in the Dream Monster's popularity at the box office and in shops, the future of Freddy is not 100 per cent sure, despite the usual influx of screen treatments by some of horror's finest.

British viewers will see the film in April next if all goes well, but some sequences from *The Dream Child* have already been slashed for US release. They include a sequence in which a child turns into a motorbike and the brakes fly through his cheeks, and another infamous Freddy one-liner: 'Don't dream and drive'.



# THE RETURN OF FRANK HENNENLOTTER

*Whilst Hollywood congratulates itself on one of its best years ever, Frank Hennenlotter works behind the scenes preparing to warp the minds of middle America with two new black comedy horror films. Philip Nutman reports.*

**DATELINE: New York City, September 1989 . . .**

With Halloween just around the corner, we enter the final quarter of a year that has been one of the most successful in Hollywood's history. A record \$2.05 billion has been taken at the box office – an increase of 20 per cent on 1988's record-breaker; and the fun continues, with most Big Apple cinemas still pulling in large crowds. But the Powers That Be are still confused about what makes a movie work, despite all their detailed – and expensive – market research and their overly conservative reliance on formula stories.

For example, Disney are obviously delighted with the fact that *Honey, I Shrank the Kids* grossed more than *Ghostbusters 2* (my least favourite movie of the year, a total yawn from start to finish; special effects and spectacle do not excite me unless there's a story). And no doubt several CEO's are suicidal after months of trying to work out why an adult fairy tale about baseball – Phil Alden Robinson's delightful *Field of Dreams* starring Kevin Costner – lasted from spring into late summer to out-perform Timothy Dalton in *Licence to Kill*. Cinemagoing was certainly dominated by big bucks sequels and kick-ass action flicks, but the results were consistent in only one respect – surprise.

Even though they had high hopes, Warner Bros were nevertheless astounded at just how successful *Batman* turned out to be: a gross of \$240 million to date and still counting. With figures like these, the Tim Burton directed movie now ranks seventh most successful in Hollywood history, running behind *ET*, *Star Wars*, *Return of the Jedi*, *Jaws*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Beverly Hills Cop*. But as all these films' figures include profits from rereleases, the Caped Crusader seems certain to end up in the top five all-time biggest hits. *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* clocked up \$189

million in takings, putting it in second place behind *Batman*. Another sequel that broke records and expectations was also a Warners vehicle: *Lethal Weapon 2*, clearly the season's biggest crowd-pleasing action movie, clocked in at a more than respectable \$131 million. The original film grossed \$65.2 million, but what makes the sequel's success so surprising is its violence. Even the most conservative critics here have seemed to encounter no problems with the picture's excessive aggression and downright viciousness, which amazes me, as criticism of violence in the media has reached almost Thatcher-like proportions over the past year.

Industry analysts predicted that Warners would cast off their reputation of being a studio which makes successes but not blockbusters with *Batman*, but they were way under when it came to the final results. So too were predictions that Disney, who dominated last summer with *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, would be quiet this year. Three movies from the home of Mickey Mouse hit big, making 1989 one of the best years ever for the company: *Honey I Shrank the Kids* (written by *Re-Animator*'s Stuart Gordon and Brian Yuzna with former *Fangoria* editor, Ed Naha) pulled \$119 million, *Dead Poet's Society* took \$86.4 million, and the Tom Hanks cop-with-dog-trouble comedy, *Turner and Hooch*, took \$57.1 million.

But where is horror and science fiction, you may cry? Sadly, way down river. *A Nightmare on Elm Street 6: The Dream Child* has grossed only \$20 million to date, *Star Trek 5* started strong but failed to have legs, meaning it fell in the first quarter, and James Cameron's excellent *The Abyss* only managed \$40.7 million. With that film's costs (over \$50 million, not including prints and advertising), it needs to gross over \$100 million just to break even. According to Robert L Stein, cofounder of Leading Artists

talent agency, 'everyone is going to be taking a look at the sequel business. We may have seen the end of certain franchises.' He was referring here to James Bond – *Licence to Kill* pulled a disappointing \$32.2 million – and *Star Trek*.

