

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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ISSUE 142 · 17TH AUG 2011

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EDITORIAL:

by alasdair stuart

Zero Day

I was always a Marvel kid. Mostly it was because Marvel actually got some distribution in the news stands and newsagents on the Isle of Man but partially it was because Marvel felt... solid to me. The adolescence metaphors of Spiderman and the X-Men turned up at exactly the right time for me and I dived headlong into their world, complete with vast hats, impenetrable plots and limited edition polybags, trading cards and holographic covers. Crass? Certainly. Fun? Without a doubt.

As the years went by, and I ran a comic shop, my taste expanded and I read pretty much everything. Now I read less, because I'm not paid to cover it all anymore, but I still read and enjoy a lot of stuff, some Marvel, some Image, some Vertigo.

That's about to change. The DC reboot, a line wide return to issue 1 and a new status quo has grabbed the attention of the entire comic industry for several weeks at time of writing. It's easy to see why too, with Action Comics less than a hundred issues away from 1000 before the reboot and seemingly decades of history being erased and streamlined.

Sort of.

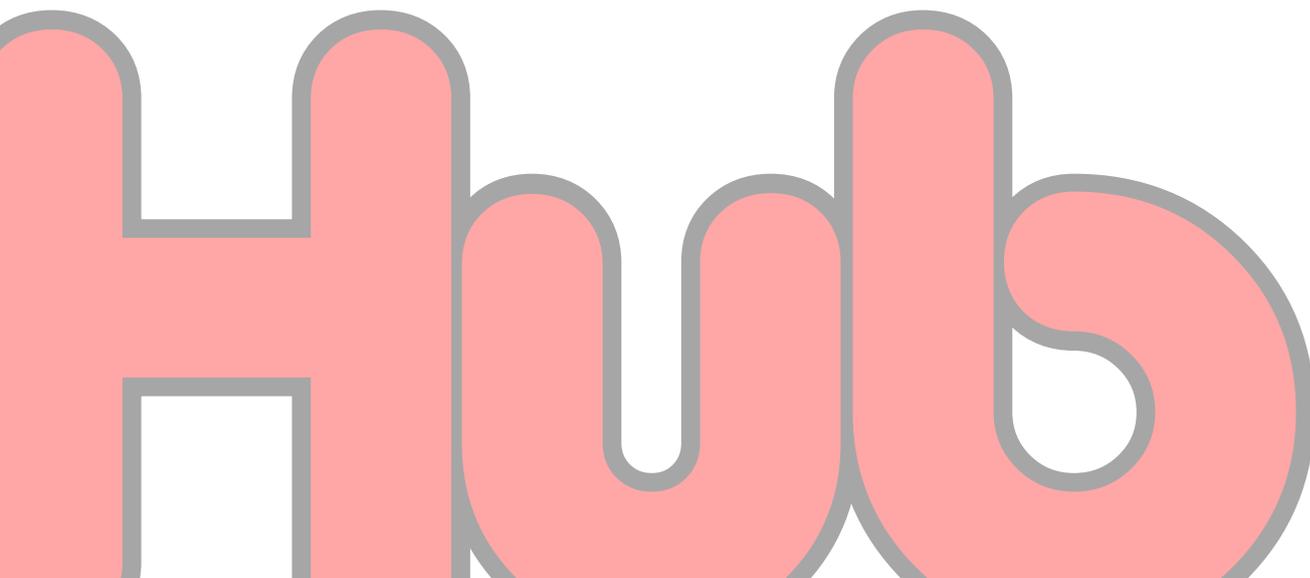
Whilst details are still emerging it seems like a certain amount of the existing stories will be remembered and acted upon. Gail Simone, superlative writer of *Birds of Prey* for example, is now writing *Batgirl*, featuring

the original Batgirl, Barbara Gordon. Initial controversy over this apparently erasing Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke*, where she was crippled, has been offset by two things; Simone writing the book and an acknowledgement that Barbara will remember the events of *The Killing Joke* in some way.

(Now there's a whole other article there about the issues of entitlement, power, feminine action and the male viewpoint which I'm not going to get into but would love someone else to discuss. If you want to write that piece for us? Email me at alasdairstuart@gmail.com.)

Sacred cows moved out of the road but not killed, continuity streamlined and rolled back and modified and suddenly everything's fluid and new and interesting. DC have an insanely rich history with their characters and the organisation of them into 'families' makes this a really attractive prospect. Like Batman? These books, all issue 1s. Like Superman? These, all issue 1s. Paul Cornell, who's writing what promises to be a fascinating version of the old Wildstorm book *Stormwatch* summed it up perfectly when he was asked where people should start with the DCU relaunch; 'Anywhere!'

So they've got my attention. And I have yours. So if you want to review some of the issue 1's for us, let me know at that address. We'll sort out a roster of who's covering what and when the relaunch happens we'll run reviews of everything. Because it's not often you get to be at day one of a new universe is it?





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FICTION

The Mumbling Man

by danie ware

I like trains.

No, I don't mean I stand at the end of the platform at Clapham with a fur-hooded anorak and a notebook, I mean intercity trains. I've got a bitch of a schedule and a lot of meetings and trains are quiet. They're good places to think.

A long-distance train is a null-space; it's timeless, it exists between one place and another. You don't have to be anywhere, or anyone. No-one expects anything of you. You can sit with your earbuds, your laptop, your book; you can watch the passing countryside and leave your stresses behind.

Trains are peaceful, tinged with potential.

It was Friday evening, and I was heading back into London from Portsmouth, straight from a conference and laden with possibilities. As we'd left the coast, the carriage had been heaving, but now it was almost empty; outside, dusk was beginning to gather over the fields and castles of old Sussex. I had a gin and tonic and a warm glow; my laptop was on the table, but I'd not got as far as opening it, or attaching structure to the wealth of new ideas.

The rhythm of the wheels brought restfulness. They could wait.

