

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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ISSUE 111 • 6TH FEB 2010

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EDITORIAL:

by phil lunt

Shake your Sonic-Wiimote...

A couple of weeks ago it was revealed in the press that the BBC has decided to get back into video games. Apparently, they want to turn some of their biggest licences into DS, Wii, iPhone and online games.

This is of interest to me, genre fan and gamer, because Auntie Beeb has this small property called *Doctor Who* and I would hate to see something rushed out to hit the market in time for Christmas 2010 but the timing just makes me wonder... However, the BBC have been stung in the past. They closed their own Multimedia division in 2005 due to poor sales and the last *Doctor Who* game, *Destiny of the Doctors* in 1997, was poorly executed, to put it politely, so surely it must be a case of lesson learnt?

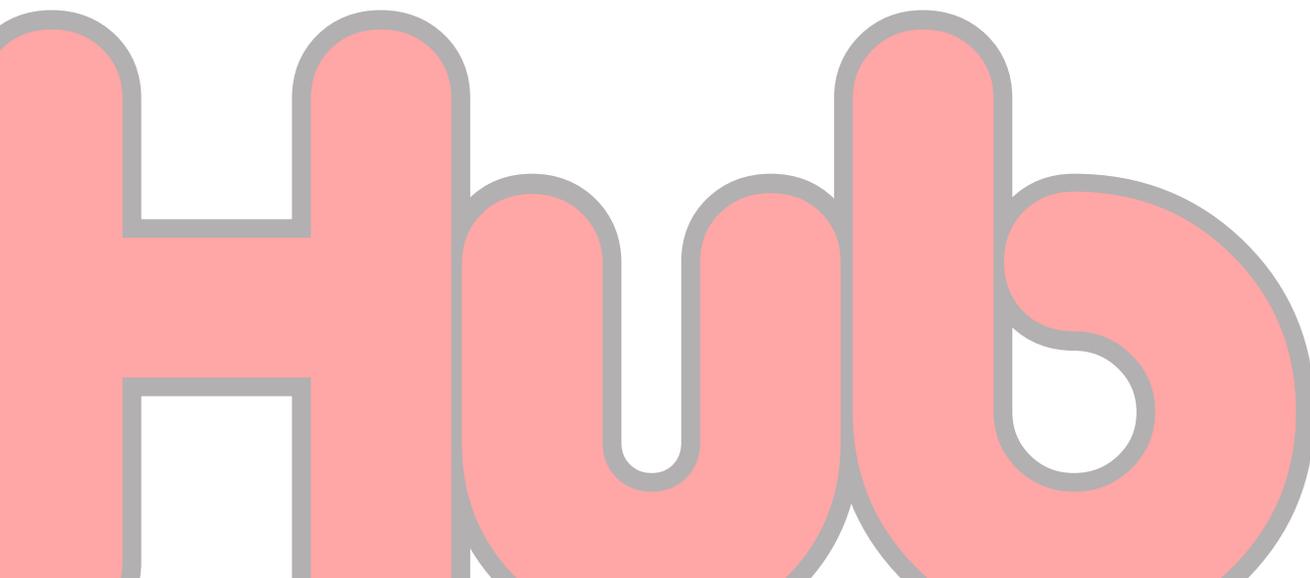
Unfortunately, though, we have to succumb to the fact that the odds are not on these being games that will keep everybody happy. I'm sure we'll see quite a few BBC properties (*In the Night Garden*, anyone?) high up the video games sales charts but they won't necessarily be any good.

Taking *Doctor Who* as an example; I'd love to see the developers actually work hard at this, be given the time to realise their original plan and get a writer on-board who knows the product and maybe even make the storyline canonical, making it *matter*. This, however, doesn't always make a successful, top selling, game. Sure, games developers always work hard, I know enough of them, but sometimes things just inexplicably do not gel together. Take 2008's *Lost: Via Domus* for example. It was loved mostly by fans and panned by everyone else. The developers had worked very hard with a tricky property, working alongside the development of the TV series, but in the end it just didn't quite get there. Incidentally, it's over in about 3 hours so an easy 1000 gamerpoints for Xbox 360 owners! *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed* did very well in sales numbers, as pretty much every *Star Wars* game does, was canonical and did OK by the critics even though it was, as far as I'm concerned, not much more than a fun, yet repetitive, button basher. Again, I'll stick my neck out and say the replay value was pretty much only endured by die hard fans. Now, I like *Star Wars* but I have my limits... However, as far as mass appreciation versus keeping the fans happy goes, *The Force Unleashed* did pretty well.

I could go back through the entire history of video games, dissecting all of the film and TV licences, but I know as well as any other who has probably played far too many games since a young age that the *overall* trend is that they sell in large quantities even if the game sucks. Now, in my opinion this latest exercise will be primarily about potential cash revenue but, then, I'm a cynical so and so!

Anyway, enough of my ranting. This week in Hub we have an extract from Guy Adams' new book *The World House* along with a feature by Richard Whittaker on the use of religion in some of the more recent genre films to hit the big screens. Enjoy!

Phil,
Hub Magazine



FICTION

The World House

by guy adams

Young men were supposed to have big dreams, but for Tom there had been only one ambition. Nothing beat playing a piano for a living. Tom would assure people of this, anybody that was still around at the magical time – say three in the morning – when the martini took over and Tom quit speaking for himself. He would stop playing, pour himself straight up on to a barstool and graze on olives and punjabi mix until his tongue felt like a tramp's sock during a downpour. "It's, like, pure," he would burble, pointing at invisibles in the air between him and his audience and fixing them with an earnest stare. The sort of look that says its owner knows... OK? He just fucking knows.

