

Hub Magazine

SCIENCE FICTION HORROR FANTASY

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EDITORIAL:

by phil lunt

“If life was like comic books then people would repeatedly come back from the dead. And die again. Then come back again...”

Ever thought about it? Obviously, life is a bit different to the worlds we read about on a daily/weekly/monthly basis in comic books. It'd be bonkers otherwise.

Comics still, I think, get looked down on too much. They're supposed to be anathema in the adult world. Rejected at 13+ and resigned to a life in a box in an attic somewhere. I was in a show recently and was reading a copy of Warren Ellis' "Do Anything" backstage. An old friend and fellow thesp had a look and caught the subtitle "Thoughts on Comics and Things" and began to recount tales of when we did a show in San Francisco years ago and I scoured the city for comic book stores. I travel in "weird" circles, apparently. I take it on the chin nowadays and choose my battles. Some folk will never be won over.

On a personal level, when I pick it apart at the seams, reading comics was the one thing that I shared with my Dad and wasn't hassled about. That's not to say that's the only reason I did it. I've loved comics since being about 4 when I got into Transformers toys and was bought the Marvel UK reprint of the US Transformers comics. It was a way in, for me. Something I could talk to my Dad about, and he told me about the stuff he used to read in the US comics when he was younger. We really didn't have these conversations much but it was something. Surprisingly, not many of my school chums read comics so in a reversal of the norm it was accepted at home and derided on the playground...

Anyway, bla bla artform bla bla literary relevance, it's all been said before and put far more eloquently than I. The fact is that there are, right now, some bloody brilliant stories going on in the medium of the sequential artform. I'll randomly point at Mike Carey's work on "The Unwritten", Antony Johnston's "Wasteland", Paul Cornell's "Knight & Squire" (recently finished a 6 issue run but worth hunting down) and Nate Simpson's "Nonplayer". That's without even looking at the big guns.

Wednesday & Thursday, every week, newborn baby comics come out to play at your friendly neighbourhood comic store. Go and adopt a couple. Give them a try. And if you're already a convert then pick up something new, take a risk. You might be glad you did.

SERIAL KILLERS INCORPORATED

BOOK+ALBUM RELEASE

SERIAL KILLERS INCORPORATED, the new thriller by Andy Remic, is **NOW AVAILABLE TO BUY** at www.anarchy-books.com priced at £3.49 for the novel, and £3.49 for the accompanying tie-in album by th3 m1ss1ng. For a ***very short period*** the novel is on special offer at Amazon.co.uk for the low low price of £1.14, and Amazon.com for \$1.83.

Shortly, there will also be a POD paperback release ISBN: 978-1-908328-04-5 available from Amazon.

Novel: Meet Callaghan, a hard-drinking, drug-fuelled, womanising no-good son-of-a-bitch. He's the amoral hardcore photographer for Black & White, the tabloid rag that tells it as it is. Or at least, how it should be. Callaghan's in way too deep with Mia, his Mexican stripper girlfriend... and even deeper with Sophie, estranged wife to Vladimir "Vodka" Katchevsy, infamous Romanian gun-runner and self-eulogising expert at human problem solving. People start to die. And Callaghan's caught in the middle. A situation even his Porsche GT3, Canary Wharf Penthouse suite and corrupt politician contacts can't solve. At the nadir of his downward spiral, Callaghan is approached by a man: a serial killer who brings him a very unique and dangerous proposition...