Instead, I kicked off my heels under the table – damn things were pinching – and tucked my stockinged feet up onto the seat beside me. The setting sun streamed in through the window, sliding liquid gold through the carriage and warming my skin. With my drink in my hand, ice-cubes rattling gently against the plastic, I leaned my shoulder against the rest and watched the world roll by.

Over my ghost-reflection, the summer day was fading with a lilac sigh. The railway line ran through long folds of rich green, through woodlands tinged with yellow light. Rural Sussex is beautiful, a perfect patchwork of rolling fields, speckled with villages; every so often, there's the square, flint tower of an old Norman church, lord of its domain for a thousand years. Gravestones surround them, tiny slabs of pale grey.

The gin spread its glow into my belly. It had been a very long day.

I closed my eyes, and lifted my face to the touch of the sun.

The sudden hiss of the inter-carriage door woke me with a start. The train had stopped, the sun was gone and there were voices, outside on the platform. A breath of chill air touched me and I sat up, shivering and blinking, a crick in my neck where I'd dozed off against the window. My feet were cold.

I was disoriented; had no idea where we were.

Sitting up straighter, I put the drink down and twitched my shoulders, unsure how the temperature had dropped so sharply. Outside, the dusk had gathered to purple streaks and the sun was a heavily lidded eye, swollen-dark and sinking low over the hillsides.

The outer door slammed, hard.

As the train hauled itself back into motion, I missed the platform-sign, and fumbled for my smartphone as I craned to see round the edge of the window. The station was a small one, almost deserted. Hanging baskets were overladen with dying spring blossom and the lamps threw pools of odd, pale light.

An after-echo of my dreaming made me shiver.

Irritated, I sat up, shook myself awake. Tapped the screen on the phone.

Nothing.

The shiver came again.

Banishing my disquiet with carefully disciplined annoyance, I stood up, slipped my feet back into my

heels and stretched, fetching my briefcase from the overhead storage. When my phone was safely plugged and charging, I flicked open the laptop instead.

As the little machine powered up, I realised something else – a thought like a slowly crystallising drip...

There was no-one else in the carriage.

My shiver became a *frisson*; a tantalising cold finger, stroking, teasing, down my spine. Under me, the train was picking up speed, the rattling now swift and relentless.

My thoughts caught the rhythm of the wheels: *Where are we going? Where are we now? Where are we going? Where are we--?*

Stop it!

In the sky, the evening had gathered to gloom. Vast shadows stretched long across the hillsides and nameless dark shapes flashed by, close to the window.

I rubbed gooseflesh from my arms, stood up to slot my briefcase neatly back where it had been. I took a proper, careful look around the carriage.

No, I wasn't quite alone.

Down towards the door, slumped asleep with a newspaper forgotten in his lap, was a slightly crumpled, older man. His face was unshaven, creased with age or pain, and one arm was tucked protectively against his side. His clothing was dirty and every so often he twitched, like a sleeping animal.

For no rational reason, he made me uneasy.

Faintly humorously, my mind labelled him 'creepy playground stalker' - though he'd probably been no closer to a playground than I had.

He was muttering in his sleep.

Something between distaste and sympathy curled my expression. I watched him for a moment, but decided that no, I wasn't going to move. After all, he was harmless – just one of life's casualties. Whoever he was, he had nothing to do with me.

On the table, my laptop was booting, a bright light of rationality. It jingled welcome and I banished all thoughts of stalkers and sunsets. Instead, I drained the last of the G & T, now mostly water, and set the cup down decisively.

I watched the screen as the browser opened...

There was no time readout.

No wifi symbol.

Nothing.

My Cleopatra wallpaper smirked at me, at thoughts unvoiced. She looked like she'd just closed some huge deal, made a bundle on the markets, fired an ex-lover and got a kick out of doing it--

From the end of the carriage, I heard the man give a sudden, louder mutter and I jumped, my heart pounding. Sternly telling myself there was nothing wrong, I reached for my phone.

Had to know what the time was.

Damn thing was still dead.

Oh for God's sake!

Really peeved now, I checked the socket, made a mental note to call my provider and give them hell at the earliest opportunity.

The man muttered again. He sounded like he was laughing.

As I glanced down towards him, the train juddered and lurched. My stomach flipped and I found I was breathing swift and shallow, some irrational fear chasing across my skin and leaving tails of chill. The man's mouth was moving, some hopeless, endless monologue that touched both pity and aversion; for a moment, I could almost hear him. "...lost... ..aren't you... ..Juliet?"

Juliet.

I froze.

What?

But my rational, corporate mind was too well-trained – I'd misheard him. My surroundings were teasing me – there was no way he could be using my name.

Ridiculous.

My browser still wasn't opening. My phone was still dead.

Cold crept over my shoulders like fingers; I straightened my suit skirt and turned to the window. It was almost dark out there now. In the flat black, I could see the reflection of my face, my laptop, the lights in the carriage. If I cupped a hand against the cold glass and peered, I could just about make out the gently sloping Sussex hills...

The ground was flat.

That couldn't be right.

I'd done this trip many times, down to the company's offices on the harbourside and then back into London – had I somehow got on the wrong train?

I peered harder; both hands now shutting the light from round me.

Lost. Aren't you. Juliet.

The sky was deep blue, streaked with grey cloud and scatters of white stars; there was no moon. If I looked down, I could see the railway line was elevated, slightly above what looked like some sort of fen, almost a swamp. In places, there was the dark sheen of water.

This time, the shiver was tangible – a shudder, a choke of cold that closed soft hands around my throat. For just a moment, the fear was so strong that I couldn't breathe.

Where the hell was I?

Lost.

I reached for my phone again, pointlessly, reflexively, trying to check the time and reference my progress. As I did so, I heard the man say distinctly, "...don't you remember?"

My browser still wasn't opening. Cleo smiled at me, mocking, knowing.

Aren't you, Juliet?

No, dammit, I wasn't letting this scare me. I'd faced down a sneering table of middle management; I was the toast of my company and I'd got to the top by any damned means possible. I wasn't being bloody-well frightened by some stinking-poor alcoholic on a train.