Overall, though, it was a fun, frequently exciting and surprising summer for moviegoers. As far as horror is concerned, however, I got my best seasonal chills from fiction – Stephen King's *The Dark Half*, 'Anne Rice's *Queen of the Damned*, Skipp and Spector's *Book of the Dead* anthology, Joe Lansdale's *The Nightrunners* and Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs*. Speaking of which, Orion Pictures have just announced that they will be filming the Harris novel this autumn; Jonathan Demme is to direct and Gene Hackman and Jodie Foster will star. Foster will play Clarice Starling, the novice FBI agent on the trail of a serial killer the press have named Buffalo Bill.

## TWISTED WORLD VIEW

The good news on the low budget front is that Frank Hennenlotter, writer/director of midnight favourites, *Basket Case* and *Brain Damage*, is currently shooting not one but two films for spring release next year. Although he has bigger budgets to work with, Hennenlotter maintains he is not going to

compromise his uniquely twisted world view. As long term producer and partner Edgar Levens puts it, 'now we have the opportunity to warp the minds of middle America without technical problems detracting from the vision of New York City Frank's interested in.' The films in question are *Frankenhooker* and *Basket Case II*, both budgeted at \$2.5 million a piece through a deal arranged with Shapiro Glickenhaus Entertainment.

Shot back to back this summer, the two pictures promise to be a breath of fetid air in the face of respectability, and on the strength of the footage I've seen, should certainly surprise the unwary. *Frankenhooker* stars James Lorenz of *Street Trash* infamy (he was the wise-ass doorman) as Jeffrey Franken, an off-the-wall med school dropout with genius potential, who recreates his dead girlfriend after she is mutilated in a freak lawnmower accident. Before her demise Elizabeth, the object of his desire, was rather overweight, and Jeffrey plans to remould her into a living, breathing fantasy figure by using parts of dead hooker: hence the title. Since press restrictions prevent me from revealing certain plot specifics, all I can add is that the movie is critical of certain social trends and is definitely a comedy, albeit a very black and sick one.

*Basket Case II*, the sequel Hennenlotter said he would never make (because he didn't have a story), revives brothers Duane and Belial Bradley (who 'died' at the end of the original version) and has them join a colony of freaks living on Staten Island. All is peaceful until a nosy tabloid reporter starts digging up the dirt. Then, as Hennenlotter puts it, 'it's time for the brothers to kick some serious ass'. Effects

## FILMS IN PRODUCTION

### BLOODY MURDER! Lazlo Productions

Producer: Fred Caruso. Director: Laszlow Hege. Starring: Charles Durning.

### DEAD WOMEN IN LINGERIE Seagate Films

Producer/Director: Erica Fox. Starring: John Romo.

### ENRAPTURED Platinum Pictures

Producer/Director: Chuck Vincent. Starring: Kevin Thompson.

### HARDWARE Palace Pictures

Director: Richard Stanley. Starring: Stephen Shellen, Stacey Travis.

### THE HAUNTING OF MAURELLA New Horizons

Producer: Roger Corman. Director: Jim Wynorski.

### HIGHWAY TO HELL Hemdale

Producers: Mary Anne Page, John Byers. Director: Ate de Jong

### MERMAIDS Orion

Producers: Patrick Palmer, Wally Nicita, Lauren Lloyd. Director: Frank Oz. Starring: Cher, Winona Ryder.



on both pictures are the handiwork of Gabe Bartalos, and are highly impressive. More on both movies in a future column.

## SAD NEWS

I had planned to devote half of this month's column to John McNaughton's disturbing movie *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* but at the last moment my thoughts were shattered by the shocking news of the untimely death of director Cameron Truscot.

Cameron who? I hear you ask, though those with sharp memories may remember my mention of him (back in Issue 5) in reference to *Boilsucker*, his proposed feature debut.

A former commercials editor who worked in New York and LA, Cameron died on September 21 as the result of complications following a hit-and-run accident here in New York. He was twenty-eight.

Born in Akron, Ohio, Truscot was the only son of a retired air-force engineer and a school teacher. Although he was always a big movie fan, Cameron's great passion was stage magic, and it was this love of illusion that eventually led him to direct a short documentary on the subject, which in turn brought him into the film industry proper. Truscot was entirely self-taught and, following completion of the documentary *Rings of Desire*, he started freelancing as a boom operator, then swiftly switched gear to editing.

