

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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CONTENTS:

FICTION: *Tashi's Future Lover* by Dave Hoing

REVIEW: *Saturn's Children*
Against The Darkness
Infoquake: Book 1 of the Jump 225 Trilogy

FEATURE: *Marble Hornets and the Urban Myth Creation of Doom!* by Phil Lunt



EDITORIAL:

by phil lunt

Genndy Rules OK!

Genndy Tartakovsky is back!! Alright, he's never *really* been away but bare with me here...

Anyway, whaddya mean, who is he? Were have u been? *Samurai Jack* not ringing any bells? How about *Dexter's Lab*? Or, well, there was this small thing called *Star Wars: Clone Wars* that he did in 2003 for Lucasfilm when they still played risks with more traditional forms of stylised animation and before they got all CGI crazy... or Tartakovsky got bored of the franchise. Maybe. So, yes, he's very much genre relevant.

Admittedly, he hasn't churned out LOADS of work in the animated sector but what he *has* produced is very good, very stylish and immense fun, in my honest and open opinion.

Tartakovsky 's new series, *Sym-bionic Titan*, started on Cartoon Network in the US on the 17th September at 8pm (Eastern) and I recommend any of our US readers who 'can' to check it out... please... and then let me know what it's like because;

- 1) I'm in England and I'm not sure when it'll reach here and...
- 2) I don't have Cartoon Network anymore!

Admittedly, from the trailer I've seen, it looks dangerously close to *Power Rangers* in a "teenagers control giant robots that can combine into an even gianter robot to fight the forces of evil which are all big monsters" stylee but I'm still excited because the kid in me just loves Tartatovsky's work and the kid in me pretty much rules the roost.

So there!

p.s. HAPPY BIRTHDAY ALASDAIR!

FICTION

Tashi's Future Lover

by dave hoing

Tashi is a whore, and has been since arriving in the slums of Kressa four years ago. She does business out of her room on the second floor of the Serpent's Rib, a drinking establishment that draws the worst sailors from the worst places in the known world, criminals of all persuasions, the poorest of the poor honest folk—if anyone living in this part of the city can be said to be honest—and, of course, the occasional crusader determined to improve the lot of people who have long since stopped caring.

Tashi has not stopped caring, although it gets harder every day. The two men finishing with her now have not been gentle, and she is leaking blood from several cuts and small tears. Still, as violence goes, this has been a fairly mild session; they used only open palms rather than fists or foreign objects. The fantasies they acted out were mundane, boring affairs, petty perversions she sees a dozen times a week.

As the men dress, Tashi straightens her bandana and the wig beneath.

"What d'you wear that thing for?" the tall one asks, indicating the bandana. Sweat oozes along the folds of his fat. He glares down at her on her stained and stinking mattress. Tashi hesitates before answering. She's never sure if she should behave as if the abuse excites her or terrifies her. Some men like it one way, some the other. Guess wrong, and things can really get out of hand.

She decides to play demure with these two. They don't know about the wig.

"Someone pulled out a chunk of hair last night," she lies. "Left a bald patch. It's not very pretty, I'm afraid."

The men chuckle. "Whore thinkin' she's pretty," the short one says.

The tall one tosses her the fragment of mirror he finds on the small trunk that holds all of Tashi's possessions. "Better take a look, girl. A face like that and you're worried about your *hair*?"

I am pretty, Tashi thinks. *Prettier than any decent woman who'd have you.*

Before buttoning their trousers they piss in the chamber pot next to the bed. When they're done, the short one drops a copper into the pot, and both men laugh at his cleverness. Like nobody's ever thought of *that* before ...

"We catch somethin' from you," he says, "and we won't be so nice next time."

As soon as they're gone Tashi swishes her mouth out with *grol*, a villainous ale that stings and burns but is still preferable to the aftertaste of *them*. She spits into a cup. The window is open and the fetid air of the nearby docks wafts in: the stink of fish and shit and brackish water, filtered through the smoke of a candle and the fiery tingle of *grol* in Tashi's throat.

She wets a rag in a pitcher and dabs at her cuts. The bleeding has already stopped. Any bruises she gets probably won't appear until later, so she doesn't need makeup yet. Using the same rag, she washes the men's fluids and her own sweat from her stomach, thighs, and breasts.

Finally she pulls a black jug and a small squeeze bag from beneath the bed. The jug contains a special potion her friend Jen has mixed for her. He claims it will prevent pregnancy and, sometimes, disease. The potion is nearly gone. Tashi hopes she has enough to last the night. Lying back and propping her shoulders on a pillow, she draws up a precious few drops into the bag, slips the nozzle into herself, and squeezes out the liquid. Unlike *grol* it doesn't burn or sting, despite her injuries; in fact, it's pleasantly warm and soothing. She clenches and unclenches her pelvic muscles to swish it around good in there. When she feels thoroughly cleansed, she expels the potion into a bowl and dumps the bowl out the window.

Jen's brew has worked so far, for in the two years since she met him she's neither conceived nor gotten

the clap.

Lucky thing, too: it's not even full dark yet, and there's likely to be several more clients before Tashi can pull her shade and shut down for the night. By then her magic potion jug will be empty. She'll have to go to Jen for more tomorrow.

She retrieves the coin from the chamber pot, wipes it off and polishes it, then carefully places it inside her trunk. She can still dream; at this rate she'll be able to afford a better life for herself ... three lifetimes from now.

Tashi is wearing the better of her two blue cotton dresses today. She's got a wide-brimmed hat on over her wig instead of the bandana. It's an uncommonly fine morning as she heads down to the docks to buy her usual breakfast of fish and potatoes from her friend and sometimes client Stimme. She managed to make her potion last through her final customer, but her jug is bone dry now, and it's a half-day's journey to Jen's lab. The miasma of fog, slaughterhouse fumes, and coal smoke has burned off, leaving a clear sky and calm waters. A light mist hovers over the bay and twinkles in the rising sun.

The main harbor of Kressa is far from here, but this little alcove gets its share of business, mostly small semi-legitimate crafts that can't afford the docking fees elsewhere, island-hopping smugglers and, yes, real flesh-and-blood pirates who cruise the archipelago and then seek shelter and anonymity in the poverty and squalor that surrounds the Serpent's Rib. It's easy for the criminals to blend in. The dirtier they look, the smellier they are, the more at home they seem. The authorities seldom waste their time in this part of the city: too much danger, too little reward. Better to let the inhabitants fester in their own filth.

Stimme is cooking over a little pot-bellied grill in his ramshackle kiosk near the docks. Sometimes, if he's had a good catch the day before, he'll throw in a free extra fillet for Tashi; but with no boat he can only fish from the pier along with everyone else, so good catches are rare.

As she wends toward him through stevedores and stacked crates, a cramp in her lower abdomen causes her to stop and wince.

"Hey, Tash," Stimme says when he sees her. "What's wrong?"

"Courses coming on."

"Your breakfast's all ready for you. Got some nice taters from Marl, too. Can't you just smell 'em?"

She can smell them, their skins darkened and flavored with smoke. The aroma makes her stomach growl. She worked hard last night. "I'm starving."

"What's in the jug?"

"You've seen it before."

"Maybe. I don't really care, just making conversation."

"Well, then."

Stimme clears his throat. "So talk. Got some hootch, or what?"

She holds up the jug and shakes it. "Got nothing."

"Did I mention I have butter ...?"

"You have butter? *Real* butter?"

He caresses a tiny keg on a shelf. "Made fresh this morning by Marl's wife."

"Where'd she get the milk?"

"Maybe she diddled a dairyman, what d'you care?"

"How much?" and when he tells her, the price is outrageous, but it's *real butter*, and anyway, does it matter if it takes her three lifetimes or four to whore her way up and out?

She turns over half of the evening's take, which she claims is all of it (but she knows Stimme knows otherwise) and sits on the pier to enjoy her delicacy, her toes almost touching the water. She sets the jug down next to her. The sun warms her face, although the stubble on her head is itchy and sweaty beneath her wig. She doesn't mind; fine, clear mornings like this are to be cherished. For Tashi it's the best time of the day, far removed from the shabbiness of her room and what takes place there every evening.