You can do anything, my father used to tell me, and I'd spent my whole life knowing he was right.

But I still had no web access; no time and no space. I had no idea when or where I was.

Don't you remember?

Enough!

I stood up to my full height, did up the jacket, banished the phantoms. Figuring that creepy-stalker-man wouldn't steal the laptop as he had nowhere to put it, I picked up my wallet and my useless phone and I walked down the carriage, my heels snicking decisively as I went.

I was going to take control of this situation. Someone on this train would have a link to the outside world and I was damned-well going to find them.

The next carriage was empty.

Rubbish was scattered across the tables; discarded papers and empty cans of fizz. Obscurely comforted by this touch of humanity, I kept walking.

The carriage after was also empty.

So was the carriage after that.

The train swayed and thundered; racing from nowhere to nowhere. I had to catch my balance repeatedly and silently cursed the ubiquitous heels. The cold was making me shiver, for real now. As I passed the train toilet and the next door along slid open, I could see that the following carriage, too, was entirely deserted.

Wasn't that..? I counted back, sure that I hadn't walked past this many doors on the platform at Portsmouth Harbour.

Don't you remember?

No, I was imagining it. For heaven's sake.

I kept walking, more slowly now, tinged with a fusion of anger and fear. Where the hell was everybody? Was this some sort of joke?

It took another two carriages for my nerve to falter. They were all abandoned, every table, every seat,

every luggage rack. The rubbish was started to mock me – the brown bags from the coffee places, the neatly knotted crisp packets – it was all staged, eerie, perfect, an echo of vanished humanity. The windows were utterly black, now; the whole world had shrunk to this vacant and blindly racing train.

Breathing deeply, struggling to walk calmly, I turned smartly on my heel and headed back up to my seat. One carriage, two, three, four. I was starting to feel like there was something behind me, following me, something lurking just off my shoulder. It was waiting for me to run or to glance back; the moment I panicked, it would be on me like... like an irate client.

My own flash of sarcasm made me feel slightly better.

Five carriages. Six.

At the end of the sixth carriage, the old man was slumped in his seat, still muttering. There was drool on his chin. He smelled bad, of stale food and old metal and dried blood. I stopped, turned around.

Stared at the empty table for a moment.

My stuff had gone.

All of it.

There was only the tin from the G & T, sitting there almost like a marker.

Oh, you have to be bloody joking..!

The man was muttering more loudly, now, a ghost of a cackle in his booze-stinking breath.

There was no way he could've taken it; no way. Where would he hide a designer briefcase, for God's sake? What would he want--?

"...a trade, Juliet. A life."

His eyes were closed, yet the words fell from his lips like pearl-drips of toxin. I stared at him, soaking his stench through my skin, waiting for those eyes to open...

A trade, Juliet.

What bloody trade? Had I really heard him speak my name? Had I heard it in the still carriage air? In the rumble of this timeless, ludicrous journey?

No. I was scaring myself for no reason. This was impossible. There was a rational explanation for all of this.

Think, dammit, there had to be someone else here. The guard, the driver. It wasn't like they could get off before I found them.

A trade, Juliet.

Really angry now, summoning righteous fury to cover deeper, darker sensations that coiled in my belly like wires, I stalked past the old man and headed up the train the other way.

His muttered laughter followed me like a spectre.

A life.

Oh, I was going to tear an explanation out of someone's bloody *hide*.

One carriage, two. Doors hissing as I went through them; tables littered with the same scatters of rubbish. The rattle and shake of the racing train. Three carriages, four. I was walking faster, sweating now; a tickle under my breasts, a line at my temple. Five carriages, six.

Where was the First Class compartment? The refreshment car?

Long time, Juliet.

The man's muttering laughter was still following me. It teased my ears like a lover's breath, like a soft hand. It was almost--

Oh, my God.

It was almost familiar.

Don't you remember?

My blood froze to crystal horror. Where the hell did I know him from?

I paused, but the recollection was there-and-gone, even as I reached for it – a sliver of dream, as fine and sharp as a blade, shattering in the emptiness. I found myself standing in the centre of rubbish-strewn nothing, my skin crawling, my hands clenched, my polished-perfect nails biting my palms.

For an instant, I nearly turned and ran.

But to where?

Then my anger took hold, righteous and incandescent. No. This was not happening to me. I could do anything.

You hear me? Anything!

I was back in motion. Letting out a breath that promised bloody warfare, I was walking – then striding – down the middle of the train. My heels clicked like a metronome. I didn't know what the hell this prank was, but I'd teach them to fuck with me.

God bloody help the first thing I found. This wasn't funny anymore. I'd had *enough*.

The storm of my fury carrying me, I marched.

And the doors hissed and slid for me, marking my progress.

I marched until my anger ran down over my skin in rivulets of sweat and dread, marched until my feet were blistered and I could wear my shoes no longer.

Lost. Aren't you.

The train was empty. As empty as death, as empty as a grave, as empty as an abandoned bloody Norman church. When I finally saw a sleeping figure, I almost broke into a run—

And came to a dumbfounded halt at the sight of the old man.

A trade. A life.

Still slumped, still muttering, curled even harder round his arm. He didn't wake as I stood, trembling, over him.

I stared, stunned by impossibility, unable to find a single rational thought.

I'd gone round in a circle; the train had no beginning, no end.

This was insane.

Denial and disbelief froze my throat to wordlessness; bafflement screamed in my head, as loud as the rattling wheels. I had no idea, nothing, no explanation remaining. I could only stare at the lone constant, the one thing in my messed-up world that made any kind of sense.

Don't you remember?

Where was the driver? How the bloody hellfire..?

Jesus. It was too ridiculous for me to even formulate the question.

The train had slowed, rumbling softer now. Clinging to the last shreds of sense, of logical determination, I put a careful hand on the arm of the chair and leaned down to look at my companion.

Who are you? Why are you here?

Around us, around our reality, the world was plastic and metal and darkness.

He muttered something, but this time I didn't catch what he said. I leaned closer, my hand over my mouth and the blur of my shadow touching his skin.