Truscot and I first met at the 1987 World Fantasy Convention in Nashville, where we discovered a mutual passion for black comedy and true crime cases. We kept in contact via phone and letter for a year, then reconnected in person when he moved to New York last December. It was at this point that the subject of *Boilsucker* first reared its ugly head, a project designed to be the ultimate gross-out flick. Cam had the concept but no story, which is where I came in. What started as a drunken joke soon grew into a thoroughly revolting treatment concerning winos, religious maniacs, a serial killer and large quantities of pus. Although I was then scheduled to pen the screenplay, prior commitments prevented me from doing so, and Cam went on alone, managing to raise half the \$750,000 budget on the strength of the outline. He had finished a third draft of the script the week before his death and was in good spirits concerning further financing.

Well, Cameron, you lived up to your dream: 'hope I die before I get old.' But I'll miss you, you crazy sonofabitch. R.I.P.

Welcome to the verbal punishment page. Give us your gripes, vomit forth your vox pops, and generally air your putrid ponderings. Write to: **RAISING THE DEAD, FEAR, PO BOX 10, LUDLOW, SHROPSHIRE, SY8 1DB**

## CURSE IT!

Dear FEAR

Could you please tell me from which H.P. Lovecraft story the video *The Curse* was taken? I have several of his books but can't find that one.

**K Marcotte, Haywards Heath, Sussex**

*Take a look at one of Howard's most famous stories entitled The Colour Out of Space and you'll see more than vague similarities betwixt it and said video.*

## FORBIDDEN LOVE

Dear FEAR

After reading the article about Forbidden Planet in Issue 9, I decided to write and add to their defence. I currently buy around twenty or twenty-five different comics through their mail order service. If you ever have a problem you can ring them up, quote your special number, which you get when you start to order regularly, and they will add to your list. I have also visited both the old and new stores several times, and the staff have always been friendly and helpful. All the titles are arranged in alphabetical order, the store is air-conditioned and no one frowns at you if you walk out without buying something (a rare occurrence).

**Jonathan Porter, Andover, Hants**

*Too right, Jonathan. The editor can never go in there and leave without buying something. Then again, we're not surprised as he gets a discount and we don't. Sniff(!)*

## RIGHT CHARLIE?

Dear FEAR

The interview with Charles L. Grant in Issue 9 has spurred me into writing to your magazine. I wish to comment on the interview but, in particular, on Mr Grant himself.

Firstly, his comments on the *Masques* books left me pondering. Does Mr Grant dislike the above series because (1) he cannot get a regular spot in the *Masques* books (2) most of the authors who have contributed are more famous/successful than he is (3) he doesn't want to be involved with authors that he criticises as soon as he gets the chance to? A case of sour grapes or maybe a small gun trying to make a big noise? I think so.

I did notice in the interview that 'poor, modest, Charlie' raves about the *Prime Evil* anthology. What a surprise! Grant has had a

short story published in that one. Another surprise, 'old Charlie boy' thinks that the Stephen King story is a dog; when Grant sells the number of books King has then maybe he can afford to write an average piece of short fiction.

It's all very well being called by Douglas E. Winter, 'The field's leading anthologist' but is it a tag he richly deserves? After all, it's the authors who write the short stories who have given the raw materials. The editor reads, selects, buys and introduces. Grant, like others, just chooses the stories he likes the most.

However, I do agree with the outspoken Charles L. Grant on his views about big name anthologies of new writers. He is right in saying that publishers only want well-known authors when it comes to collections. After all, publishers are out there to make a considerable profit and they don't see money to be made in unknowns. Aspiring authors are not given the chance to shine when all the publisher is interested in is the size of the bank account at the end of the day.