On the night in question, Tom still had some semblance of balance left, having arrived late for work and therefore being two rounds light on his normal consumption. Not that he was what you might call straight. He still had to expend a considerable effort windmilling his arms and breathing deeply so as not to smack his teeth on the bar as he'd done that time in Chicago when a combination of whisky sours and a pair of Quaaludes had sent him carpetwards with a hard-on and a smile but no real consciousness to speak of. When the TV above the bar showed silent news footage of distraught fans gathering at Graceland to pay tribute to their lost idol he was capable of figuring out what had happened. "The King is dead, baby," he slurred, raising a glass. He took a sip and then pushed the glass away. He needed to maintain a modicum of muscle-control tonight; it was Thursday and that meant Elise would be dropping by on her way home from her shift at *The Neon Melon*. Tom liked Elise, in fact he loved her almost as much as he did Jim Beam and Lord Buckley, which – for an emotional retard like Tom – was tantamount to obsession.

"Knock me your lobes, daddy-o," he said to Terry behind the bar, a man who ran out of the very little creativity he possessed thinking up names for happy-hour cocktails. "Frilly Maiden", "Velvet Sunrise", "Fruit Sunstorm" ... after that he was spent.

"You talk like a dick, Tom," Terry commented, whipping a dank towel at the bar as if it had been misbehaving.

"And you have no jive."

"But plenty of liquor so I'm sure you'll bring yourself to forgive me."

"You may well be right. What time is it?"

"She'll be here soon enough."

Tom smiled. That Terry was one smug son of a bitch.

He took the brave step of slipping off the barstool and taking himself to a window booth, a journey so long and perilous for Tom by this stage of the evening that he felt entitled to call it a goddamn quest. He was an inebriated Frodo Baggins heading to the leatherette and formica landscape of Boothor... This idea gave him the giggles about halfway across the shiny carpet and he had to grab hold of a particularly rubbery rubber plant in order to steady himself.

"You cool?" Terry asked, only too aware of how difficult Tom was likely finding the journey.

Tom waved, signalling that all was fine, before letting go of the plant and risking a few more steps toward the window.

Outside, Ninth and Hennepin was taking a beating from the rain. Tom pressed his nose against the glass and imagined sailing paper yachts along the gutter, floating the hell out of there. A man has to dream. The neon of the Triangle Pool Hall buzzed like a trapped bluebottle, winking in and out as if tired. Fat Eugene, the owner, was sheltering under the smudged green awning, pushing cotton-candy balls of cigar smoke

into the wet air to be smashed apart by the raindrops.

"When you gonna quit moonin' over her, for Christ's sake?"

"Just as soon as she sees sense and gives in, Terry."

"I've as much chance of getting a BJ from Barbara Streisand."

Tom, baffled at the best of times, was utterly confused by the notion of this. "Would you want to?"

Terry, still making a pretence of cleaning, nodded. "Who wouldn't?"

Tom guessed there was little to be said to this without causing offence so he went back to staring out of the window. Fat Eugene had returned to the seedy hop-musk of his pool hall and the street was now empty... No, there was some guy hanging around in the front doorway of Verbinski's Pawn Shop. He was wearing a fedora and raincoat, a regular Philip Marlowe, Tom thought.

"Perhaps he's on the trail of a red-hot dame," Tom muttered in his best Bogart impression, "surviving on rye and smarts."

"What you talking about now?" Terry called. "And wipe your goddamn chin – you're dribbling on the upholstery."

"Nothing, just watching some guy..." but "Marlowe" had gone and Tom's attention was elsewhere, watching Elise – a folded copy of the *Times* over her wild, electric-shock red hair – running down the street towards them. Tom yanked his brown suit into shape; it had a habit of looking as if it was trying to worm its way off him. He tried to work his hair into respectability but as usual it refused, sitting like whipped ice-cream on the top of his head.

"Oh, she's on her way, is she?" Terry said with a smile. "I'll get the grill warmed up."

Elise burst through the door in a shower of rain and cussing. "Jesus, but it's biblical out there," she roared, heading over to the bar. The sodden newspaper hung from her hand like shed lizard skin. She dripped on Terry's carpet but he sure as hell didn't care; maybe the damn thing would grow more luxuriant if she watered it enough.

"Grill's on, give me five and there'll be patty melt and fries to take the edge off the cold," he said, walking out back to kick the fat-fryer into life.

"Hey, Elise," Tom offered from his booth, hoping to hell he'd made it sound non-committal rather than the bark of a desperate man.

"Hi, Tom," Elise replied, "good night?"

"I've been shaking down the jazz and blues as surely as you've been shimmying those curves of yours. I dare say neither of us really got the appreciation we deserved."

"I dare say." Elise joined him in his booth, just as Tom had hoped, dragging a snail trail of rain across the leatherette from the damp ass of her coat.

"You want that whistle of yours wetting?" Tom asked, nodding an inebriated forehead towards the bar and the rows and rows of seductive possibilities it offered.

"I'll take a Martini, something long, cold and strong as hell – I'll leave the rest up to your creative imagination."

"I am a veritable Manet of the Martini, a Hopper of the Highball."

"Then refresh your thirsty nighthawk, Tom, she's had a damn long night as always."

Tom threw a wink in Elise's direction. Catching his reflection in the window, he thought it looked more like the facial twitch of a man who had just been shot. He really ought to keep the expressions to a minimum; he was long past the point of being able to pull them off.