How are you doing this?

There was a webwork of scars in his face, a faint white lattice under dirt and stubble. He wasn't as old as I'd first thought – only a little older than I – but the marks of harshness were all over him. By his huddled arm, he'd been in some sort of accident.

His clothing was good quality, but filthy, seams rotted and fabric thinning. It was over a decade out of style – it looked like he'd bought it at a charity shop.

And, in the breast pocket of his jacket, there was a corner of worn, brown leather. I looked at it for a minute before I realised what it was.

How did this wreckage of a man still have a wallet?

Juliet.

The train lurched and rattled.

I stared at it, compelled. The wallet was a rational thing in a world gone all to hell – it consumed and confused me. As my reality rang with the thunder of the wheels, with questions and impossibilities, with the damned *screaming* in my head, I stared at that little, brown leather corner.

I needed its answer – but God, I was afraid of what it contained.

Where was I? Really?

Lost.

Shivering now, one arm clutching my jacket against the horrors of incomprehension, I watched the man's face. I measured his sleeping breathing, his mutters, his spirit-reek that coloured the air.

Then, holding my breath, I touched the cool leather with a careful finger.

As I did so, he started and muttered louder, his lips and eyelids flickered. I jumped, heart pounding, the waft of shock and booze and stale sweat nearly making me gag.

His lips were moving.

"At last," he said softly. "I've been waiting for this."

Been waiting for this.

The words echoed in the train's rhythm, 'been-waiting-for-this', 'been-waiting-for-this'. As I listened, the noise closed round me, a band across my throat, an echo in my ears, a hand tight around my heart. His soft, rotting laughter was twisting in my memory, old fears jabbered at the corners of my mind. The reek of the alcohol, so familiar, the colours of his now-faded jacket...

Oh my God.

I *did* know him, this mumbling man!

Been-waiting-for-this!

The realisation hit me like a fist, flattened me, horrified me. Tight with terror and fury and anticipation, I waited for him to settle.

Been-waiting-for-this!

Why I didn't just shake his shoulder and wake him, tell him exactly what I thought of his joke and demand an explanation, I didn't know – I throttled the thought as it surfaced. I had to know everything first, I told myself; had to face him with all the relevant information.

His mutters rolled into quiet. Stinking, he settled deeper into the seat. His breathing evened and slowed.

As I watched him sleep, the lines of his face hazed slowly into focus, like the dawn creeping into an all-night party.

I know I know you! But from where?

It was a smoke-wisp of recollection, laughing and elusive. His face was a sketch in the back of my mind, slowly taking shape. Cautiously, tightly controlling my movements, I reached a hand for the wallet.

Got it.

Touching it was a shock, a pulse of electricity up my arm. As I slid it free, it was warm, blood-warm, flesh-warm, sweat-warm. It made my skin tingle, brought flickerings of imagery--

Long time, Juliet.

For an instant, I heard an echo of music, smelled the mingled scents of beer and wine and cheap body-spray, warm city pavement and lingering cigarette smoke. I was outside a pub, laughing in the gathering evening.

As the image took shape, I found myself trembling – fear and tension and hope and dread.

In my hand, the wallet was heavy with significance and the world shrank round it.

Been-waiting-for-this!

Fear climbed my throat. Any moment now, this madness was going to be too much. My denial would falter, my courage break--

No. I can do anything.

With one last, defiant gesture, I flicked the thing open.

And I saw the picture inside.

I remembered.

A younger me, ten years and more, overconfident and laughing, wine-glass in my hand. Behind me, the front doors of a streetside pub; I'd had too much to drink but I was young and already successful and I didn't care. The world was at my perfectly pedicured feet and it was mine to walk over as I chose.

Been-waiting-for-this!

The rattle cut through the memory like the train cut through the countryside – a hard line of truth.

In that picture, I was on the very precipice of the single worst moment of my life.

A trade, Juliet.

Standing in that timeless carriage, that empty and impossible hell, I looked at the mumbling man and I remembered the dare, the thrill of adrenaline, the shock and the rush. I remembered the vicious girlish laughter as we targeted his drink; the gasps of gleeful horror as he raised the spiked glass to his lips. I remembered how slaving-eager I was, how much I wanted it; I remembered the sheer rush of power it gave me. I had no idea who he even was – he didn't matter. What mattered was the authority, the sheer might I could exert. What mattered was the laughter as he reeled from the pub, and was gone in the city and in the night...

Who cared? I would never see him again.

A life.

Looking at that younger self, cold and hard-eyed, there was more. As though the very picture had ignited in my grasp, it blossomed with sudden life, singing my fingers, burning my eyes until they stang...

A newspaper headline – a young man, fallen from a bridge, crushed by an oncoming train. It had caught him by the arm and dragged him for several meters – a passenger had seen him screaming and pulled the emergency brake.

Too late.

The text under the picture said: 'Traces of ketamine in his blood'.