"Mind if I eat with you?" Stimme says. Even on the worst days his body odor cuts straight through the vile vapors of Kressa. As far as Tashi knows, the man has *never* bathed. But he's less offensive clothed in the open air than naked in her bed, and anyway, a slight breeze carries the worst of his stink out to sea.

"Sure," she says, patting the wood on the other side of her from the jug. As he rumbles and grunts his fat ass onto the pier, Tashi smears a pat of butter onto a slice of potato and slides it into her mouth. She savors its sweetness. Oh, if only she could hold it on her tongue forever, if only she didn't have to swallow!

"So what was in the jug?" Stimme says.

"Poison to put in your drink."

"I drink grol, so I'm immune."

"Yeah, that shit's awful." Tashi decides to save the other half of her potato with butter for last. She places the spine of the fish filet between her teeth, bites down, carefully pulling the meat from the bones. One thing she'll say for Stimme, he can cook. Wouldn't think there'd be anything hard about frying a perch, or whatever this is, but she's never been able to do it properly. Hers always comes out half raw, half coal. If she ever gets married, it'll be her husband who does the cooking.

"No, really," Stimme says, reaching around her and tapping the jug's lid.

"Well, if it's any of your business, it's a potion to prevent any little Stimme bastards from popping out. Or anybody else's."

"A potion that stops you gettin' knocked up?" He slurps down a fish, bones and all. Tashi winces. That's gotta hurt coming out. "Where d'you get such a thing?" he says.

"My friend Jen makes it."

"Jen? That loondog who keeps company with Drun and Cresyns? Bah! You never told me you knew him. He's scum."

"Unlike ourselves, of course."

"Least I don't mix with Drun. And Cresyns! Half-breed vermin. Oughta kill 'em at birth, you ask me. Makes my skin crawl, the idea of a Lyhian mixin' with a Drun. I'd chop my own pecker off 'fore I'd stick it in one of them ugly bitches."

Tashi finishes her fish and burps. "Why don't you? That'd sure save me some aggravation."

"Ah, I ain't that bad, am I?"

"Ever heard of a bath? A farmer could take soil samples from you."

"You mean get wet ... on *purpose*? I don't see that happenin'."

"You can borrow my knife, then."

"You ain't no Drun, so I'm 'fraid I still got use for the little fella."

"You got the *little* part right."

"In that cave of yours anything looks small—"

"Quiet, I'm eating."

Tashi butters the other half of the potato. She chews slowly, enjoying every moment, every nuance of flavor. Not even womanly discomforts can spoil the experience. When it's gone she sighs and stands up. You just don't get butter down here very often. "Anyway," she says, "I think Cresyns are kinda pretty, 'specially their hair."

"When they're dead, maybe."

"Aren't you the cheerful one?"

He inclines his head in a small bow. "Always first with a kind word."

Tashi keeps a rag in an inside pocket of her dress. Her blood never starts right away with the cramps, but just in case she slides the rag down the front her bloomers and wriggles it into place.

Stimme watches with amusement. "What a pain in the ass that must be."

"My ass ain't where it hurts, stupid." She readjusts her bloomers, straightens her dress, and tucks her jug under her arm. "Places to go," she says. "Tomorrow, Twigman?"

Stimme hoists himself to his feet. "Like always, Cavewoman."

When she was a girl, Tashi loved the water. Sometimes she swam in the ocean, but mostly it was in the stream that ran through the colony where she lived with her mother. She and the daughters of the other ladies would strip off their clothes and flit like minnows against the current, sleek and shiny, then sun themselves on the rocks. They didn't worry about being seen. Men rarely came to the colony, and when they did it was on a predictable schedule: the fruit and fish vendors every morning, the yarn and thread

man once every sixth day, the hosiers and haberdashers the day after that, and of course the night soil man, who hauled his smelly wagon in every night around sunset. That left plenty of free time for little girls to play and swim and run around naked as skinned monkeys.

The colony was located in a beautiful wooded area, so when the girls weren't swimming, they had plenty of trees to climb. Tashi and her friends liked to sit high in the branches, unseen from below, and watch their mothers work their gardens and tend the pigs. All of the adult women were bald and bore an ugly triangular scar high on their foreheads, above where the hairline would have been. The girls giggled and gossiped about this. They made up all kinds of outlandish stories, but the truth was, they simply didn't know. Most of them had seen their mothers shaving, so they knew the hair didn't fall out naturally. The scars were a complete mystery, but one thing was sure, no hair could grow back there even if the women wanted it to. When the girls got brave enough to ask, all they got were tears or anger or blushes and a promise to explain later. "You'll know soon enough," Tashi's mother Naci told her. "Enjoy your childhood."

Tashi had long golden hair then. Naci spent hours at a time brushing it, often using only her fingers, caressing it, seeming to savor its smooth silky feel. Perhaps her own baldness was why she loved hair so, and why, when it had just started to darken in the summer of Tashi's first blood, she became especially sad. "Don't swim when you feel your courses coming on," she said one day outside their hut.

"It's just blood. Won't hurt the river none. I mean, fish poop in there and stuff."

"No, it's the cramps," her mother said, and she was crying when she didn't need to be. "If you get one when you're in the water, it could pull you under."

"It's all right, Momma," Tashi said, not understanding her tears, "I won't go in then. I won't drown, I promise."

Naci removed the floppy hat she wore to protect her scalp from the sun. Her scar looked angrier than usual. She took Tashi's hand and led her inside, made her sit down. "We always hope we won't have to tell our daughters this," she said, "that, somehow, the laws will change before they grow up. They don't. They just ... *don't*." Tashi heard bitterness in Naci's voice. "I suppose," her mother said, "I should have warned you. But how do you admit such a thing to your own child? I was ashamed."

When she explained what was about to happen, and why, Tashi was confused and didn't believe her. She knew she was a Lyhian, but had no real concept of sex, other than girlish whispers, and of course she'd never seen a Drun, although there was supposedly a village of them near the colony.

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

Her mother smiled joylessly and kissed her cheek. "My lovely girl," she said.

In the second month of her blood the officials came for her, and then, despite Naci's efforts to prepare her, Tashi cried, too.

To get to Jen's lab she has to cut through some nicer sections of Kressa—"nicer" being a relative term. There's still no decent person who'd live here, but at least the garbage crews show up occasionally to sweep the streets. She winds through a tangle of alleys, people, and awnings en route to the main thoroughfare that will take her out of the city. Two urchins start a mock fight in front of a fruit shop so a third can steal oranges. The vendor is wise to that trick, however, and cuffs the potential thief alongside his head. Undaunted, the boys scamper down the street and try again.

Five bored whores sit by the window of a brothel and chew at their nails. Tashi notes with some satisfaction that the rags they're wearing aren't any better than hers. Truth to be told, they aren't nearly as pretty as she is, either, but the clients they get, shabby though they are, are still several notches up the social ladder from the vermin who slink into the Serpent's Rib to sample Tashi's wares. Maybe someday Tashi can relocate here on her way out of the slums.

One of the whores catches her staring and raises a provocative eyebrow. Business must be really slow. *Oh, please*, Tashi thinks, and scurries away.

As she turns a corner she notices someone is following her, but whoever it is ducks out of sight when she glances back. All she catches is a bright mop of hair reflecting the morning sun. Well, petty hooligans are common as air in Kressa, and this bumbleboy is obviously no threat. No reason to slink and hide down here; a more seasoned thug would simply chase her down and punch her in the head until he got what he

wanted from her—and often enough, the punch in the head was what he wanted. In any case, it takes more than a shadow on the streets to scare Tashi.

She pauses to wait out a cramp, then moves on.

Toward the edge of town a stone overpass sweeps out of the rich quarter and merges with the thoroughfare. Here carriages drawn by caparisoned steeds bear powdered and pampered aristocrats to estates in the country. Tashi doesn't even give these a second look; they're as far beyond her reach as the flight of birds.