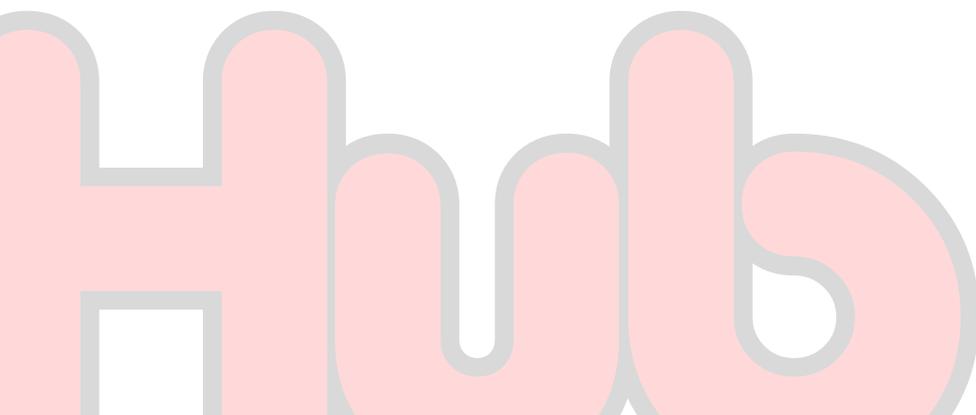
Album: Serial Killers Incorporated, the album, was written and recorded by th3 m1ss1ng, an indie junkie rockband who can be found at m1ss1ng.com. Three tracks feature the superb guitar-thrash of Jon Bodan, from one of Atlanta's premiere hardcore rock bands, Halcyon Way.

Both novel and album were developed in conjunction, and share concept and lyrics/text to offer a unique media experience born of collaboration.

We hope you enjoy our dark little corner of the world...

Who kills the killers?

www.anarchy-books.com



FICTION

Cycloparalleladrine

by saxon bullock

So, it's Friday night, and I'm already speeded up to my eyeballs. The whole world is like this exciting, multicoloured frenetic blur that sometimes resembles stuff I recognise, but I don't care. I'm doing what I want. I'm down the club, dancing, larging it, throwing myself around, feeling like nothing matters. Darrel's there, and he's doing the same, only larger and louder – but after a while, he looks over at me, and starts saying all this stuff about how I need to chill out. And he gives me these pills. Little red pills that glow when you hold them in your hand.

"What's this?" I shout.

"They're Cycloparalleladrine," Darrel shouts back, over the roar of the music. "New stuff. Good stuff."

Through the noise, I can hear him saying more. Like how it'll make me feel good, make me see things differently. Says it's a great buzz, life-changing. Fucker won't shut about it, to be honest, but I let him go on. He can be an arse at times, but anything Darrel says to take is okay. And if he says I need to cool down, maybe he's right.

I've been larging it for the last couple of days. Truth is, it's the only thing that makes life worth living. The job down the Leisure Centre sucks. Every time I see Lisa, all she does is bawl me out, even after everything she's done. We're fighting more and shagging less – when she isn't fucking other guys behind my back. My parents – my uptight, jumped-up, loser fascist parents – say I'm going to have to move out, and 'turn my life around'. What would they know about that? Cunts are stuck in a grey, soulless fucking rut. Every day the same. Not for me.

Club's the only escape. The one place I feel like I belong. All I can do is head there, stoke myself up – bit of speed, maybe an E if I'm in the mood – and feel the bass pound through my body until I want to die. Big bass, shaking up your body. Reducing you to liquid.

I stand there, the pills in my hand, looking at Darrel throwing his arms around, the whole seething tide of the club around me. The bass in my head, pulverising me. Seeing things differently... it feels right. I like the sound of it. Another escape. Buckle myself in, and take the ride.

So, I take the pills. Gulp them down with water.

Here we go.

The first thing that happens is the room blows up. Not a hallucination, not a rush. It really blows up. There's this massive explosion, a fireball crashes in from nowhere. Debris, and smoke, and all of a sudden there's screaming and panic everywhere. People being trampled. The ceiling of the club starts crumbling. Last thing I remember is the wall near me collapsing, knowing I was about to be buried, and thinking – *Seeing things differently. Yeah, right.* Then there's pain, and weight on top of me, and everything goes black.

They find me twelve hours later in the rubble. I'm unconscious, mangled, half-dead. It takes them six hours to revive me. As part of the tests, they check my blood, and it tests negative for any drugs. Don't ask me how.

I know something's wrong the moment I wake up in the hospital bed, and Lisa's there. Dressed all smart, like she's off to a job soon – which is weird, considering what a lazy bitch she is most of the time. She's sitting at the edge of my bed, looking at me real worried, like she's going to lose something precious if I go somewhere. She looks different as well – her make-up is... lighter. Makes her look nicer, somehow. More gentle. I lie there, bandaged up like a motherfucker, barely able to move for all the painkillers they've pumped into me, and I don't know what to do. She's all over me, hugging, and kissing, and saying how

she couldn't believe I'd made it. Lisa, who hadn't really given a shit about me for months. The girl I'd only stayed with out of habit, the girl who'd sucked off my best mate and then let me find out about it, just because she 'didn't think I'd mind.'