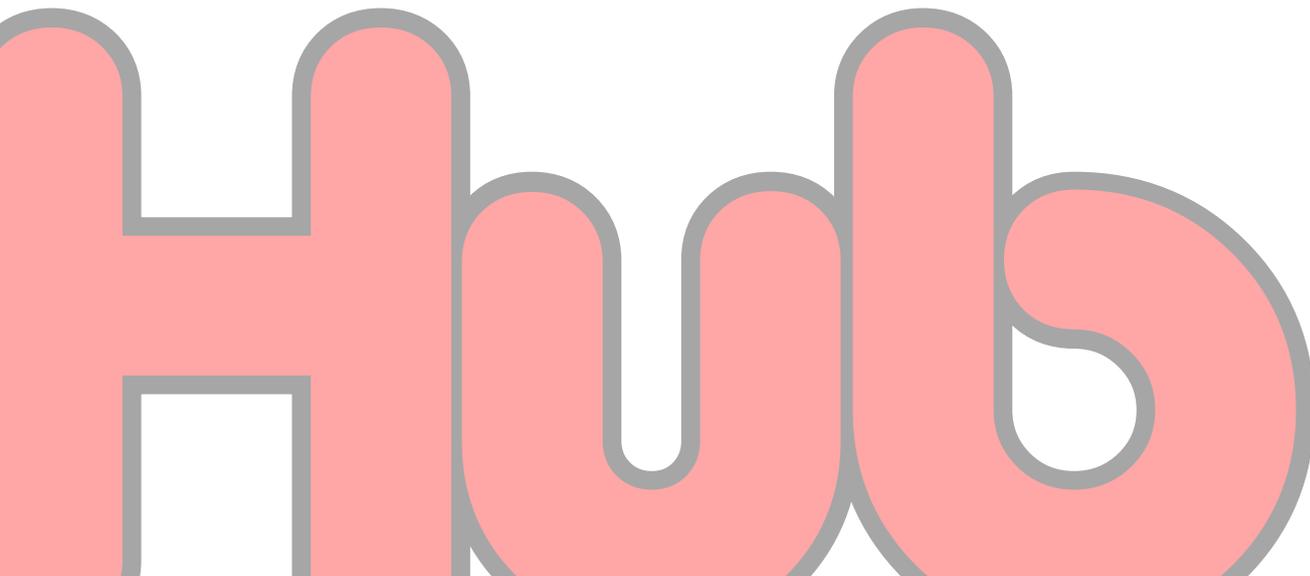
A trade, Juliet. A life.

Like the closing of the hangman's noose, the realisation was utter and inescapable. The moment was frozen endless, chilling my skin to frost, my heart to ice. My breath was solid in my throat. My denial was gone, finally silenced; my assurance and anger crumbling like the lost castles of Sussex - hopeless. As the endless train rattled onwards though the darkness, I saw myself, reflected in the window, my face forever running across where a young man screamed...

There was no driver, no guard. There would be no station.

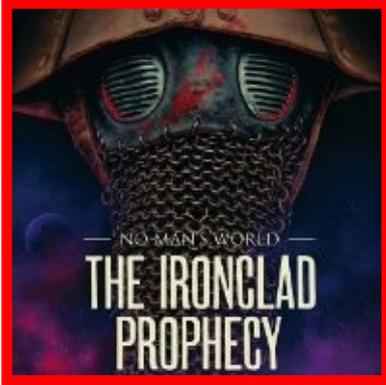
This was my personal hell, made for me. Made for a debt I had forever to pay.

fin



No Man's World: The Ironclad Prophecy

reviewed by keith harvey



by Pat Kelleher
Abaddon Books
rrp £7.99

Pat Kelleher's *No Man's World: the Ironclad Prophecy*, the second book in the *No Man's World* series, relies on literary conventions from portal and quest novels, as well as pulp, horror, and historical fiction, to create a rich secondary world. The result is an enticing post-modern story that combines meticulous historical detail with a pulse-pounding pulp plot, set in an

alternate death-world.

Both novels of the series—*The Black Hand Gang* (Abaddon 2010) and *The Ironclad Prophecy*—involve a battalion of British soldiers on the western front that, through some apparatus (magic or alchemical), are transported (ported) to another world where they battle to survive its hostile environment and its strange sentient beings. Steam punk elements (biplanes, tanks, *Flammenwerfer*, gas, and trench warfare itself) abound and the historical accuracies, along with the Edwardian behavior of the men and women, create a unique reading experience. The world upon which the characters land is a brilliantly created “death” world inhabited by both humans (*urmen*) and other sentient (insectoid) races. This bump, this movement from the known world of France during World War I to the secondary world, makes the novel ultimately a *portal* novel in the grand tradition of Edgar Rice Burroughs, John Norman, David Lindsay, and even C. S. Lewis. But the novel is more: it reveals all those earlier influences but it also shares similarities with H.P. Lovecraft, H. G. Wells, and Jules Verne. In fact, during my reading I thought of Verne's *Mysterious Island* several times, as well as Wells' dystopian novels, while in the second novel there is a definite reference to L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900).

The series' exciting force arises from a mystery: the disappearance of the 13th Battalion of the Pennine Fusiliers from the battlefield of the Somme. This disappearance, like the lost colony of Roanoke, which the novel alludes to, is surrounded by rumor and conjecture; however, in the Abaddon universe, there exists a greater mythos, a mythology connected to Croatoan magic. Croatoan magic relates somehow to the inhabitants of Croatoan Island, the name the Roanoke colonists used for Hatteras Island off the coast of North Carolina in the 16th century, and the English colonists' inexplicable disappearance. One of the first mentions of Croatoan magic in the Abaddon universe is in Rebecca Levene's *The Infernal Game: Ghost Dance* (Abaddon Books 2010), where a modern-day cult based in San Francisco called the Croatoans have stolen a sacred *shofar*, a ram's horn, that belonged to Doctor John Dee to employ in a bizarre ritual that the CIA, among others, is interested in stopping. Similarly, in *No Man's World*, Jeffries, an Edwardian magician and psychopath, furthers the mythos through his attempt to gain power from Croatoan magic.

In *The Ironclad Prophecy*, four months have passed since the action set forth in *The Black Hand Gang* and the Pennine Fusiliers have established a foothold on the new world and have figuratively taken root like the poppy seeds embedded in the transported mud of France. The Tommies have survived their initial clashes with the Khungarrii, an insect-like race that relies on scent, the betrayal and magic of Jeffries, and the onslaught of the planets' diverse and deadly flora and fauna. The men now feel secure enough to explore their environment and Lieutenant Everson sends the *Ivanhoe*, their sole tank, commanded by Lieutenant Arthur Mathers, on an expeditionary mission. Mathers, a man suffering from battle fatigue, fails to return and Everson orders the Black Hand Gang, led by Lance Corporal Thomas “Only” Atkins, into the bush to retrieve the lost tank and its crew. Through three narrative lines—Atkins, Everson, and Mathers—the author reveals more information about the biology and physics of the world, the structure and culture of the Khungarrii, known as the “Chatts,” and the fate of Jeffries. In that regard, the amount of flora and