A small group of wanderers has set up camp beneath the overpass. Many times these wanderers travel from place to place in long caravans, stealing, drinking, and making a general nuisance of themselves before being driven off or arrested. There's only one wagon with this group, though, so probably not more than two families. Several children are singing while one of the women plays a woodflute, another pounds a drum, and a man strums a tansenlyre. The song is a familiar folk tune, made exotic by the children's unusual harmonies and a beguiling countermelody on the flute.

Although they've placed a hat on the ground, no one has gathered to drop coins.

"What about you, eh?" the drum woman says to Tashi.

"I just like to listen," she says.

"Well, ain't nothin' free in this world, girl, so you pays yer money or you moves along."

Normally Tashi would be on her way, but her clients didn't hurt her much last night, and the day is so fine, and she's eaten real butter, and the music is pretty. "I can dance," she says.

"So can a monkey."

Tashi sets her jug down and grabs the hand of one of the boys, twirling him around, her skirt rippling in a wide arc, the hair of her wig flying straight out beneath her hat. The boy squawks at first, but then giggles when she swings him high off the ground by his wrists, swoops him down low, and lifts him again in a tightening spiral. The wanderers get in the spirit and play their music faster and faster; the drum woman pounds a frenetic rhythm. Soon both Tashi and the boy are sweating and dizzy and everybody is laughing. She collapses onto the cobblestone pavement, pulling him down on top of her so he doesn't get injured.

It's a wonder she hasn't lost her hat and wig.

Her mysterious follower is still there, a block away, watching her from behind the fallen canopy outside an abandoned shop.

"That was fun, Mytter!" the boy says to the drum woman.

"May be," she says, "but still ain't free. What's in the jug?"

"That's mine," Tashi says, but her head is spinning and she can't find the balance to sit up.

"I'm thinkin'," the tansenlyre man says, "that it was yours, but there's payment to be had, so now it's ours. Boys."

Two of the children go for her jug, but Tashi lunges and gets her arms around it. As they roll around on the ground grappling for it, legs and arms akimbo, the tansenlyre man, drum woman, and flute lady seem content to stand back and enjoy the spectacle.

"Help!" Tashi cries to her hidden admirer, but he only withdraws out of sight.

Her dizziness is fading, and she gets a grip on the jug the boys can't break, hugging it to her chest and protecting it with her elbows. Frustrated, one of the boys tries to distract her by pulling her hair. All this does is yank her hat and wig completely off her head, exposing her stubbly scalp and an angry red scar at her hairline, shaped like an inverted triangle.

The adult wanderers gasp. The boys jerk their hands from the jug as if they've been burned, although their reaction is surprise, not revulsion.

"Bloody gods," the man says, and he is revolted, "she's a shorn woman."

"A shorn woman," the drum woman says.

"A shorn woman," the flute lady says.

"What's a shorn woman?" one of the children, a girl, says.

"She fucked a Drun," the flute lady says. "Boys, don't you touch her or nothing of hers. She's ... *dirty*."

"But why?"

"She fucked a *Drun*," the other two adults say with such enthusiastic malice that soon all the children

are chanting the refrain as well, then singing it, embellishing it with their exotic harmonies.

"She fucked a Drun, la la, she fucked a Drun, la la, she fucked a Drun, la la, la la ..."

"Get away, you," the drum woman screams over them at Tashi, making a warding gesture, "'fore we call the guards. What're you doin' out here 'mong decent folk? Take yer filthy jug and go. You got nothin' we need."

Tashi rises and puts the wig and hat back on. "I just wanted to dance."

The women quickly usher the children into the wagon. The tansenlyre man spits at her, but misses. "Scum," he says, following in behind his kin. "Slut."

A carriage clatters by on the overpass. Tashi can hear the horses snort between hoofbeats. The sun is warm on her back, the sky still clear blue and beautiful. She stands alone facing the wagon.

"I never fucked a Drun!" she calls.

She was just a girl, and she had done nothing.

On the same day the census man came to the colony to record new births and future victims, the authorities stripped Tashi naked and paraded her onto a platform in the village square, where scores of people laughed and jeered curses at her.

She was just a girl, and she had done nothing.

A beam which sometimes doubled as a gallows loomed up behind her. They bound her hands to it and read the charge. There had been, and would be, no trial.

She was just a girl, and she had done nothing.

With shears and razor they cut and scraped every hair from her body, every hair. They were harsh men, with clumsy, rough hands, and she bled from dozens of little wounds, high and low.

She was just a girl, and she had done nothing.

They forced her to her knees. Splinters from the beam pierced her arms on the way down. A large muscular man grabbed her chin from behind and jerked her head back against the wood. A robed man pulled a glowing iron from the fire and pressed it into the flesh of her hairline. She heard the sizzle and felt the cauterizing heat before she passed out, the people still laughing and jeering.

She was just a girl, and she had done *nothing*.

She had done nothing!

And when she awoke, she was in a different colony, a colony inhabited by many other girls and women who had also done nothing, and by some who had.

Tashi follows the thoroughfare south out of Kressa, but when it turns westward toward the highlands, she leaves it for one of the paths that runs parallel to the Danriana Sea. The view is lovely. The sun has burned off the morning mist and hovers over still, blue waters like a fiery beacon. The air has grown hot, and in no time Tashi has thrown off the bleak mood brought on by the wanderers. She never did fuck a Drun, after all, so she has no reason to feel guilty. It was her mother who did that, years before Tashi was born, a wild and drunken teenager who was baited by some boys into a foolish, foolish act with a Drun they had captured and tormented. Unfortunately, the authorities had gotten wind of it and raided the cheap boarding house where the Drun was being held. They were unimpressed by Naci's claims of youth, drunkenness, and coercion. She was arrested and taken to the square. The Drun, already beaten raw by the boys for sport, was executed right there in the room. The boys themselves? They walked away with a reprimand. A rebuke. A warning that they shouldn't associate with Drun and whores.

Being a shorn woman is an offense of perpetuity. Any daughter born to a shorn woman and a Lyhian father is also branded, at puberty, with the mark of shame. The daughter's daughter is punished, and her daughter, and so on down the generations. Any Lyhian woman vile enough to have relations with a Drun must, by definition, have corrupt blood, and that blood is passed on to her children. Only girl children, however: sons are given new names and sent off to be fostered in Kressa or some of the villages in the Northern Reaches of the archipelago.

And so Tashi, a girl who had committed no crime, became a shorn woman in the summer of her first blood.

The path veers away from the sea and into the woods. A short distance in there's a wide swath of trees knocked flat by a waterspout several years ago. Most are dead, bleached white in the tropical sun, but the roots of one have managed to stay buried, leaving a living tree lying twisted and prone among the devastation. The spot marks the midway point of the journey between the Serpent's Rib and Jen's lab. Tashi pauses to rest on her favorite branch, a juncture that seems fitted to her body. She stops here often, sitting among the foliage to think or just enjoy the view. The dead trees look like bones strewn across the earth, yet the whiteness is beautiful in its way, white against the greens and browns of new growth within and old growth without, white against the blue of the sky and, from here, the just-glimpsed sea, white against color, death against life. Tashi finds comfort in the life that sprouts from death, life made more verdant, more poignant, by the presence of death.

Mostly, though, this forest reminds her of the colony, the first one, where she grew up with her mother, and the normal carefree days of childhood, of swimming and climbing, when happiness was taken for granted. Most of the time she sensed no shame within the colony. There was only peace, there was only love. Yes, the girls noticed when their older friends went away and didn't come back, but they assumed, or maybe their mothers told them, or implied, or allowed them to believe, that the teenagers had gone off to marry or seek work in the city.

Why, Tashi wonders, weren't we more curious?

And what good would *that* have done? What use did little girls have for the burdens of the world? The truth would, and did, come soon enough without their questions.