Terry was whistling along to the hiss of sizzling hamburger and fries. It was the only tune he knew.

"Hey, Terry," Tom asked, "fix the lady a drink, would you? Something to wash down the melted Velveeta and cockroach thigh she has forthcoming."

"Hell with that, I keep a clean kitchen as well you know. Fix it yourself, but mind..." Terry brandished a spatula with conviction "...don't get carried away, I'll be watching you pour."

"Pour... *poor* me." Tom shuffled his way around the bar hatch and began to throw gin, vodka and vermouth at crushed ice and lemon zest. There was something about his coordination that improved when it came to going through such automatic functions as playing a piano or mixing a cocktail. They were the sort of moves that, unlike walking or trying to look cool, came naturally to him. He throttled the shaker,

ice-cold condensation biting into his palms through the chilly chrome, and poured some over one lucky bastard of an olive.

"Now that's a whistle-wetter." Tom nodded his approval, pouring one for himself, just to be sociable.

Terry appeared from the kitchen with a hot sandwich and fries and carried them over to the booth before leaving Tom to it with a half-smile.

"Something to chill your teeth, my good lady." Tom placed the drink next to her plate and took a big sip from his own, just so it was easier to carry to his side of the table. She tried it and acknowledged her approval while gasping for air.

"If that doesn't kick away the pole-riding blues then nothing will. Thanks, Tom."

"No problem at all. So how were things this evening down at that most esteemed of all skin joints?"

"I shook and rolled, while the pasty-faced and well-heeled steadfastly refused to notice anything above my nipples. Same old same old..."

"The damn fools missed your eyes," slurred Tom, then immediately wished he hadn't. The problem with fancying a stripper was you felt a heel hitting on them. Just another purveyor of corny chat-up lines.

Tom worried too much. Elise gave him a genuine smile. "You're a sweetheart, Tom," she said.

"Hell, Elise, I don't know much but there's two things I can swear to: I know beautiful eyes when I see them, and I can mix a Martini." He took a big mouthful of his own, just to shut himself up.

"I shouldn't complain," said Elise, tucking into her patty melt, "a few years of tips and I can pack it all in for a job that allows for more than glitter and tassles. Having said that..." she dug into her coat pocket "... what do you make of this?" She handed him a small wooden box.

Tom lit a cigarette – as he was wont to do when thinking was required – and turned the box over in his hands. "Looks like the kind of thing you stash your dope in when you've got visitors."

"Trust you. Try and open it."

Tom did but, no matter how he ran his fingers over the box's edges, he couldn't find an opening. "Weird."

"Damn right." She tugged at a stray strand of melted cheese that ran from the corner of her mouth like tacky spider's web. "Some guy gave it to me as I was leaving. 'A sign of my immense appreciation', he said."

"Did you tell him you preferred foldable appreciation?"

"I was just glad to get the hell out of there."

"Was he Chinese?" Tom pointed at the writing on the box's surface.

"Nah, some old white guy, not the sort of clientele we normally attract. He had his pants done up for one thing. Dressed like out of some old movie... hat and coat, you know, '*the Shadow knows...*', that kind of thing."

A bell of recognition rang in the back of Tom's head but Elise licked her lips and he lost his train of thought. "Shadow knows..." he murmured, to stop anything more provocative spilling over his vermouth-soaked lips.

He went back to looking at the box, sure he must be blushing. "So what you going to do with it?"

"Damned if I know. Think it's worth anything?"

"Oh yeah, a box that doesn't open... there'll be a line around the block for the chance to own it."

"What I thought..."

Tom looked out the window, hoping the sight of rain would wash his numb brain.

"Marlowe's back," he mumbled, sucking down the final dregs of his Martini in case the answer to Elise's problem was hiding under the olive.

"Huh?"

"Nothing." Tom nodded towards the window. "Guy stood out in the rain, thinks he's a private detective or something."

"That's him," Elise said, "that's the guy..."

"He's coming over." Tom started to get to his feet. "Think he wants his box back?"

The man reached into his raincoat as he strode towards them, and pulled out a large handgun. With no hesitation he opened fire and the large plate-glass window cracked like river-ice in spring.

"Jesus!" Elise dropped to the bench. Tom, quicker than he would have ever given himself credit for, grabbed her arms and pulled her down to the floor next to him.

"What the fuck?" Terry shouted. He looked in a mood to argue until a second shot knocked the window through in a waterfall roar. That took all the fight out of him and he decided that crouching behind his bar was the only sane response to the situation.

Tom hugged Elise hard, burying her head in his chest, the hard corners of the box pressing between them.

Terry worked his way along the floor to a strongbox he kept stashed beneath the till. Swearing repeatedly, he yanked the strongbox on to his lap and fished in his pants pocket for his keys. "What's the goddamn point of having the thing if you end up dead trying to get the fucker open?" he whined. He rifled through the keys on his bunch. "Fucking thing, fucking thing..." He picked the smallest out and tried to force it into the strongbox lock. It wouldn't fit. He heard the sound of shoes grinding glass to powder on the sidewalk outside. Panicking further, he emitted a high-pitched whine and started punching the lid. He picked another key and tried it. It turned the lock and opened the box. He grabbed the .45, stood up and pointed it at the man climbing through the window. Then he noticed the live rounds rolling out of the spilled strongbox at his feet. "Dumb fuck..." he whispered before deciding to bluff the situation out. "Drop the gun!" he shouted, "or I'll drop you." That sounded so embarrassing he'd have turned the gun on himself were it loaded.