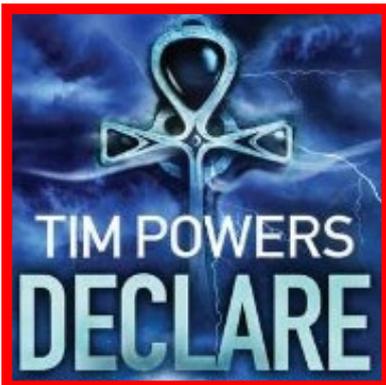
fauna described, as well as the precise description of the biological systems, far surpasses most portal novels that introduce a mere representative handful of creatures that the author uses repeatedly; Kelleher populates his world with a plethora of diverse creatures, creating verisimilitude on one hand but adding a sense of wonder on the other. Wonder arises from the unveiling of the world through the expedition and the concomitant detail accompanying the disclosure. This process, this unveiling, is similar to the experience of playing a MMORPG but is consistent with the portal novel. As Farah Mendlesohn states in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Wesleyan University Press 2008), "the portal fantasy is about entry, transition and exploration" (p.2)

Perhaps the strongest aspects of the series are its attention to detail, its ability to overcome the anachronism of modernity, and its strong prose. From the very outset of the series I believed the characters were World War I soldiers fighting in France, British citizens living during the Edwardian age. This suspension of disbelief is sometimes difficult because of the anachronism of modernity. Jorge Luis Borges, in his short-story, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," writes that Menard abhorred "these useless carnivals, fit only ... to produce plebeian pleasure of anachronism or ... enthrall us with the elementary idea that all epochs are the same or different." More precisely, most historical fiction or fantasy relying on history, no matter how heavily-researched, are very modern novels, which cannot help but be, in essence, an entertainment filled with anachronisms, not anachronisms in detail, but anachronisms in spirit, tone, and plot. The question then is: can anyone really write a historical novel that captures the essence of the epoch in which it chooses to imitate. In other words, can an author find a method to cause, or trick, the reader to feel, which is more important than thinking in this context, as if he or she is situated in a certain historical period or, at best, hope that through the willing suspension of disbelief the reader will not suspect he or she is simply reading (watching) a book (film) that purports to be set in a historical period. The answer is "yes" an author can accomplish this Herculean task; an author can overcome the anachronism of modernity but only through a trickery of technique. Pat Kelleher has accomplished this feat; he has convinced me that British Tommies are fighting for their lives in a death-world through his strong prose and attention to detail. And it is his ability to overcome the anachronism of modernity, plus his unique world, that has so excited me about this new series.

On a final note, the novel demonstrates flawless editing from Jenni Hill and David Moore, clean design from Simon Parr and Luke Peece, and outstanding cover art from Pye Parr. It was his art that enticed me to pick up the first book.

Declare

reviewed by catherine mann



by Tim Powers

Corvus

rrp £8.99

In 1963 Cambridge academic Andrew Hale receives a coded telephone call and reluctantly travels to London in accordance with standard procedure. There Hale is summoned to a meeting with the Prime Minister and the head of an extra covert section of the British Intelligence Services. Hale, retired since 1948 when he led a botched mission, is put back into the field under deep cover in order to complete what he started and put to bed an operation that has been active since before he was born. The book follows Hale's strange career in intelligence, and goes from Nazi-occupied Paris, via post-war Berlin, to Beirut and finally Mount Ararat.

Declare was nominated for an Arthur C. Clarke award this year as it was published in the UK in 2010. The copy I actually read was tatty because the book was originally published in the US in 2001, when it won the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel. Tim Powers is probably best known for writing *On Stranger Tides*, the credited inspiration for the latest *Pirates of the Caribbean* film. However this review is about *Declare*, which is an impressive book.

The story is mostly told from the point of view of Andrew Hale. In 1963 Hale is recalled to his old life in intelligence. Through flashbacks we learn that Hale has been 'on the rolls' of a very secret branch of British Intelligence for most of his life. Despite several odd occurrences during his childhood and a mysterious origin that even he is unaware of, Hale becomes an ordinary young man. His interest in current events consists of joining the Communist party in order to meet girls while at university. It is easy to sympathise with young-Hale, and adult-Hale's resignation at being dragged back into the Great Game is recognisable to anyone who's had a difficult and unwelcome task. Though a spy Hale is not a James Bond figure, he has vital intelligence skills and can operate under very deep cover, however he is no killer and rarely resorts to violence. He is a spy the ordinary person can relate to.

Elena Ceniza-Bendiga is the female lead. Brought up as a Communist in Spain, from childhood she worked for the Party and ends up monitoring radios in Vichy Paris. Partnered with Hale, they work the radio and evade the Gestapo as Moscow rolls up its Parisian intelligence networks. Summoned to Russia, Elena experiences something that turns her hair white and makes her defect to France. She is a resolute character, first committed to the Party, and later determined to bring them down. Unlike Hale, she is capable of murder and she has managed to survive dreadful things. She is the focus of romantic attention, but is rarely portrayed sentimentally.

Another main character is Kim Philby, who actually existed. I didn't realise the smug, stuttering man was a real person until towards the end of the book when Guy Burgess (who I had heard of) appeared. Philby was a double agent working for British intelligence and the KGB, later defecting to the Soviet Union. In the notes at the end of the novel the author reveals that he was inspired by Philby's biography and other contemporary accounts. The story Powers has invented neatly fills the gaps in the historical record, as well as explaining a few odd occurrences in the lives of both Philby and T. E. Lawrence (better known as Lawrence of Arabia). It's strange but fun to read about Kim Philby's online and see the events of the novel peering at you from the background.