**Shaun Rendall, Sheerness, Kent**

*Well Shaun, and how many novels have you had published lately? What's sauce for the goose... Charlie has been in the horror genre for many years now. His work has won awards and he is acknowledged by his contemporaries as a master of the quiet horror story (perhaps that's what you don't like about him). Okay, so he doesn't like headbangers. Well we're not exactly enthusiastic about them running riot in our living room, and we suspect that Charles L. Grant feels the same about a genre which he's inhabited for more than ten years. He has a right to his opinion in our pages, as you have.*

## KING BEE

Dear FEAR

As a horror fan and Stephen King addict, it was a great pleasure to find the prepublication extract of *The Dark Half* in your October edition.

The strength of King's writing, I feel, rests on the twin pillars of his consummate ability to plot a detailed storyline, and his powerful characterisations - a combination that produces compulsive reading. The 'horror' element is secondary to the extent that it reinforces these two aspects, adding an extra squirt of adrenalin to the plot and placing the characters in situations of great duress in which their true colours become apparent. In this light it seems to me that King's statement

in the foreword to *The Tommyknockers* is playfully ironic:

'Haven is not real. The characters are not real.

This is a work of fiction, with one exception:

The Tommyknockers are real.'

In fact, in the context of the book, the characters are 'real' and are made more so by their reactions to the 'unreal' or horror elements that the author introduces.

Why then is there an apparent overemphasis on the gory elements of King's writing in much that is written and spoken of him? Although the horror is vital to the strength and entertainment value of many of his books, I am certain that King has more to say than simply to provide cheap thrills for us horror aficionados. In a broad sense, he deals at length with the human condition eg: the differences between childlike and adult perceptions of reality in *It*, and deeply moral issues eg: the threat to the planet of those with the nuclear plug in their ears in *The Tommyknockers*. Similar examples may be found in all of his books; as well as providing unrivalled entertainment they are highly thought-provoking.

Perhaps if more emphasis was placed on King's undoubted literary genius as opposed to those elements in his work which cause him to be pigeon-holed as a writer of pulp horror fiction, he might reach an even wider public. With this particular bee in my bonnet, it was gratifying to peruse the list of critical works on King which accompanied the extract. Beneath his obsessively macabre facade, I am willing to bet my little finger that there lies a heart which is profoundly concerned about those who face the real-life horrors that exist in modern society.

**Philip Maund, Dunblane, Perthshire**

## THE TROUBLE WITH HARRY

Dear FEAR

I must say it's really great to see Judith Coulter's *Julia* in print again after so long. Of course, she has modernised it slightly since it was published over twenty-five years ago under her pseudonym of Rosemary Timperley, with the title of *Harry*, but it's still the great horror story it always was, although it's a shame to see it shortened. Still, I suppose space is at a premium in a magazine like yours, but just so you can enjoy the full-length story, I send a copy of the story as it originally appeared in the *Fourth Pan Book of Horror Stories* in 1963. [Thanks. Ed.]

Best of luck to Judith with her Victorian madhouse thriller. Will it, perhaps, be about a vampire let in by one of the inmates called Renfield, or maybe some other tale from her unique and original imagination?

**Ben Mars, Broseley, Shropshire**

*Over to you, Judith...*  
Judith? ...

# FEAR

FEAR ISSUE No. 12 ON SALE November 16

## FEAR DOES THE TRANSYLVANIAN TWIST

- VINCENT PRICE sinks his veteran fangs into his next movie project and reveals the secrets of his latest trip to Transylvania.
- THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH may be a remake of Vincent Price's classic Edgar Allan Poe movie, but Patrick McNee, late of The Avengers, intends to play it his way.
- CHRISTMAS DINNER with a bunch of cannibals. We tear up the rule book on horror's final taboo and serve up an uncensored overview on the films that made you puke.
- A CHRISTMAS CARROLL from the acclaimed author of *Bones of the Moon*, *Sleeping in Flame* and *A Child Across the Sky*. Yes, Jonathan Carroll has written this one especially for FEAR, so here's the one exclusive Christmas pressie that won't be available from Harrods.

### ADD TO THIS

- A bloody Christmas bonus round-up of films, videos and books, Xmas on Elm Street and the word on a new novel by Mike Jefferies, plus some Chris Cringle greetings from the States, and you've got . . .



- AT HOME WITH SHAUN HUTSON, author of the recently released *Nemesis* and *Assassin*. Here he tells of *Slugs*, the video of his first novel, which will take stores by storm at Christmas.