The man clambered over the booth table and on to the floor. Terry was surprised to see how old he was, in his late seventies at least. "There's no need for anyone to shoot," the old man said, holding up his own gun. "I just want the box." He gestured to a small wooden box on the floor and Terry was baffled to see there was no sign of Tom or Elise. Maybe they'd got out somehow?

"Take it and leave, real slow..." Terry said.

The old man sank to his haunches, picked up the box, dropped it into his coat pocket and stood upright, keeping his gun levelled on Terry throughout. He looked at Terry's gun and smiled. "That ain't loaded," he said. To prove his conviction he turned his back on him and walked slowly out of the front door.

Terry dropped quickly, grabbed a couple of rounds off the floor and loaded them into the Colt. By the time he'd stood up again he was alone in his bar. No sign of the old man, Tom or Elise. "Well..." he scratched at his baffled face and stared at the Thursday night pouring in through his broken window "... fuck me sideways."

As far as Tom was concerned he and Elise had fallen through the floor of Terry's bar. The impossibilities of that didn't occur to him; he was just glad to be away from mad bastards with guns. They tumbled through utter darkness for a couple of seconds before landing on what felt like a stack of rough pillows. Tom coughed as a cloud of dust erupted from under them. He pulled himself away from Elise, knowing he was going to be sick. His hands grabbed at rough hessian and he guessed they had landed on a pile of sacks, flour by the feel of the powder all over his face. He rolled off the sacks on to a cold floor and got to his feet just as he started to throw up. Blind to his surroundings, he hoped he wasn't upchucking all over his shoes.

"Elise?" he asked, once done. There was no reply. Spitting his mouth clean he retraced his steps up the pile of sacks, pulling his cigarette lighter out of his jacket pocket to give him some light. "Elise?" he asked again, feeling her limp arm and starting to worry. He brought the light to her face to see a panicked look in her eyes that at least meant she was conscious. Conscious but unable to move... it occurred to him that wasn't a good thing at all. "Elise? Can you hear me?" Her eyes flickered but that was all the response she could give. Tom started to panic. It didn't help that his head felt strange... airy and brittle. He realised it was because he was sober, not an experience he had had recently.

He needed to find some light. "Don't worry, Elise," he said, an empty promise and he knew it. He climbed back down, let the lighter go out and waited for his eyes to adjust. As the blue and yellow afterglow of the lighter flame faded from his eyes the darkness moved in. Turning around he saw a thin beam of light ahead and walked towards it. He stuck out his hands to stop himself bumping into anything. After a few seconds, his palms hit the far side of the room. Rubbing the surface he decided it was wood and therefore, as hoped, a door. Moving his hand down he groped for where he would expect a handle.

His hand gripped metal, he turned it and the door swung open bringing the light from outside with it.

On the other side of the door was something completely unexpected: a large old-fashioned kitchen, filled with wood and tile, large dressers and stone work-surfaces. It was the sort of kitchen you saw in old movies, where fat cooks wore white hankies over their hair as they chopped up meat and vegetables. The sort of kitchen that really shouldn't be in the basement of a New York bar.

"Bad jive, daddy-o," Tom whispered, before deciding that there would be time enough to worry about where they were once he had seen to Elise. They had landed in the kitchen's larder, sacks of flour perfectly placed to offer a soft landing. Except... the ceiling above was intact, no sign at all of where they might have fallen in. He propped the door open with a clay bottle of oil and – trying not to look at where he had been sick – grabbed Elise and carried her out of the larder.

As soon as he'd lifted her on to his shoulder he realised this was the wrong thing to do. You weren't supposed to move someone who had been in an accident, just in case you made things worse. He paused, not knowing what to do next. He wasn't a man used to making executive decisions, definitely a "go with the flow" kind of guy. Well, there was little point in worrying about it now; he'd picked her up, the damage – if there even was any – was done and there was no going back from it. He lay her down as gently as he could on a large marble-topped preparation table. He brushed her hair from her face and gently unbuttoned her raincoat. He felt her arms and legs delicately. She seemed OK, nothing obviously twisted. Elise mumbled something... Tom, hyper, had his ears to her lips in seconds. "What was that, Elise, honey?"

"*Cnt muvve,*" she repeated.

"I know that..." he replied, trying not to sound exasperated. "You'll be fine, it's probably just..." he had no idea what it might be "...shock or something." That was lame and he knew it. "Just relax, everything's going to be fine." That was somewhat overconfident too, wasn't it? At that moment though, her hand twitched and grabbed his, which made him so stupidly happy he was willing to continue thinking positive. Then it occurred to him that if they were beneath Terry's bar – *except you know it ain't so, don't you, Tom? We ain't in Kansas no more and the sooner you admit the fact the better* – perhaps the gunman was going to follow them down to finish the job? In a surge of panic he moved around the room hunting for the door so he could block it, get some kind of barricade going.

There was no door.

A large stove took up one wall, several thick chrome pipes leading off it and into the bricks behind. It made him think of a church organ. Thin wisps of smoke were escaping from its various hatches and seals, like a steam-trawler boiler ready to blow. There were rows of saucepans hanging from a rack on the roof, old and beaten like a war-damaged knight's armour. A heavy porcelain sink took pride of place on another wall but where, above it, you would have expected to see a window there was nothing but red brick. The wall was painted with dust and cobwebs, suggesting the kitchen hadn't been used for some time, though the fire in the wrought-iron grate said otherwise. Logs crackled and spat their disapproval as Tom moved around the preparation table, checking out every part of the room. A large hatch in the wall to the left of the fireplace was probably a dumb waiter, he decided; certainly it fitted the period. But no, other than the larder they had fallen into there was no door. He checked the larder, climbed up on to the sacks and shone the flame of his lighter on to the ceiling, it was completely intact. They could not have fallen through it.