The one question she *did* ask, though, in the period between the revelation and the ritual, the question she could not *not* ask, occurred to her one evening as she and Naci sat together before the fire, watching a stew bubble to a boil. Everything was calm. The stars shone through the smoke hole, the crickets and the frogs trilled their nightsongs, the bats swooped through mosquitoes with a comforting whir, and suddenly Tashi was angry. "*Is my father a Drun?*" she demanded, rising to her feet.

"No," Naci said, surprised only by the vehemence of the asking, not the asking itself.

She must have known this was coming. Of course she did. She tried to take Tashi's hand, as if that small touch could still the trembling within. Tashi snatched it away. "No, sweetie," her mother said. "If he were, you would be dead. When a Lyhian woman conceives by a Drun male, the offspring are killed. Those unions are illegal."

"But Cresyns—"

"Lyhian father, Drun mother. That isn't illegal. Under Kressan law, it's not possible to violate a Drun female, so no crime has been committed when a Cresyn is born. They're despised and shunned, but usually not killed. There are good people who care for them."

"That don't seem fair. I mean, that the ones are killed and the others aren't."

"How would you have it? Shall we kill them all?"

"We shouldn't kill anybody."

"Good for you, Tashi." Naci stared at her feet. When she looked up, she had tears in her eyes. "Your father was the night soil man."

"The one with the stinky wagon?"

After a long pause her mother said, "It's such a world, Tash," and then she couldn't hold back the weeping: as if she were more ashamed of sleeping with a Lyhian shit collector than a Drun ...

She'd never lost control in front of her daughter, not like this. Tashi's anger drained away in an instant. It was hard for her, at that age, to see anything beyond her own needs, but her mother's distress jolted her into a deeper understanding, a more profound love. She stroked Naci's smooth scalp, letting her fingers trail over the hideous scar. "It's all right, Momma."

"A woman gets so lonely ..."

I'm never lonely, Tashi thinks from her perch among the bones of the forest. *At least I'm never alone for too long*; and as if the universe is listening to her thoughts, a crunch of underbrush alerts her that her admirer is still following. She spins around and sees long, shining hair disappear behind a snaggle of brambles and dead tree limbs. She's only caught a glimpse again, but this time there's no doubt: the sun on that hair reveals that her friend is a Cresyn. For reasons unexplainable even by Jen, the smartest man she knows,

the hair of Cresyns is multi-colored, like a rainbow, starting out white at the roots and progressing to yellow, gold, orange, red, brown, and finally black. On a still day, when the hair hangs straight down, it simply looks black or dark brown, and a Cresyn's Drun heritage is more apparent, the coarser facial features, the muscular frame, the thick, ruddy skin But when the wind comes up and pushes the hair back from the shoulders, when the sun sets those colors ablaze, it is truly a lovely sight that dominates every other aspect of appearance: a brilliant array of flames sprouting from the scalp and framed by a smoky black aura.

How could anyone look at such beauty and *hate*?

"I know you," said a small voice from the thicket.

"Come out, let me see you."

A barely pubescent boy stands up and gawks at her nervously. He's taller than most Cresyns his age, but is otherwise indistinguishable from others of his kind. At least, Tashi has never been able to tell much difference between them. He's twitching like fingers on a bowstring. "No reason to be scared," Tashi says. "I won't hurt you. Why are you following me?"

"Don't know."

"You're following me but you don't know why?"

"I saw you at the pier with the fat man, and I recognized you, even with your fake hair, and so I ..." He puffs out his chest. "It's dangerous for a lady to be out in Kressa by herself ..."

A lady? How cute. "That's very gallant, um...?"

"Ket."

"Well, that's nice, Ket, but it would've been *more* gallant if you'd protected me when I needed you."

Ket blushes and stares at his feet. "That group of wanderers, they don't never hurt folks. Been watching them since they come to town. They was just having fun with you. They wouldn't really've kept your pickle jar, 'specially not after they found out you're ... you're a ..."

"Shorn woman?"

"Yeah."

"I never fucked a Drun."

"Me, neither."

Tashi tries not to laugh, but can't stop herself. Everybody knows male Cresyns are sterile; they can't even get it up, so they don't fuck *anybody*. And this one's too young anyway. Ashamed, the boy puts his head down and turns away.

"No, don't go," Tashi says. "I'm sorry. Tell me how you know me."

Ket brightens. A sea breeze catches his hair and the sun engulfs his head in silky fire. "You come to Jen's lab sometimes."

"And how do you know that?"

"I sweep up and stuff there. He pays me."

Tashi looks him over, trying to recall his face. Jen *does* keep Cresyns around, and Drun, and an assortment of odd Lyhians, too. Ket could be one of them. He does look familiar. Doesn't he? No. Cresyns are Cresyns. "I remember you now."

"No, you don't."

"I will from now on. Come sit with me."

"Can't."

"Can too. Just point yourself at me and move your feet."

"Don't want to."

Tashi stands up and puts on a show of injured pride. "Well, then. Have it your way. I don't really care. You're just a dumb Cresyn anyhow. I'm going to leave, and don't you dare follow me."

She storms down the path that leads out of the woods toward the sea. She doesn't deign to look back, but she can hear Ket's footsteps behind her. As she emerges from the trees the boy cries out, "You're the same as me."

Stifling a smile, she turns. He stands in the open with his hands on his hips, a surprisingly daring stance for a Cresyn, even if the Lyhian he's facing is only a shorn woman. His trousers are tattered at the hem and knees, but their most outstanding feature is their complete failure to hide his arousal. So much for *that*

theory. Goodness, Tashi thinks, *and a fine one it is, too.*

"You're the same as me," Ket repeats.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm a Cresyn 'cause my father fucked a Drun. You're a shorn woman 'cause your Momma did."

"How do you know what my mother did?"

"'Cause you just said you didn't, so it had to be your Momma, or grandmum, or someone. Anyway, I heard you and Jen talking one day."

"You were eavesdropping."

"So?"

"So that's not nice."

"It's not nice to call me a dumb Cresyn, neither. You're no better."

Well, that's true enough. Drun are reviled in the archipelago, Cresyns more so, but shorn women are the bottom feeders. Drun can't help being Drun and Cresyns can't help being born, but shorn women choose, and that's the worst crime of all. Or so says the law. Tashi *didn't* choose, though; she's a victim of her mother's blood.

Ket has a point. They're both where they are in society because a parent had sex with a Drun, and they're both identified by their hair—or lack of it.

She looks him over. His erection has subsided. "What do you want?" she says.

"Do you like to swim?"

"I probably told Jen, so you know I do. Do you always flirt with girls by asking them to swim?"

"No. And I'm not flirting."

"You just want to see me naked."

Ket breaks into an awkward grin. His excitement quickly returns. Tashi smiles: *Teenaged boys—up, down, up, down ...* "Do not," he stammers.

"Liar." If Ket wants to look at her, well, so what? She suspects even Cresyns have a normal sex urge; it's just that until today she didn't think they could do anything about it. In any case, she's been with so many men that body shyness is certainly *not* a problem with her. "Where do you swim?"

"C'mon. There's a place I go all the time." He rushes back into the woods, calling over his shoulder, "Hurry! It's not far."

This isn't what she planned to do today. Her jug is empty. A girl's got to make a living, and to do that she needs Jen's potion. She can't afford to get herself knocked up and then pay the woman with a wire to scrape her again. Or worse, carry the thing. That puts her out of work for months and sticks her with a kid to raise until she can foster it out. And if that kid is a daughter ... Bad enough for business when the courses come—although the kind of scum who frequent the Serpent's Rib don't usually mind a little sauce with their serving.

But it's not yet midday, and she's already halfway to Jen's, so a *little* delay won't hurt. After all, she hasn't been swimming since she was a girl in her mother's colony. And she's always loved the water ...

"Wait for me!"

She was told it started as an innocuous lump on her mother's left breast, a tiny point of mass just below the nipple, but with appalling swiftness it had transformed itself into a dreadful beast that snaked its tendrils through her entire body, claiming muscle and fat and deforming bone; and before anyone thought to send for Tashi, Naci had no hope and little time left.