The fantastical elements are initially very mysterious, mentioned only in tantalising references to the failed operation on Mount Ararat in 1948. It's increasingly clear that there's something odd and supernatural going on, this combines very well with the intrigue and mystery of a spy thriller. There is no awkward bumping of realism against fantasy. That the characters are hesitant about discussing the supernatural only makes the whole thing seem more plausible. Rhythms and symbols are important; Egyptian ankhs are used as protecting talismans, and walking to a certain beat can make a person unnoticeable. There are links to Middle-Eastern mythology, both Biblical and Mesopotamian -I didn't pick up on the Biblical stuff so much, but did get the references to Gilgamesh. This all combines to give a sense of something very ancient and powerful. It is a testament to the quality of both story and writing that the revelation of what's going on manages to live up to the foreshadowing.

This is a book with a very international feel to it. The reader is taken through Nazi-occupied Paris, post-war Berlin, the desert life of Bedouin tribes, and 1960s Beirut. I especially liked the portrayal of Berlin at the founding of the Berlin Wall. I found the description of a city split by mentality -and the occasional guard-fascinating, especially considering what was to come. I also liked the desert scenes with the Bedouin, the setting links with the mythical past that influences the events of the novel. The combination of familiar landmarks -Notre Dame Cathedral and the Brandenburg Gate- with exotic locations gives the reader a real sense of the scope of the story.

This is an excellent piece of primary world fantasy, showing the supernatural lurking in the corners of our own world. This is a historical fantasy set in a recent period that doesn't usually appear in fantasy. I'm not a reader of spy thrillers and have limited knowledge of the Cold War, so I can't comment on how well this book would compare to a John Le Carré, but I thought that that the worlds of spy and supernatural were blended excellently. The plot was clever and intriguing, the characters engaging if not always sympathetic, and the whole thing was a joy to read.



Wizards of the Coast / Hasbro

rrp £49.99

It would be unfair on Wizards of the Coast to describe *Conquest of Nerath* as "Risk* with dragons" because it is so much more than that but "Risk with dragons" might be the absolute easiest, certainly quickest, way to describe it. However, I won't stop there because I'm not that lazy. After reading the 24 page A4 rulebook I realised just how much more complex *Conquest of Nerath* is.

Conquest of Nerath is a game for two to four people and sees you controlling one of four realms' armies as you hack, slash, plunder and burn your way to world domination. Here we have humans and dwarves as the Nerathian League. Elves make up the Vailin Alliance. Warlocks and their undead armies form the Dark Empire of Karkoth and goblins, orcs, mercenaries and other general ne'er do wells come under the Iron Circle banner. You can either play a free-for-all game or alliances can be formed between Nerath and Vailin and between Karkoth and the Iron Circle. There are even rules included for alliance play so there's no need for dodgy "house rules" like everyone plays during the annual family outing of *Monopoly*. Come on, we all do it.

Each realm has the same kinds of units from footsoldiers and wizards to dragons and warships with siege engines, monsters and Storm Elementals in between! Where Karkoth have their Skeletal Warriors, Nerath have their Human Infantry, the Iron Circle have their Hobgoblin Soldiers and so on. The names are just cosmetic, though, as the units of each similar type fight in the same manner and win, or lose, in the same way also. Some units have "special abilities" but nothing realm specific.

The differences between the armies come in the shape of Event cards that are specific to each realm and also the amount of gold each realm begins the game with and recuperates during play. Players start the game with two event cards and draw a new one at the start of their turn. These can range from increasing a specific unit's attack roll for that turn, to adding units to the board or gold to the coffers.

To win the game you have to collect a set number of victory points. The number of points needed to win determines how long the game should last. A short game has a target of 13 points, a medium game sees you battling for 20 points and a long game is won by controlling all of the capital cities in the game or by collecting 8 treasures which is not as easy as it sounds by a long shot!

The first game we played was intended to be a short one but after setting up and getting used to the rules and sequence of play it seemed anything but short! Once we got used to things the game sped up. It's a good idea to allow a few hours to play through this. The medium and long games will eat an evening.

Points are won by capturing enemy lands, conquering enemy capitals and by playing Treasure cards. The two former options are done in the standard fashion; attack, kill and destroy via the medium of a die roll! Treasure cards, however, can only be won by defeating the denizens of one of ten dungeons scattered throughout the lands. This is easier said than done as only Hero class units can enter dungeons, these being the Fighter and Wizard classes, and the Dungeon Guardians – who some might think are just innocent creatures seeking an alternative lifestyle – can be kick-ass hard to beat!

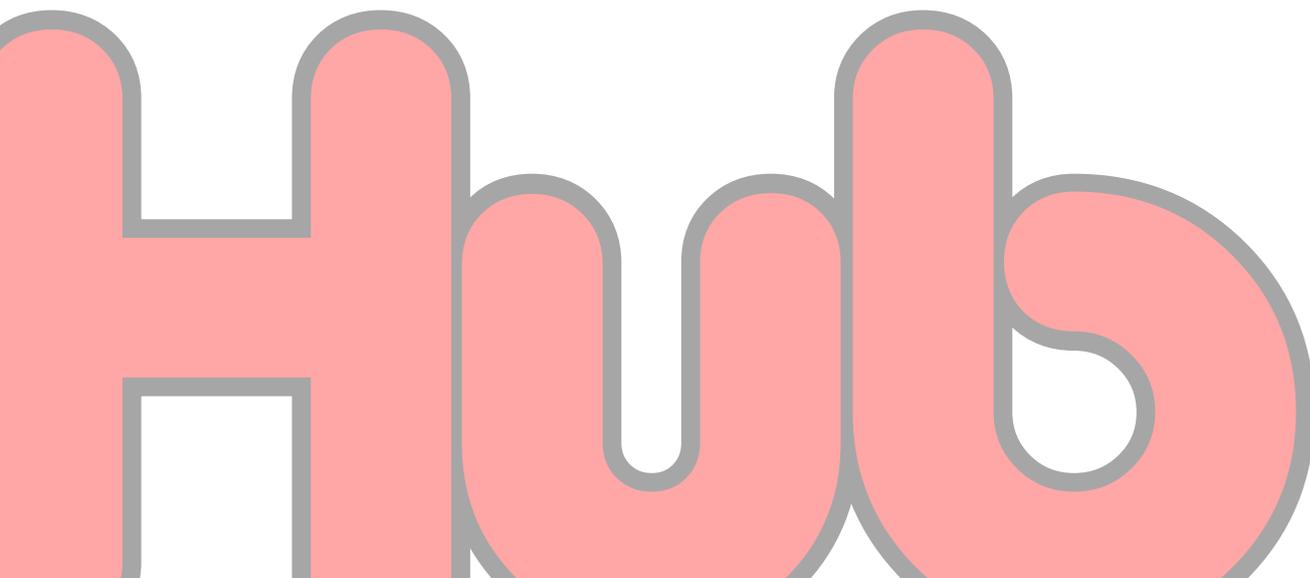
Sequence of play is familiar with movement, fighting, repositioning, reinforcing and collecting income being the main blocks. Fighting then has its own turn of events that allows attacking, pressing the attack or retreating, and exploring dungeons again has a set turn of events. Luckily there are plenty of quick reference sheets provided.