Two weeks later, they let me out of hospital, and now she's talking about marriage. And I'm trying to get my head around these weirdoes who've replaced my parents. Dad used to be a used car salesman. Now he's a sharp-suited, slick-haired guy who runs a bank. And Mum's a children's books writer. Apparently she won the Carnegie Award last year, but I'm fucked if I can remember. They live in this huge house over in Holland Park. And I live there too, according to what they say.

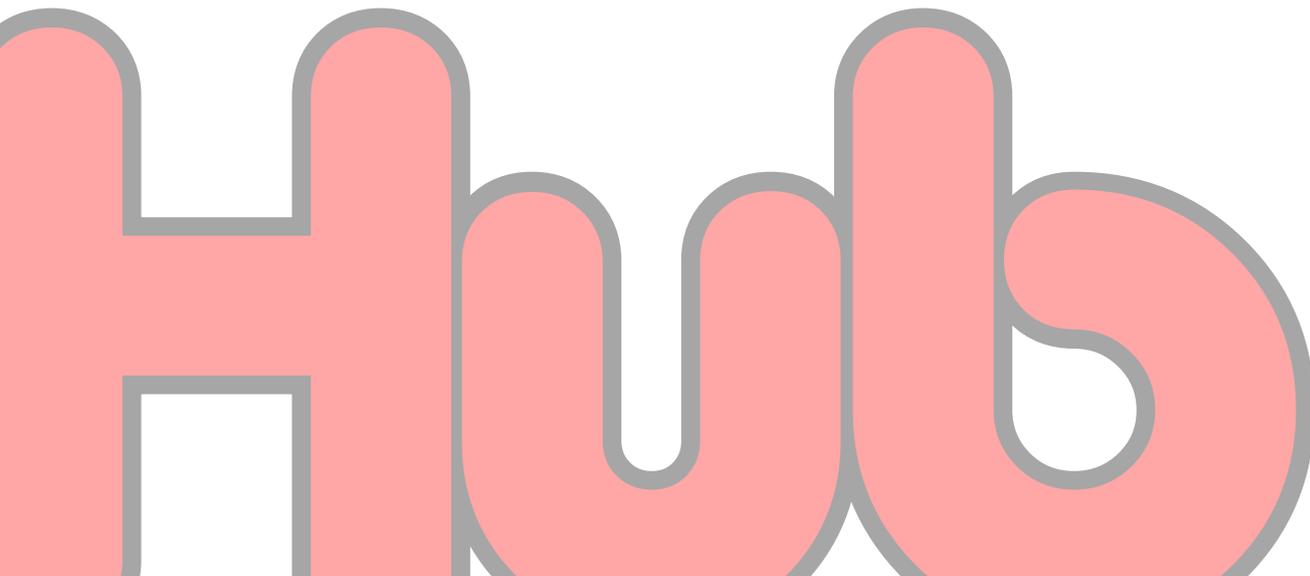
I know it's the drug. When I finally get back to work at the Leisure Centre, and find out I'm the manager of the place- the manager of a staff that thinks I'm the bees knees, by what I can work out- I know it's the drug. This isn't the way the world works. My Mum and Dad aren't the go-getters I'm seeing. I don't have the loyal, gorgeous girlfriend who's smart, funny, and – as she's now proven time and again – dynamite in bed. This life isn't mine. I don't belong here.

And that's because I know I'm not really here. I'm back at the club, on the dancefloor, everybody dancing around me, the bass pounding at me like a sledgehammer. It's the Cycloparalleladrine that's doing it – sitting at the heart of my brain, changing what I see and what I feel. Feeding me a different world. It's a beautiful world, but it's all lies. Every happy moment, every smile, every time my parents tell me how proud they are, every time Lisa says how much she loves me – I know it's all lies.

But how long can I resist? How long can I hold out?

And how long before I come down?

fin



Soulless

reviewed by martin willoughby



by Gail Carriger
Orbit
rrp £7.99

Gail Carriger is a new author and this is her debut novel, though you'd never guess that by reading it. Normally, first novels have a mistake or two such as a loose end not tied up. Not here.