A shorn woman is not forbidden to leave her colony, but she does so at her own risk. Anything that happens to her is, by law, her own fault for being out in the first place. That understood, certain protocols must be observed. The scalp must remain shaved upon penalty of hard incarceration in a real prison. Although reasonable headgear may be worn to protect the skin from the elements, nothing may obscure the brand on the forehead. The wearing of wigs is subject to heavy fines and possible jail time. The use of public transportation, while technically not illegal, is impractical, as any shorn woman foolish enough to hire a carriage can expect scorn and revulsion from her fellow passengers, and usually much, *much* worse.

And so, when someone finally came with the news, Tashi had to walk back to her former colony.

Relocated nearly three years before to a new place of exile, she'd been too angry, afraid, or resentful to visit her mother since the humiliation of her public shearing. She was tending her flower garden when a lady in a white dress approached her and said simply,

"Your Momma's sick."

Oh, how she *hated* being a shorn woman that day, barred by custom or law from carriages, from kindness, from pity. She willed her feet to fly, but her feet could not fly, and when at last she arrived at her mother's hut, Naci was almost gone. The woman Tashi remembered had dwindled and collapsed upon herself, becoming as insubstantial as the discarded husk of a spider. Like a spider's shell, the living thing inside was breaking free, but not to more life.

Naci had grown her hair back in the months of her illness, a belated act of defiance that would allow her to die who she was, not who she'd been made to be. Even greasy and matted to her skull, it was a lovely shade of auburn, highlighted with a few tangles of gray. Tashi had never seen her mother with hair. The two helpers attending Naci stepped aside respectfully as she rushed to her bed to embrace her. "Oh, Momma—"

"Don't touch, sweetie. It hurts." Naci's voice was raspy and soft, but each breath she drew rattled like water snorkeling through a tube. Tashi jerked her hands back and clasped them over her mouth. No no no

...

"Can't you ...?" she said to the helpers, who only shook their heads.

"I see a face," Naci whispered.

"Whose face, Momma? Who do you see?"

Her mother smiled and started to speak and died.

Tashi gaped at her, then at the helpers, then at her own hands, as if there were something they should be doing.

"You look so pretty with hair," she said to Naci's body, and it wasn't enough, but it was all she would ever get. After that she went out into the world. Although she never quite had the courage to risk long-term prison by growing her own hair, she never returned to the relative comfort of her colony, either. She became a creature of the fringe, eventually drifting down and down into the slums of Kressa, where she met Stimme, who introduced her to a man at the Serpent's Rib. She was only fifteen, young and attractive, and the proprietor thought she would do very nicely indeed. Youth and beauty were prized by his clients at the Rib ... for the few weeks or months that such qualities usually lasted there. "I'll give you a room," he said, "but you gotta earn your keep. And get yourself a wig. We can't let on we got a shorn woman workin' for us. Bad for the reputation. The law catches you wearing the wig? You pay the fine, and I never heard of you. You get yourself knocked up? You're out."

After two years and a couple of messy incidents involving a wire, the midwife told her about Jen. She'd been getting her potion from him ever since.

Tashi has somehow maintained her looks, despite her lifestyle, although at nineteen her youth is already gone. Standing next to the stream where Ket has brought her, she sets down her jug and peels herself out of her blue cotton dress and her bloomers. The rag won't be needed here, so she stuffs it back into the pocket of her dress. *It's only blood. Won't hurt the river none.* She hesitates before taking off her hat and wig, but Ket must have seen her without them at Jen's, so what's it matter? The boy watches her disrobe in stunned awe, as if the gods themselves have descended to earth before his eyes. "Well, whatcha gawking at?" Tashi says. "Come on, strip. This was your idea."

"Don't look."

Don't look? Tashi laughs; she's seen more peckers than this boy has hairs on his head.

Her amusement seems to hurt his feelings. "Oh, *whatever*, all right? I won't look."

Instead she wades into the stream, to her knees, to her hips, to her chest, where it's at its deepest point. The water is cool on this hot day, and feels wonderful. Trees line both banks, but the sun breaks through gaps in the canopy and glitters on the swells like tiny diamonds. Tashi leans back against a meandering current, paddling her arms to keep herself afloat. As the water laps at her ears and cheeks, as flecks of light ribbon past her eyes, she immerses herself in something more substantial than the physical now.

She recalls a time of innocence, not so long ago, not so long ago ...

A small cramp interrupts her reverie. She notices Ket hasn't joined her. She rises in the water, enjoying the buoyancy of her breasts. Ket, now apparently naked, has knelt behind a fallen tree trunk. The sun is in his beautiful, many-colored hair, framing his head in a fiery halo. She can't see his hands, but he is pumping his right arm furiously and gazing rapturously at her.

When he realizes she's watching he becomes still as stone. "I'm sorry," he stammers. "You're so pretty."

Tashi feels an upswelling of tenderness that's neither maternal nor lustful. "Don't stop," she says. "It's all right."

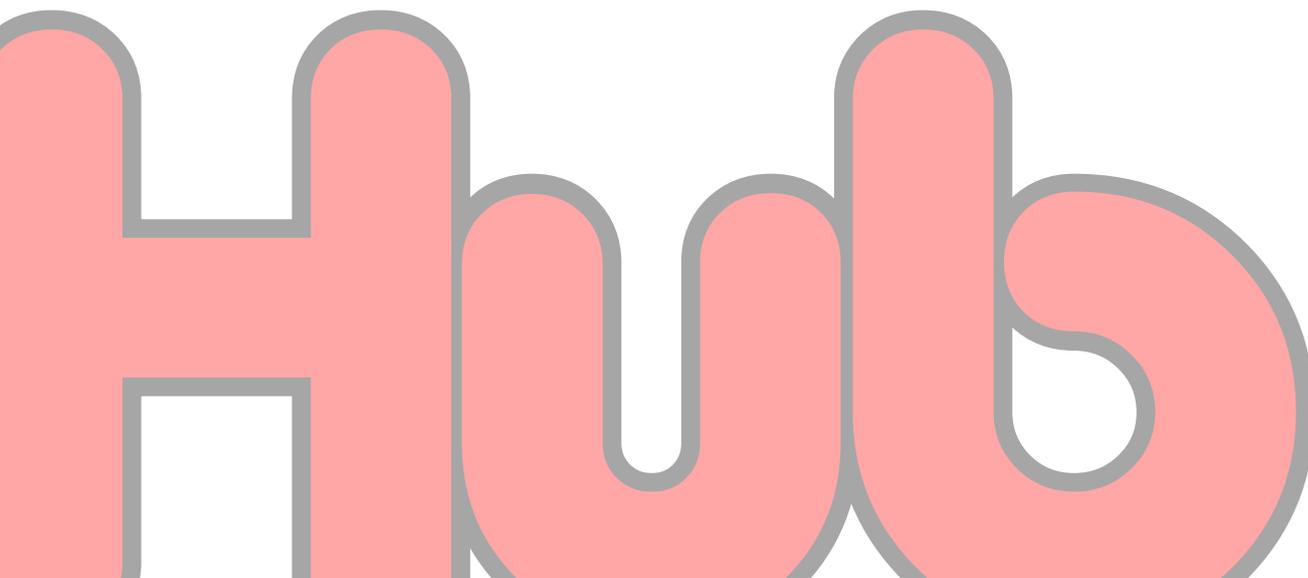
Slowly his arm begins to move again. "Thank you," he says.

She looks down to allow him his privacy. Her reflection ripples beneath her.

I see a face.

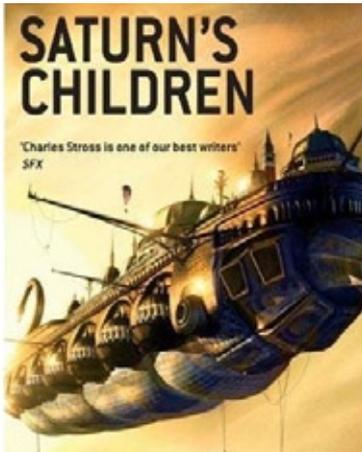
Was it my face, Momma? Please, was it mine?