Interesting point: even the order of play is set in the rules and the bad guys, the stinky undead armies of Karkoth, get to go first! Still, they start with less gold than everyone else so it all evens out.

My only niggles, and one shared by some of my co-players, was that it might've been fun if each realm had more specific army units but, understandably, this would've added to the complexity of the game. Pressing attacks was also a bit confusing until we got into the flow of the game. We felt it a bit unusual that an attacking side could choose to continue fighting until it either won or lost but that was a small thing and we got used to it eventually. It's a bit like when a referee allows extra time in a football match until Manchester United eventually score a goal...

Overall I found it a fun game to play through though it's not one that can be picked up quickly. For around £50 quid there is lots of replay value and the whole package is of a very high quality – never have I seen a plastic box insert made to hold all the pieces, cards and dice of a game so well for storage! The artwork is eye-catching and the figures, though small, are nicely detailed and made to withstand heavy hands.

**Don't know what Risk is? Basically it's a strategic board-game based on world conquest and first released in 1957. Go wiki!*



FEATURES

Interview: Ben Richards

with alasdair stuart



Outcasts was, depending on who you talk to, an abject failure or a brave experiment. The story of the first, and last, human colony on the planet Carpathia, it combined an exploration of human nature in the face of catastrophe with a genuinely fascinating plot arc. I talked to show creator Ben Richards about how it went, plans for the future, where the show would have gone and why he thinks it didn't find an audience.

1. Pacing

Writer's room???? That would have been quite a luxury! The process was very different to the US. The biggest problem we had was the time available between greenlight (which was NOT 2007 when the first development script was announced as some have mistakenly claimed) and delivery of the series to the broadcaster – about a year. We had to get the writers in fast and produce several scripts under intense pressure. Each episode was supposed to have a strong story of the week and push the serial element which was a massive challenge given the time constraints we faced. In the end though it was much more serial-heavy than more conventional dramas and the writers did a great job in taking on the overarching elements which were developing all the time.

2. Earth

We deliberately left this vague as I didn't want it to be too cut and dry. The idea was a war which had involved China and the US and had involved a nuclear exchange. It was going to be explored further in a Series 2 with the arrival of the new transporter.

3. Faith versus pragmatism

This was a massive element at the beginning although we didn't want it to become faith = bad or have big set-piece theoretical debates between Tate and Berger. The degree to which Berger was using religion to build a base and the extent to which he actually believed in the "universal spirit" was something we wanted to leave open for the audience to consider. I was also interested in the way that religion and other types of non-rational belief systems are so long-lasting and – like vinyl! – might even survive on another planet. I find new-age charlatans fascinating as well so we wanted to incorporate that kind of language into Berger's vocabulary.

4. Other settlements.

Yes the building of a new settlement would have been an integral part of Series 2.

5. AC reveal.

Actually the main debate was whether to introduce them in Episode One!

6. Humanity.

I kind of go with Gramsci on this one – pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will. I think we have to believe that humanity has a future and I loathe the cynical views of "human nature" being fundamentally

flawed. I don't believe in original sin. Morality was a HUGE part of Outcasts. My view is best summed up by Fleur – we are neither prisoners of our genes or our environment; we can try at least to design ourselves.

7. Chose not to do.

Yes I didn't want to do camp. It was a serious show and I agreed with the director Bharat Nalluri that we didn't want uniforms, space buggies or phasers. That probably cost us a few viewers but it was worth it.

8. Viewing figures and reaction.

I was amazed at the figures for the first episode. I was terrified of a big drop off but I just didn't expect it to START that low. In a way that was kind of reassuring! But sci-fi does not on the whole get big audiences, it is the genre with the highest casualty rate for early cancellations although it usually has a long tail. It also needs a decent budget so it is in a tricky position.

The thing about a sci-fi audience though is it is usually very loyal. In spite of the flashmob that descended on Episode One – and which included some people who should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves – our core audience stayed very solid through the move to Sunday night. We were growing steadily in terms of appreciation as well, gaining support from a number of big online sites who had originally been skeptical but the damage had been done too early for us to survive. It makes me both sad and angry. Our kind of show would ALWAYS have a slow-burn element, it would always need some time to grow into itself, to establish the characters and the world etc. Shows like BSG got paltry ratings and took at least a series or two to really hit their stride. Maybe if we had been an American show we would have been given this time, but British drama returning series gets the toughest treatment of anything on TV. The last rites will be read after Episode One. The danger of this is that it will deter people from taking risks again and it is an irritating paradox that some of those who shriek the loudest about the deficiencies of British drama show about as much care or interest in it as the fisherman who lops the fin from a shark and tosses it back into the sea.

My one big hope – and I wouldn't have said this at the start – is the internet. It was from here that we received easily our most considered, thoughtful and interesting criticism. Even those originally hostile were able to watch the whole show rather than just attack one episode and to find some middle ground between “brilliant” and “shit” which are the only two modes some critics seem willing to entertain currently. Anyway, the fans are still there and we have had amazing feedback from them which has been both touching and inspiring.

Outcasts is available on DVD now.



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