But they had.

"Do not adjust your *goddamn* set," he mumbled to himself, talking nonsense as he did when in need of a morale boost. He went back to Elise and rubbed her arm gently, pleased when it began to twitch.

"Pins and needles," she said, "feeling coming back." Her speech was still slurred but clearer than it had been, another sign she was recovering. "Where the hell are we?"

"I just don't know," Tom replied. "It's freaky shit, I have to tell you. We, like, fell through the floor, yeah?"

"I've no idea what happened... that guy was shooting at us and then, I don't know, I blacked out or something."

"It felt to me like we were falling but..." he looked towards the larder and decided not to think any more about it.

"Are we still being shot at?"

"No."

"Then, for now, it's all good."

"Yeah... copacetic..."

Tom couldn't stand still, he was feeling too damned twitchy. He squeezed her hand and began to pace, sure at any moment that something hostile and terrible was bound to descend on them. "Just makes no sense..." he muttered, beginning to open the cupboards around them, "completely whacked..." He opened a large cupboard to the left of the oven and stumbled backwards in surprise at the sight of the small man who stood inside.

"Hello," the man said, pulling a puffy white chef's hat from the pocket of the stained smock he was wearing. "Who's hungry then?"

There was no more than five foot of him and a good portion of that was the hat: white and puffy, the sort of thing you only saw on cartoon chefs. The little man walked over to the stove and stroked its wrought-iron curves with tenderness. "A light meal, perhaps a stew... or something more refined?" He turned to Tom and smiled, his face pink from the heat of the stove, his little moustache furred up like a rat in a storm-drain.

"Look..." Tom finally managed to find his tongue "...my friend's not well, she... well, we don't know what happened but she can't move and..."

"Oh, nonsense," the little man insisted, "she'll be right as rain in a few minutes. It always affects newcomers that way – it hammers the nervous system travelling here." He fixed Tom with a curious stare. "In fact I'm surprised you're not suffering from the same thing." He stepped closer to Tom and sniffed deeply. "Ah... alcohol! How interesting! It must make for a smoother journey."

"That's my creed, brother," Tom muttered. "So..." he took hold of Elise's hand "...she's going to be cool?"

"Absolutely," replied the little chef, "which is why we must get to work quickly." He pulled a knife from a drawer and firmly inserted the tip into Tom's thigh. "It's such a bugger to prep them when they keep thrashing about, after all."

Tom fell to the floor with a shocked yell that took a frying pan to the brow to silence. Elise cried out too, but the little man slapped his hand on her mouth like a lid on a screeching kettle.

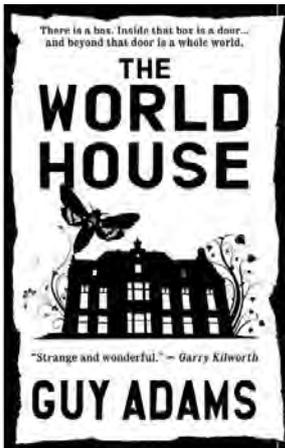
"Shush now," he said, leering over her. He smiled, showing off large yellow teeth, chipped from gnawing the edges of bones. "It's distracting." He tugged a long paisley handkerchief from his pocket and began forcing it into Elise's mouth with fingers that smelt of old meat and body cavities.

He whipped off his leather belt and wrapped it around her face, tightening it around her jaw to keep the handkerchief in place. "Feel free to chew on that while I cut and slice and peel." The butchery that lay ahead was exciting the man. He was getting breathless and needed to steady himself for a few seconds by holding on to the marble top of the preparation table. "Sorry," he whispered, "I'd hate you to think you were in the hands of anything less than a dedicated professional, it's just been so long." He straightened up and began tugging her blouse from the waist of her jeans, smacking and squeezing her exposed belly. "By all means, if you have any particular preference for a dish, a rump cut or braised thigh perhaps, then do let me know, otherwise I'll just follow my gut."