Tashi hears Ket groan, then a cramp seizes her, threatening to pull her under. She struggles to remain upright, to fulfill her childhood promise. *I won't drown.* She feels the first sputtering of blood, corrupt blood passed down from her mother, but the cool, pure flow of current dilutes it and carries it harmlessly away.



Saturn's Children

reviewed by martin willoughby



by Charles Stross
Orbit
rrp £7.99

I wasn't too impressed with *Halting State*, but, not wishing to ignore an author on the basis of one novel, I decided to give this one a go. I'm glad I did.

I was expecting another SF Comedy/Thriller, but instead got an SF Thriller/Comedy. At first I thought, "this isn't funny", but the story was so good that I ignored the lack of laughter and continued anyway.

It's told from the point of view of Freya, a courtesan robot who was designed for escorting human males and providing sexual services, but was built after humanity became extinct. Needless to say, she's a little frustrated.

She lives in a solar system run by aristo robots who keep the rest of the robots as slaves via slave chips inserted into the back of their heads. When the book opens, Freya's on a cruise ship high in the Venusian atmosphere contemplating suicide, like so many of her siblings have done in the past. An aristo robot takes exception to her, for reasons that only become clear towards the end of the book, and Freya has to leave Venus in a hurry.

What follows is a gripping story of cross, double-cross, triple-cross with several erotic moments (all done in the best possible taste) in between. Freya leaves Venus as a courier for JeevesCo to take a package to Mars, upsets another aristo and has to hide on the outside of the spaceship hiding from the pink police... no, not that kind of pink.

After being co-opted into being a spy, she uses her agent's bank account to get some serious upgrades before she gets killed. Naturally, things don't go according to plan and she gets caught and slave chipped. How she gets out of it is interesting and not fully revealed until near the end of the book.

There's nothing to really dislike about this book. It's very well paced and has more SF ideas than you can shake a stick at. At times you have to concentrate really hard so as not to lose the plot (literally), but that's no bad thing.

The author has also created a universe that has innumerable possibilities for future stories. Not only do you have an underground movement seeking to overthrow the slave-owning aristos and give every robot freedom, but you also have non-slave workers in the outer system and beyond seeking to remake humanity from strands of DNA left behind.

The main character, Freya, is particularly well drawn and we get to see everything from her point of view. She is one of many robots of the same design, but due to the way they were raised and taught, in order to have distinct personalities, she is also unlike her sibs. I'll let you find the rest out for yourself as it's far more interesting, and surprising, that way.

The other main characters work for JeevesCo, a company staffed by robots built as butlers... as if you couldn't guess. Seeing as there are very few robots, and no humans, in need of their services anymore, they have branched out into many other things, such as courier work. Freya gets to meet several of them and finds out that at least one of them is a spy for the aristos.

There are several other interesting characters such as Stone, Bill and Ben who are murderous dwarf

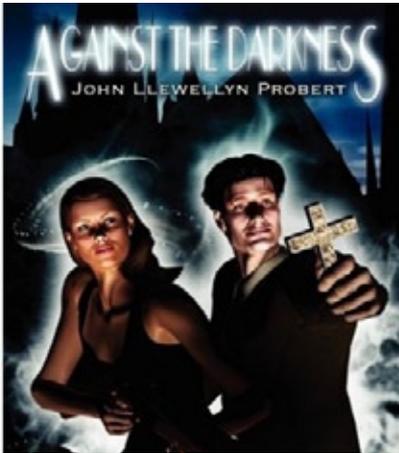
robots and a spider-like robot that works for the underground.

All in all, this is far better than *Halting State* and a thoroughly recommended read.

One last thing. There is a bit social commentary in here about human reliance on machines and its effects on humanity. It's not thrust in the reader's face, but it rings all too true.

Against the Darkness

reviewed by derek john



By John Llewellyn Probert
Screaming Dreams Press
rrp £9.99

There is a brand of macabre fiction that remains uniquely British. Its origins can be traced to the moment when the twisted morality tales of the penny dreadful were cross-fertilised with the transatlantic misanthropy of Ambrose Bierce and later, the horror comics of the forties and fifties. This mixture of traditional British black humour and over-the-top gore found its finest flowering in the Amicus portmanteau films and the long-running Pan Books of Horror series in the early seventies. After a long hiatus this subgenre is finally making a comeback, helped along no doubt by the success of such darkly comic radio and television series as *The League of Gentlemen*, *Garth Marenghi* and the *In the Gloaming* podcasts.

J.L.Probert will be familiar to many Hub readers for his previous collection *The Faculty of Terror* (Grayfriars Press 2006) which was an explicit homage to the golden age of Amicus and the fiction of the late R. Chetwynd-Hayes. *Against the Darkness* is his latest offering in the same vein: a collection of eleven interlinked tales which introduce the reader to the world of psychic detectives Massene Henderson and Samantha Jephcott. With two exceptions the stories are short and punchy and laced with Probert's blend of intelligent wit, mindboggling plot twists and skincrawling moments of terror.

In the introduction Probert talks about the genesis of the book in an urge to write a British *X-Files* of sorts – something akin to a modern reworking of the classic *Avengers* series. In the opening story *Bother in the Belfry* we are introduced to Massene Henderson: psychic detective for hire and his dealings with the first of the many Lovecraftian horrors who are seeking to arise and create mayhem in this sceptred isle. In the second story *A Fear of Fitness* he links up with the feisty brunette Samantha Jephcott in the unique setting of a haunted gym and the adventures proper begin in classic Hero/Sidekick fashion.

Part of the charm of the book lies in the relationship between the two characters as it develops over a series of mad escapades and near death experiences while battling the full range of supernatural horrors old Albion can offer, from foxhunting vampires (*Bloodsucking in Berkshire*) to zombie Zeppelins who haven't realised the war is over (*Horror in the Heavens*).

The banter between the two leads and the will-they won't they sexual tension may be a little too close to *Moonlighting* for some but in fact (despite the Mulder and Scully-esque duo on the cover where brunette Jephcott mysterious turns redhead) with the velvet smoking jacket and general air of indifference to the modern world of Henderson and the down-to-earth practicality of Jephcott what we really have is a classic pairing in the style of Dr Who or Steed and Mrs Peel.

Each story is crammed with the trademark wordplay and wit that Probert is famous for. Often wild ideas are thrown into the mix just for fun (one glorious aside has a vampire, tired of not being able to preen himself, construct a mirror that will only reflect pure evil – much to the bemusement of the protagonists who of course can't see themselves). The stories are at their best when the mixture of humour and suspense

wrongfoot the reader and they realise that they've been suckered by one of the many red-herrings Probert has left to trip up the unwary. In one of my personal favourites *Happy Ever After* we are given a unique twist on the cuckoo-in-the-nest theme which results in the most blood-soaked wedding reception since *The Company of Wolves*.

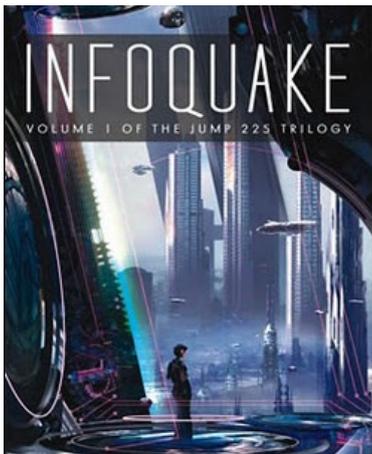
The two longer tales *Within the Walls* and *An Element of Emotion* are to my mind less successful with the reader's attention diverted by the necessary backgrounding of the various historical forces of evil at work. While the denouements of both tales are intellectually satisfying, (especially *An Element*), the attempt to blend more subtly Jamesian themes of ancient evil unleashed with the fast-paced black humour is an uneasy marriage.