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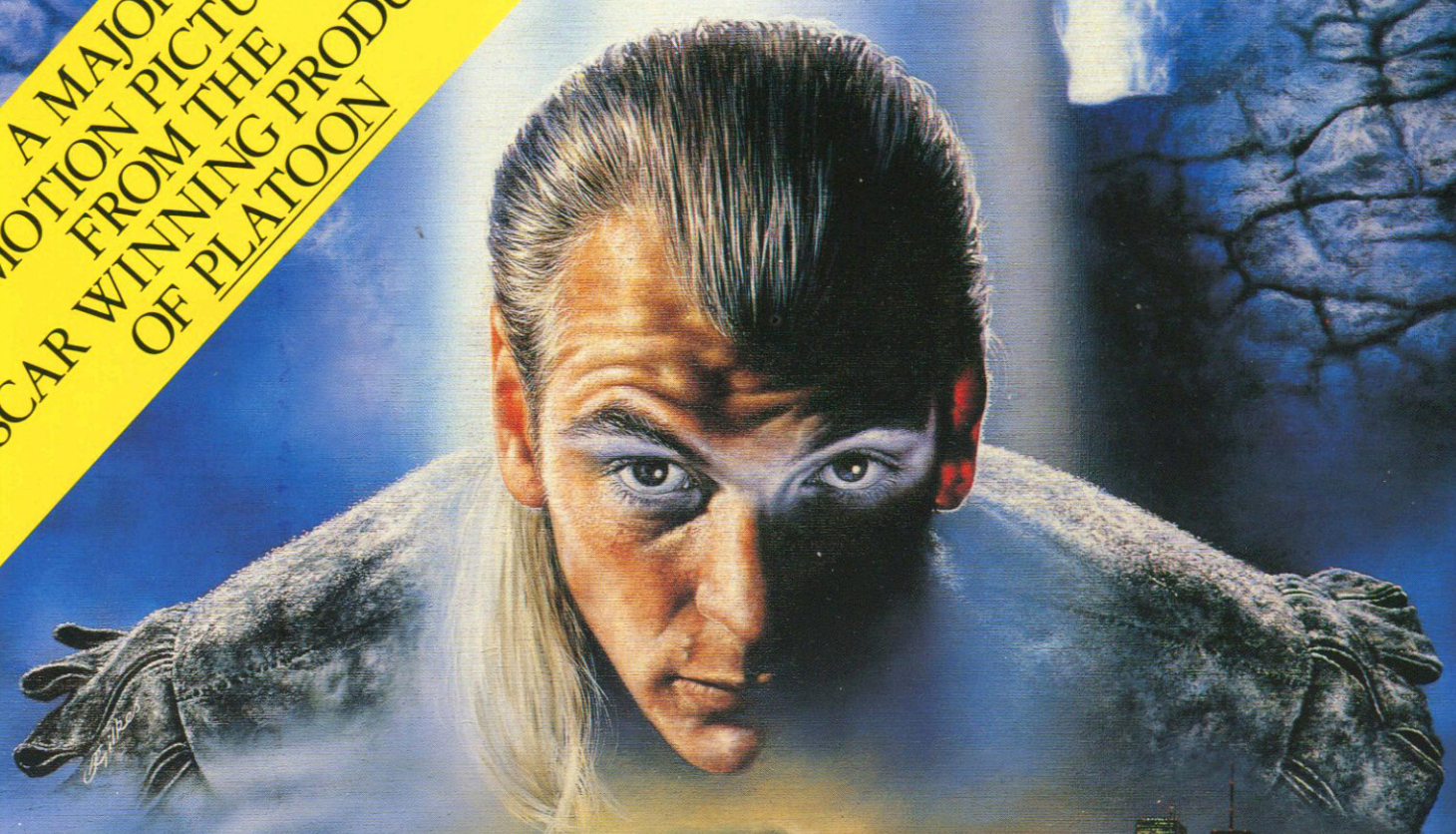
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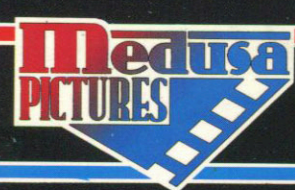
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