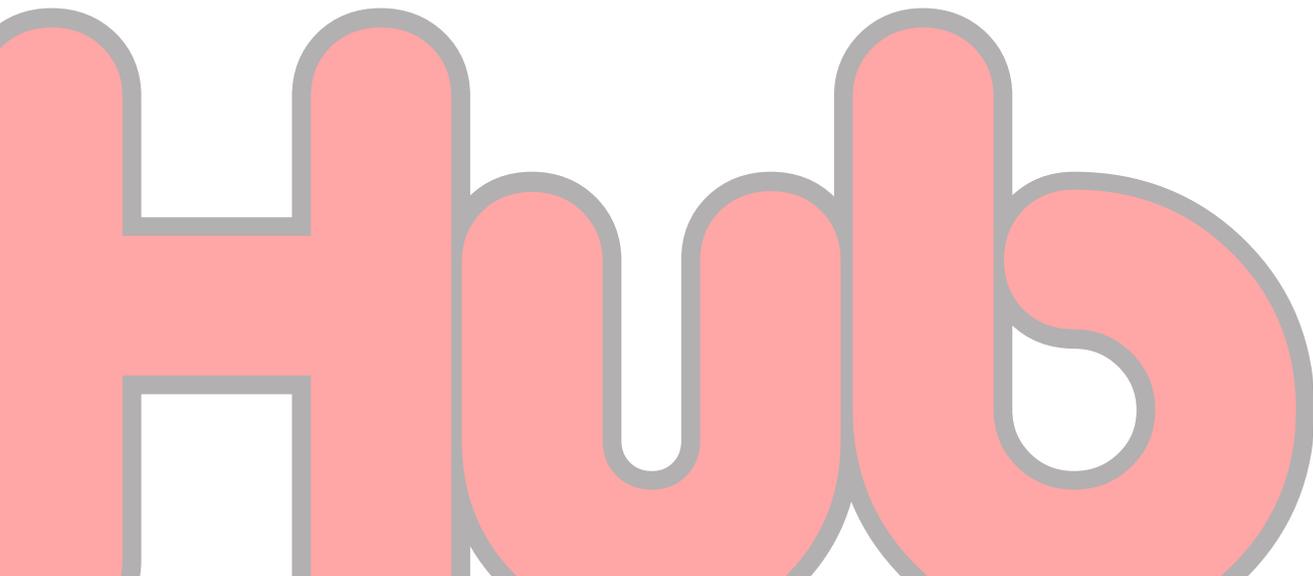
He ground his thumb into the meat of her hip and licked at the ragged fur of his moustache, tasting its salt as seasoning for his imagination. He picked up a large knife, pulled a grey stone from his pocket, spat on it and began to sharpen the blade. "I'm tempted to open an artery," he commented, "make some pudding. When pickings are as slim as they are in this kitchen you want to make sure you make the most of every opportunity. I apologise but I simply haven't the patience to force-feed you, though I'm sure I could make art from your liver if only my stomach wasn't so eager to be filled... some corn and a pipe... pump you up like a balloon until you were a masterwork of rupture and distention. Ah! My mouth waters at the very thought. But there is no need to dine on dreams, is there, my dear? When some of your most succulent portions can be searing within minutes." He leaned in as if to kiss her and licked her face with enthusiasm. "My belly aches for you sweet calf." He walked out of Elise's field of vision and she could hear the rattle of pans and bowls. She desperately fought to move her arms and legs but her hands flicked on dead wrists and her toes wriggled pointlessly in the toes of her sneakers.

The man returned with a large basin and propped her head up against the brim. "Just a pint or so," he said. "You can never keep it fresh and I wouldn't dream of wasting precious blood-sausage on flies."

Elise looked up at the ceiling and tried to prepare herself for the knife.



The World House by Guy Adams is published by Angry Robot and was released on February 4th



FEATURES

The Devil and God are Raging Inside of Me:

Religion in *Legion*, *The Book of Eli* and *The Lovely Bones*

by richard whittaker

The Book of Eli: Directed by Albert and Allen Hughes, written by Gary Whitta, starring Denzel Washington, Gary Oldman, Mila Kunis, Jennifer Beals, Tom Waits: Rating 15, 118 mins.

The Lovely Bones: Directed by Peter Jackson, written by Fran Walsh, Peter Jackson and Philippa Boyens, starring Saoirse Ronan, Mark Wahlberg, Stanley Tucci, Rachel Weisz, Michael Imperoili, Nikki SooHoo: Rating 12A, 135 mins. Release date Feb. 19

Legion: Directed by Scott Stewart, written by Peter Schink and Scott Stewart, starring Paul Bettany, Adrienne Palicki, Charles S. Dutton, Dennis Quaid, Lucas Black, Tyrese Gibson, Kevin Durand: Rating 15, 100 mins. Release date March 4

For a bunch of Jewish atheist socialist liberal agnostic communists, Hollywood loves to make films with an overtly Christian message.

There's nothing new about that: The blockbuster was built on the back of *Spartacus* and *The Ten Commandments*, the devil is the default bad guy in supernatural horror, and everyone from George Burns to Morgan Freeman has played God as a wisecracking omnipotent being with a wicked sense of humor. But there's something more pervasive and subtextual: How often does the renegade cop kiss a crucifix before he goes out on a mission? When a movie even lightly bucks the trend – like *Avatar*, with its animistic world view – the hammer comes down and the op-ed columns fill up. On the release schedules, there are three movies – a post-apocalyptic road movie, a supernatural horror, and a trip to the afterlife – that all combine the fantastical with the liturgical in a distinctly American way.

European cinema is arguably stronger at metaphysics, as proven by Lars von Trier's shocking *Antichrist* (reviewed in Hub 110) and Michael Haneke's Palm D'Or-winning *Das Weisse Band*. It's definitely more capable of tackling paganism without resorting to either bad gothisms or cracking open the Lovecraft playbook (*The Whicker Man* remains the benchmark for bringing pre-Christian beliefs to the screen, but Esther Gronenborn's sadly underseen 2009 release *Hinter Kaifeck* is a great recent addition to the genre.)

In some ways, *The Book of Eli* has most in common with that European tradition, in that it is the one that least explicitly and graphically about the supernatural. The trite explanation for that would be that the writer, Gary Whitta, is English. His previous writing credits have been on video games, which could also explain why his debut movie plays like a post-apocalyptic MMO with some roleplaying components. Yet it is absolutely about religion and, specifically, about Christianity.

There is a literal book: Eli (Washington) travels across a blasted American mid-west, turned into a dust bowl by a combination of war and a natural planet-wide extinction-level event. In his possession is the last known copy of the King James Bible. It's a necessary leap of faith for the audience to believe that, three decades after the sky split asunder, he can still get a charge for an iPod but every last hotel draw has been emptied of what the Gideons left there and the contents destroyed. Every day he reads it, and continues on some ill-defined pilgrimage west, avoiding marauders and cannibals. Cinematically, he's in the same territory that the nameless man and boy crossed mere weeks ago in the flawed but superior *The Road* (reviewed in Hub #108): But with a chunk of *Mad Max 2* and *Fallout 3* in the mix, the Hughes' brother's sepia-tinged version of America post-Armageddon is a little trite and loaded with gleaming, fresh-off-the-production line firearms.