Probert is obviously someone who has read and watched a heck of a lot of fantasy and horror and the stories are littered with little references for those fans who like seek them out. In *Within the Walls* for instance I picked-up on the following: numerous references to M.R.James and H.P.Lovecraft, classic era Dr Who like *The Daemons* and *The Awakening*, 70's schlock *The Medusa Touch*, *The Quatermass Experiment* and obscure Italian horror movie *The Church*. No doubt there's many more but I suspect we'll all have to do a heck of lot more reading before we're as erudite as Mr Probert.

Against the Darkness is a great read by a master of British macabre, in turns silly, surreal and scary and I look forward to meeting this eccentric pair again for further adventures.

Infoquake: Book 1 of the Jump 225 Trilogy

reviewed by alasdair stuart



by **David Louis Edelman**

Published by **Solaris**

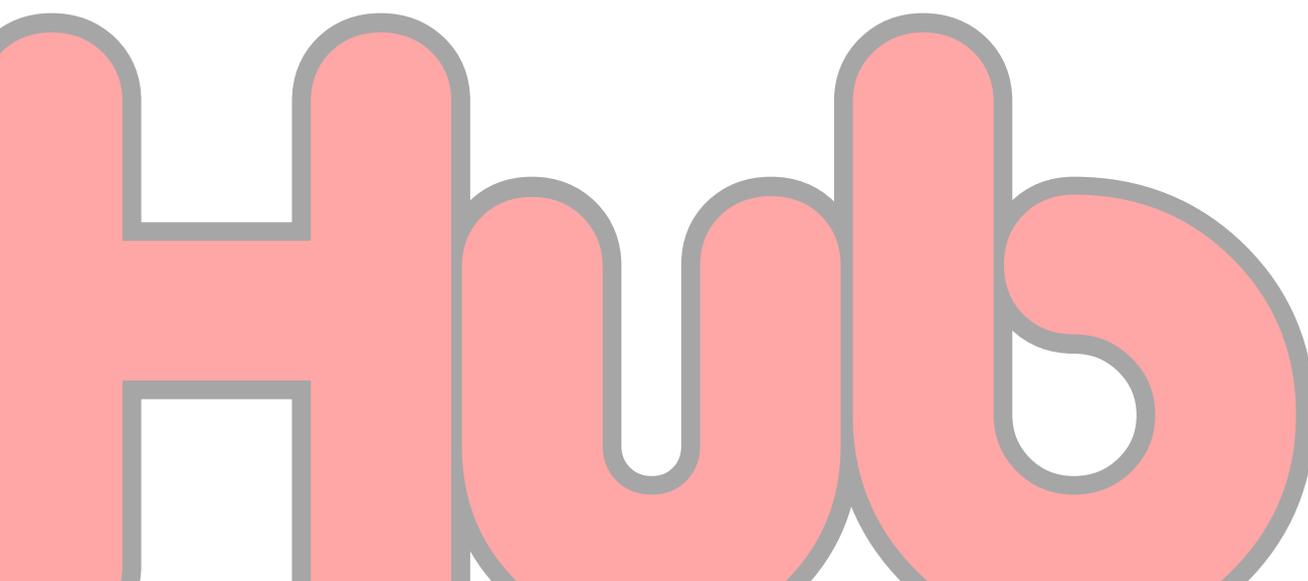
rrp **£7.99**

The funny thing about this business is that it's all too easy to focus on the new, on the now and forget what's already come and gone. Which is a shame because if you do that, you miss books like *Infoquake* and its sequels, which are within sight of being modern classics.

Natch, is a ROD coder. Routine On Demand (ROD) programs are rich toys that allow the user to 'hack' their OCHRE machines, internal enhancements that keep them healthy. ROD coders write programs that play with this, allowing them to change their appearance and literally fit in with their surroundings and Natch? Natch is the best. Along with Jara, a colleague and Horvil, a childhood friend, Natch sets up his own company with one intention; get to the top of the pile. He succeeds, he is, after all, Natch but that's where the trouble really begins. Natch attracts the attention Margaret Surina. Margaret's company has developed a technology called MultiReal and the Defence and Wellness Council will do everything in their power to stop it. The only way to stay alive is to go public and the only way to go public? Is for Natch to go home...

In this post-ipad, post-Slumdog Millionaire world Edelman's book is, if anything, more timely than it was four years ago. It's a smart, blistering novel which is filled with ideas and concepts crammed together in much the same way the city stacks people on top of one another. Edelman cleverly uses both the technology and the situation to set Natch up as a whipsmart, arrogant, almost antagonistic figure and then knock him down. As Natch is forced to go back to his childhood to help solve the problem, Edelman cleverly repositions him, contextualising Natch's actions and raising the human stakes of the story. It's a smart move, and Natch's journey from total self belief to total self examination is beautifully done, equal parts dark night of the soul and frantic programming frenzy.

Relentlessly, massively ambitious and completely relevant, Infoquake is cyberpunk for the Social Network generation. As effortlessly smart as Natch thinks he is, it's a must buy.



FEATURES

Marble Hornets...

by phil lunt

...and the Urban Myth Creation of Doom!

You're at home, alone. It's late and it's dark outside and you've just got in. You feel as if you were followed home by someone. You hear a noise outside and so you switch off the lights in your hallway, trying to get a look through the blinds by your front door, to see who is out there. You're on edge and your heart is thumping loudly in your ears. You have your film camera in your hand so get it running, document this, it might help. You peer through the blinds. There's nothing on the porch.

Scan around with the camera, anybody out there? Anything?

Yes.

He's there. Stood by your front porch. His head turns towards you, suddenly. He knows you're there, watching. He knows he can get you anytime he wants...

Legends of the Slender Man first began to appear in Germanic wood carvings from the 16th century, depicting a tall, thin, figure dressed in black who would chase children that entered his habitat. There, he was called *Der Grossmann* and he was one of the fairy-folk that lived in the Black Forest. The only way a child could avoid *Der Grossman* was if they confessed to their misdemeanour or he would pursue them until caught, whereupon he would whisk them away to who knows where.

Except, he didn't.

This article was originally going to be on Alternate Reality Gaming (ARG) as part of the *Save Point* series. During my research for that article I was pointed in the direction of a specific game by Alasdair Stuart, Hub's Managing Editor, bon viveur and all-round top bloke. As a relative beginner, re-entering the world of ARGs, I checked the game out on genre start-point website, Unfiction.com, and found that not only was this particular "game" considered to be very much active but it had a fertile following on the Unfiction forum. OK, nothing new there, I suppose, except I saw something which I hadn't seen attached to non-commercial ARGs before in that people appeared to be creating their own stories within the game. Fan-fiction, as it were. I began to delve deeper.

On 20th June 2009, the first *Marble Hornets* video surfaced on YouTube followed, on June 22nd, by a Twitter account of the main protagonist of the videos, Jay.

The story revolves around a film student, Jay, who has been given video tapes to destroy by another student, Alex, who has since disappeared. The tapes include footage from an abandoned film project that Alex was working on called *Marble Hornets* but some recordings on the tapes don't involve the project and Jay soon finds footage which shows that Alex appeared to have been stalked by someone or something.

To keep to my initial subject, however, I watched the videos and read the blogs that were linked on the Unfiction forum but I began to feel that this wasn't what I would typically call an ARG. There was a lack of puzzles, though the videos were intriguing and kept many people guessing. Some of the videos lacked sound, which was later included on other videos posted by another antagonist, totheark. Matching the sound to the appropriate videos gave enough people reason to continue to call *Marble Hornets* an Alternate Reality Game. I began to see *Marble Hornets* as more akin to an interactive storytelling project though.

I delved deeper and began to see posts about the main antagonist, the Slender Man, regarding the fact that this creature had started life outside of *Marble Hornets*, outside of the ARG, on another forum. I

began to investigate.