I found this title in the *Dark Fantasy* section of Waterstone's, but I'm not sure it should be there. Not because it's a comedy, but because I'm not sure it's dark enough. There are several horrendous things that happen but they are not bad enough to make me throw up or squirm... and I do not have an iron constitution.

The heroine goes by the name of Alexia Tarabotti. She lives in an alternate Victorian London with her two silly sisters and her even sillier mother. Her father died not long after she was born, so her mother remarried a man with the name of Loontwill and produced the other two, Felicity and Evilyn. Those two girls are very like the younger Bennett girls in *Pride and Prejudice*. In fact, there are some remarkable resemblances between the Bennetts and the Loontwills.

Unfortunately for Alexia, she is dark skinned, dark haired, tall, large chested and, at 25, is unmarried. Now considered too old to be manacled to a man she is resigned to, and not a little happy at the idea of, being a spinster.

She also has one other asset that is little known, even to her family: she's a preternatural. With one touch she can turn a werewolf or a vampire into a human for the length of time that she remains in contact with them. She can also exorcise ghosts with a touch. Added to this she carries a parasol that she hits people with and two hairpins, one silver and one wooden.

The preternatural state also means that she has no soul (hence the title), which is a bit of a bind for her as it means she has no sense of style and dresses in the latest fashions to hide this.

Her preternatural state is known to BUR, a government organisation run by the head of the Woolsey werewolf pack, one Lord Maccon. He took over the pack after challenging the incumbent and defeating him. Lord Maccon not only knows of her state, but also fancies her. But, being a typical Victorian gentleman, cannot show this, even though Queen Victoria is well aware of the fact.

Her other friends include one Ivy Hisselpenny, a woman for whom the word style means nothing. Not only does she dress in colours that can politely be described as vile, her taste in hats is equal to her dress sense.

Her other great friend is Lord Akeldama, one of the oldest Vampires in Britain. He is a man for whom the word 'gay' is an understatement, but has more depth to him than you initially see.

The alternate world that Carriger has created is a world in which vampires, werewolves and ghosts are accepted in Great Britain. This occurred during Elizabeth's reign when she allowed supernatural beings to live without fear of being hunted or killed. Eventually the werewolves and vampires became accepted in society as a whole to the point that in Victorian London, vampires are the fashionista. What they wear, everyone wears.

Werewolves joined the army.

There is also alternate technology around that has a similarity to that in Stephen Hunt's novels. Steam engines of various designs, dirigibles and flying machines that flap like birds. But it's very much in the background as the main focus of the book is on Alexia and her burgeoning relationship with the werewolf, Lord Maccon. And boy does it burgeon.

Despite her father's extensive library of... *interesting* books and research, Alexia is still innocent in the ways of sex and marriage. Her scientific interests and this innocence join when she is sitting on Lord Maccon's lap and feels something growing between his legs. Realising what this means she starts to shuffle around on his lap as an experiment to find out what the ratio is between unaroused and aroused.

The social interactions of the time are well observed and the societal wit is in the vein of Jane Austen. But it's not all polite social interaction, or attempts to kill Alexia. In between the horror, the vampires, the werewolves, the discovery of kissing and some research in her father's interesting books, she gets kidnapped by rogue scientists. Their aim is to discover what makes her preternatural, so they turn her into a weapon against the supernatural.

The book gets quite bloody at this point and several people get eaten.

There are times when this book is laugh-out-loud funny, times when the action gets your heart pumping and times when other parts of your anatomy could... do with a bucket of cold water. It's also a tremendous read.

There are currently two other books in the series and I shall be reading them soon. As long as I have a cup of tea, some delightful cake, preferably served by a butler, and a bucket of ice nearby.

The Empathy Effect

reviewed by keith harvey



by Bob Lock
Screaming Dreams
rrp £6.99

Set in Swansea Wales, *The Empathy Effect* by Bob Lock is a noir (with a soupçon of horror/fantasy added), featuring one of the oddest, but at the same time most-endearing, crime-solving duos in the history of crime fiction. The plot involves revenge, child-abduction, illicit dog fighting, and traffic violations. Beautiful women swirl around the protagonist, an alcoholic traffic warden, who possesses a super power—of sorts. He is empathic; however, with great power comes great responsibility and the MacGuffin, which propels the plot, arises from his failure to use his power precisely.