Eli's shield is the eponymous book he clutches. Yet the film's title is also a pun. The movie structured like

a book of the Old Testament, with Eli as a prophet. Wandering through the desert, he comes across a king – actually, a scavenger baron called Carnegie (Oldman.) Respectful and envious of Eli's intellect (and the fact that he wields a machete and a gun with the same calm butchery that Washington showed in *Man on Fire*), Carnegie decides to re-enact the Book of Matthew, with him as Herod Antipas, Eli as John the Baptist and his step-daughter Solara (Kunis) as an unwilling Salome. Rather than being seduced by Solara, Eli teaches her how to say grace over dinner and this begins her conversion.

It's the words alone that convert her, not blue tongues of fire from above. That said, there is a suggestion of the real existence of a higher power. Eli refers to a voice that guides him to the Bible and then to its final destination, and he seems strangely immune to bullets until necessary for dramatic effect. Yet *The Book of Eli* never suggests there are any issues with the Bible or with the order of the universe. Its critique is of organized religion versus faith. Carnegie, without saying the word, wants to become the pope of the wasteland. He seeks the Bible because, as he snarls to Eli, "It's a weapon aimed at the hearts of the weak and the desperate."

That's the most interesting concept at play here: While much of the film is little more than a dusty, CGI-enhanced reboot of *Waterworld*, there's the same musings on the power of words that underlay another Kevin Costner outing – the adaptation/mutilation of David Brin's *The Postman*. The last literate man, Carnegie wants to use words to seduce his followers. "How righteous our world would be," he dreams aloud, "If only we had the rights words." Actually, what he wants is justification for his expanded empire: Nothing like a new divine right of kings to establish authority. Eli, on the other hand, carries the word of God but does not implement it or observe it. It is when he acts purely on faith that he is able to fulfill his divinely ordained mission and his internal monologue is very typical of the kind of struggles that several Old Testament prophets face when confronted with divine edict. In that way, Eli is like Job, but with a sharper blade.

At its face, *The Book of Eli* is a clearly Christian film. Carve down a little further and it's really quite specific in its brand of Christianity. That Eli's tome is clearly started to be the King James Bible probably won't win too many friends amongst the Catholic community: Also, not only does the script make an obvious call for evangelism, but Eli's memorization of the text makes a more than passing nod to the biblical literalism of contemporary American Protestantism. Eli's Bible is definitive, memorized, and absolute.

Yet there's a reason there has been two thousand years of Biblical scholarly debate. It's because the Bible poses more questions about the nature and inclinations of God that it answers. Many of those answers are seemingly contradictory: For example, God is love, but wiping out every creature on the planet bar a couple of examples of each species is pretty tough love. Similarly, the whole idea of a New Covenant means that the Old Covenant had to be replaced. This is a God that changes his mind. That's the kind of arbitrary action usually reserved for Thor or Zeus, not Yahweh, but it's this God that waits in the shadows of *Legion*.

The Bible will always lend itself to horror movies, not least because big swathes of its imagery – pestilence, plagues, massacred infants – has a deeply cinematic bent. While *The Book of Eli* plays coy with whether there really is or isn't a God, *Legion* has no such ambiguity. There is a God, he's furious at humanity, and by sword and fire he will cleanse the earth. Why? As pregnant waitress Charlie (Palicki) explains, "I guess he just got tired of all the bullshit."

Paul Bettany plays Michael, an angel who has not so much fallen from Heaven as thrown himself down and cut off his own wings. Packing as many guns as he can fit into a stolen cop car, he leaves Los Angeles just as Armageddon starts so he can protect Charlie's unborn child. The baby is the only hope for humanity, which can be the only reason that an archangel would head into the middle of the Mojave Desert. Hunkering down in a run-down diner run by walking losing streak Bob Hanson (Quaid) and his son Jeep (Black, who got well acquainted with the unearthly during the under-rated TV series *American Gothic*), Michael locks and loads. However, and here's the twist, it's not that God has abandoned humanity to the forces of Hell. He's sending his own army of weak-willed humans possessed by angels. Considering that the heavenly host are sometimes described in the Bible as monstrous burning chimerical beasts, possessing

humans and bending their flesh into scabbling, skittering beasts with blackened eyes and shark-like teeth seems like a small mercy.

That Bettany is the Archangel Michael does not appear to be a random selection. In the Book of Joshua, he is the sword angel, the captain of the heavenly armies; In the Book of Daniel, he is named as the protector of Israel; But this Michael is plucked straight from the Apocrypha. In the Book of Enoch, he is called "the merciful, the patient." He is the defender of humanity and its advocate to Yahweh, and there's obviously been at least a dash of scholarly research into angelology. Yet again, as with *The Book of Eli*, the real inspiration here may be the Book of Job. Traditionally the most problematic book of the Old Testament for Christians, its depiction of God and his relationship with Lucifer after the Fall creates a complicated cosmology. In Job, Satan turns up before God with the other "Sons of God" and bets with the creator about the basis for Job's piety. That one moment has left biblical scholars scratching their heads for millennia: How can the adversary be in Heaven? Is God a gambler? And how disposable are humans in the plans of Heaven?