Slender Man first appeared on the SomethingAwful.com web forums on 10th June 2009, just 10 days before the first *Marble Hornets* video appeared. The thread where he was 'born' began as a simple "let's create paranormal images" informal contest that unwittingly developed into something akin to a massive social experiment in creating urban legends. People of all ages, scaring each other out of their wits with some very good photo manipulation work and often clever storytelling: the internet equivalent of telling ghost stories around the campfire.

Of particular note were the posts of one "Victor Surge". On the 3rd page of this thread, Surge adds the first post that includes the creature that they name "The Slender Man". However, elsewhere on the forum, posters begin to point out similarities between Slender Man and a story that has been floating around the internet since about 2006 called "*The Rake*". Other existing stories and real-life events soon get entwined within the Slender Man myth on the forum, including the 1959 Dylatov Pass incident in Russia, where 9 ski-hikers died under mysterious circumstances.

Slender Man is, though, in all essence just another bogeyman. A kidnapper of children, the unknown that lurks in the shadows and peeps at us around corners and through windows. The thing we fear that follows us as we walk home at night, hiding behind objects whenever we turn around.

The Slender Man was a conglomerate of different spooky figures from various films, mashed together with creative back-stories and shoe-horned into existing mysteries to scare the bejeesus out of as many people as he could. But the creature then developed further and *Marble Hornets* took it to a bigger, much wider, audience.

I managed to track down one of *Marble Hornets* creators, Troy Wagner, who also plays Jay in the videos as well as co-writing and directing the series, and bugged the heck out of him until he graciously answered some of my questions for Hub:

Hub Magazine: The first *Marble Hornets* video appeared only 10 days after *Slender Man* was first mentioned on the Something Awful forum. Did you get the whole idea for *Marble Hornets* from there or was something already in development and the *Slender Man* character happened to fill a gap in your own story? Or was it all just an amazing coincidence?

Troy Wagner: The idea for *Marble Hornets* stemmed directly from the 'create paranormal images' thread on Something Awful. I was wanting to work on some kind of video series for a while, but I could never think up a good enough concept with which I was satisfied. The ideas and "lore" that was made on that particular thread is what inspired me to participate in it, which lead directly to *Marble Hornets*. I was very fortunate that it all worked out the way that it did.

HM: How quickly did the project go from idea to actual produced/released video? What did your creative process involve?

TW: There was very little time between pre-production planning and the first finished entry being uploaded to YouTube. I made the original, in-character post explaining the story of *Marble Hornets* on the Something Awful thread, then called my friend Joseph DeLage to see if he wanted to come help me out with it (I originally planned to write and shoot it all on my own, which probably wouldn't have worked in retrospect). When he agreed he came over to my house later that night and we had a five hour story boarding session where we laid out all of the events of the entries in the order we wanted to post them. That was the easy part, however. After that, we had to go out and actually shoot all of our crazy ideas in a convincing manner. Typically, most of the entries only involved one person in front of the camera maximum (some not even requiring that). But on the few occasions where the "set" of the fictional film within *Marble Hornets* was shown, we would simply call our friends to see if they were available for half a day and then shoot. There were not really any "trained" actors involved at all, just whoever wanted to be in it.

HM: Did you have anything to do with the stories involving *Slender Man* that appeared on the Something Awful forum?

TW: No. We consider *Marble Hornets* to be completely separate.

HM: Did you have any hand in any of the blogs created regarding *Slender Man*?

TW: No. The only thing Joseph and I did was the *Marble Hornets* and totheark YouTube channels.

HM: Do you feel you've succeeded in what you wanted to achieve with *Marble Hornets*? What do you think about fan reaction on places like the Unfiction forum?

TW: I feel like we've achieved a lot more than we originally set out to do. We had no idea it would become so popular so quickly. We really owe all of that to places like Unfiction and Something Awful (4chan had a hand in it too, so I've heard). However, that being said, *Marble Hornets* is by no means over yet. There is still plenty more to try and accomplish with all aspects of it, such as the storytelling, acting, and technical aspects.

HM: *Marble Hornets* is considered by most to be an Alternate Reality Game, would you consider it to be an ARG or simply an episodic film project?

TW: I definitely consider it to be an episodic film project. There are a few "puzzles" here and there (usually with the totheark videos), but they are by no means necessary to enjoy the actual story. They're simply there for the people who want to interact with the story in an alternative way. And to fuel all the rampant speculations about what will happen next!

HM: Are there any connections whatsoever between *Marble Hornets* and *EverymanHYBRID*? Have the guys behind *EverymanHYBRID* contacted you regarding the story or anything about *Slender Man*?

TW: No connections. They have not contacted us either. But I am happy to see that they're getting exposure. *EverymanHYBRID* is a very cool concept.

HM: Following on from that, have copyright issues regarding the character of *Slender Man* ever been a concern/issue with you? I'm guessing no-one really owns the character; do you consider *Slender Man* to be *Creative Commons*?

TW: The only non-human character that appears in *Marble Hornets* is The Operator. There's definitely some inspirations from other sources, but we consider it to be our own interpretive creation.

HM: How do you feel about the number of people on the internet who have, after seeing *Marble Hornets* amongst other things, begun to believe that *Slender Man* actually exists?

TW: However people want to interact with said storytelling is completely up to them. Lots of people believe in ghosts and the like, which probably originated from scary folk tales told a century or two ago, if that makes sense.

HM: Where do you see *Marble Hornets* going in the future? Will there be a part 2 and, if so, when?

TW: Like I said, *Marble Hornets* is NOT over yet. I can't give any information on any kind of timeframe or date when new entries will be released. But yeah... not over yet. That's really all I can say at the moment.

Marble Hornets is a work of fiction and an amazing project by Troy and Joseph on a show-string budget driven by heaps of enthusiasm. Even now, and after talking with Troy, some of the videos still freak me out. To me, this shows how good the endeavour is. They appear to have captured something in the videos which is simple yet frightening on a basic level. A feeling of isolation and of an invasion of space by an unknown, seemingly unstoppable, entity. And that you only see this entity in glimpses leaves more for the imagination to warp whilst filling in the blanks. Is it what was attempted with *Blair Witch Project* minus the hype and over-egging? Or *The Last Broadcast* without the silly ending?

I'm openly pleased to say that I still find I have to convince people that it is a work of fiction whenever I recommend it to others to watch. I won't name my friends who have texted me late at night asking me to reassure them that *Marble Hornets* isn't real, that it is fiction. But, hey, I can't guarantee these things don't actually exist...

Der Grossman/Slender Man, or The Operator as he is known in *Marble Hornets*, are the creations of a type of collective consciousness, the culmination of people throwing their ideas into the cloud/internet and trying to scare the wits out of each other. One idea stuck more than others and was built on, developed and grew out of its original remit.

The development of the Slender Man myth doesn't stop here. *EverymanHYBRID*, another video project, as mentioned above, is rolling along at pace as I type. I recommend readers check that out as well as the *Marble Hornets* videos. They deal with the mythos in a different way but it's equally intriguing. Photos and written stories are still popping up on the internet on forum sites and blogs. Then there's still *Marble Hornets*, who knows where Troy and Joseph will take it in the future?

I began this primarily to look into Alternate Reality Gaming, what I actually found was something which, I believe, is a lot bigger and far more intriguing... and forgive me if I'm coming across as precocious here. I've been a part of web forums and sprawling, open, creative projects since, oh, 1996 but what I've seen develop from that thread on the SomethingAwful.com forum has been far more successful and complete than anything I'd witnessed before.

And it got loose.

In the words of "I", forum member on SomethingAwful.com:

"The Slender Man. He exists because you thought of him. Now try and not think of him."

Useful Links:

Marble Hornets:

<http://www.youtube.com/marblehornets#p/u/28/Wmhfn3mgWUI>

Marble Hornets Twitter account:

<https://twitter.com/marblehornets>

SomethingAwful Forum thread (warning: lots of swearing!):

<http://forums.somethingawful.com/showthread.php?threadid=3150591>

The Rake story:

<http://community.livejournal.com/hauntings/613232.html>