The subtle dramatic irony here is that, in Jewish traditions, Michael inherits Lucifer's old title of viceroy of heaven when Old Nick falls after his rebellion. Here it is Michael that rebels and, like Lucifer and Job, it's because of an argument over the nature of humans. God is back in full old-testament mode, striking down and smiting. Michael continues to challenge him, much as Lucifer did, and taps into key questions about the nature of angels: Do they have free will? Did Lucifer have free will when he rebelled? Was his rebellion about usurping God or not accepting the new supremacy of humans over angels? *Legion* comes up with an interesting solution to that free will enigma. Before he casts off his halo (interestingly, depicted as a collar) Michael stands with Gabriel (Durand) on the battlements of Heaven. The sword angel tells the messenger, "You give him what he wants. I give him what he needs."

Where the cosmology of the film is most complex and least resolved may be in the discussion of the nature of the child. Whether God is attempting to prevent the Second Coming or the child is something else is unclear. Some critics have also been baffled by the idea of angelic possession, and the fact that the Lord's hands would be so bloodstained: But again, that's where the film shows more intellect and depth than would normally be expected for a rock 'em, sock 'em, *The Prophecy*-esque gun-toting horror. On the rare occasions that a cross does it appear it is subverted or inverted or, like when Michael blows a cruciform hole in a door, reversed. While it's quite possible that it was just done to look cool, this is a film that did at least enough research to get Michael right. So it could be interpreted as a visual clue that this is all an undoing of the New Covenant, sealed by the crucifixion. After all, this is the old-school, Old Testament God, the god of wild places and boils and clouds of insects.

While *Legion* and *The Book of Eli* look to the Bible as their source material, *Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson has been shopping in a different section of the book store. His adaptation of Alice Seebold's acclaimed novel *The Lovely Bones* is part of the new wave of religiously-inclined pop fiction. Its theme of child rape and murder places it on a higher shelf than the abstinence-boosting *Twilight* franchise, but arguing that it's not got a broad streak of religion is like claiming *The Godfather 2* is really about cannoli.

It keys into a primal drive: That people want to believe that whatever waits after death is pleasant. That goes double when the death is brutal. Susie Salmon (Ronan) is a 14-year-old girl in 1970's Pennsylvania from a pleasant middle-class suburban family. When she is raped and murdered by her neighbor George Harvey (Tucci), her parents (Wahlberg and Weisz) are left to pick up the pieces. She, however, is still somewhat present, viewing the world from a realm known as the In Between and providing a narrative to the life she left behind.

Thematically, this is a return to Jackson's first mature picture, *Heavenly Creatures*, which dealt with the fantastical elements of adolescence. Unfortunately, and unlike that film, this it is an incoherent mess. As pure pieces of cinema, *Legion* is probably the most successful of these three: A giddy drive-in romp that is a lot smarter and a lot more innovative than it needed to be. *The Book of Eli* is a step up for the Hughes Brothers from their Victorian theme-park version of Alan Moore's shamanistic masterpiece *From Hell*, although still nowhere near the movie that their debut film *Menace II Society* nor their imperfect sophomore release *Dead Presidents* promised. *The Lovely Bones*, on the other hand, is a taut little family drama carried

by Wahlberg and Tucci, which is then ruined by Jackson's overblown and random flights of fancy.

That incoherence bleeds into the mythic afterlife that Jackson presents: Susie is voluntarily trapped in the In Between, which is less the traditional limbo and more a staging area for Heaven. This isn't the dreary bureaucracy of *Betelgeuse*, but instead a rolling, shifting pastoral scene. As a result, a lot of limp comparisons have been made to Robin Williams' 1998 Oscar-winning curiosity, *What Dreams May Come*, since both feature a CGI-afterlife bound only by the imagination of the dead. Unfortunately, and disappointingly for his fans, it seems that *The Lovely Bones* is limited by the imagination of Peter Jackson. When Williams crossed the river Styx, director Vince Ward undertook bold experiments, creating a world that looked like oil paintings: Not just in their palette but in their design, like the memorable scene of Williams' stepping through an Impressionist flower garden. Eric Rohmer perfected that technique with his 2001 French Revolutionary drama *L'Anglaise et le Duc*, yet somehow Jackson has pushed it back. His afterlife looks like a late 90's *National Geographic* screensaver after it's been attacked with Photoshop's airbrushing tools by one of those bad glossy fantasy artists that put purple sunsets and unicorns everywhere.

Jackson makes the classic mistake of many film makers that show Heaven – they show Heaven. Jackson's In Between is pastorally bland, a state re-enforced when Susie's sometime spirit guide Holly Golightly (SooHoo) announces "Of course it's beautiful. It's Heaven."

His film also represents what can be worst about adding a veneer of spirituality to a story. *What Dreams May Come* had a cosmology: Jackson's script, which is a rushed and hacked-down version of Seebold's novel, is a pubescent reassembling of *Ghost*. Susie doesn't get to interact with the real world as much as Patrick Swayze did, but the repetition of the themes of supernatural loss and revenge are pretty clear. There is even a duplicate of the sequence in which Swayze possesses Whoopi Goldberg so he can dance with Demi Moore (replace Swayze with Ronan, Goldberg with Reece Ritchie as token love interest Ray, and add Carolyn Dando as Demi Moore – if Demi Moore was a clichéd goth with some vaguely defined psychic powers.)

Of course, all three films will get some box office boost from the devotionally-motivated cinemagoer. On the downside, any overtly spiritual stance may not play so well in certain markets (seriously, doubt there's a long Netflix waiting list for Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* in Israel.) So be warned, Kenneth Brannagh: Make sure you don't go upsetting any Odinists when you start publicizing your take on Marvel Comics' *Thor*.