Although bloody and violent, with two very nasty villains, running amok on the mean streets of Swansea, the novel is funny, possessing a mellow, almost sweet tone, but, at the same time, it is scary (beheadings) and macabre; true to its genre and roots. The novel's humor arises from the author's post-modernist choice to employ both first person and third person points of view. The first-person narration of Cooper Jones provides a manic voice, incessant in its dialogues and musings, while the third person narration creates suspense and fear and moves the plot along at a rapid pace. This mixture of points of view is a tricky thing to do. First-person narrative is difficult and most writers avoid it, although it is a staple genre device for noir fiction. So the mixing of the two was brave and dangerous but Lock pulls it off.

The novel begins with Cooper Jones, the protagonist, tied to one of the support legs of Mumbles Pier with the incoming tide lapping against his genitals and his wondering how he—an avowed empath—didn't see this figurative train wreck coming his way. So begins one of the most fundamental jokes and themes of the novel. Is the ability to empathize useful ultimately or is it just another annoying noise in our everyday life? In the case of Cooper Jones, his inability to translate and locate the source of his empathy is dangerous

because he tends to want to act upon it, imagining himself as some sort of super hero. Additionally, he is one of those unreliable narrators that we have heard so much about. Not only is he unable to pinpoint, analyze, and use his power effectively, he is usually drunk or hung over. Even the supposedly prescient Cooper and his girlfriend-in-peril fail to interpret love when they feel it. This power of empathy and the inability to translate it is also the source of the antagonist's rabid anger and ruthless rush to revenge. She, like Cooper, has misinterpreted the signals, misread the signs, and re-interpreted the facts.

As the story unwinds backwards, Lock introduces a group of interesting subsidiary characters, Jones' friends, which enhance the humor and color his canvas. The most endearing character, however, is Alby, a miniature Pinscher that virtually steals the show and saves the hero, as he cannibalizes corpses. At the end of the novel, I imagined Cooper and Alby walking off into the Welsh fog, Alby marking his territory and the off-set orchestra performing the Marseillaise. Like his choice to use two points of view, Lock made tough decision to create a dog character. Dogs in peril are unstable elements that will illicit more anger and letters from readers than a child in trouble. Forget about the girlfriend, in this novel Lock successfully succeeds in putting both a dog and a child in harm's way without offending the reader.

I found the novel well-written, humorous, and satisfying; the characters well-rounded and the dog-man duo refreshing and touching. Lock's scenes of violence and horror convince and chill at the appropriate points and are not muted by Cooper Jones' humor, which is sometimes burdened by a plethora of pop-culture allusions. The humor most succeeds when Jones interacts with his friends and enemies.

Ultimately, there is an underlying question posed in the novel but not necessarily answered explicitly: does empathy qualify as a super-power, or perhaps more cogently worded--and what I think Lock is asking--can one human being--no matter how blessed with empathy--ever truly know another?

The Hammer

reviewed by jared shurin



by K J Parker
Orbit
rrp £8.99

The Hammer is the latest book from the prolific and enigmatic KJ Parker. (All reviewers are bound by contract to refer to Parker as "enigmatic" – amazing what writing under a pseudonym will do for you.)

Parker's books all share several common elements: mainly tight plotting and an absorbingly bleak view of the world. There are no clearly delineated heroes and villains in Parker's books. The cliché would be to declare it all a matter of perspective, but Parker gleefully toys with that as well. Parker enjoys self-aware protagonists: "heroes" that question the morality – even the relative morality – of their own actions.

In *The Hammer*, the lead character is Gignomai met'Oc, youngest son in the met'Oc family. The met'Oc are exiled nobility, living in squalor in an unnamed colony far from Home. They are (or were) quite a powerful family and, perhaps more importantly, they have the colony's few guns. The rest of the colony is composed of farmers and trappers – trading their wares back Home for those manufactured goods they need to survive. Outside of the colony, an unknown quantity of Savages rove at will, and do their best to stay out of everyone's way.

The three factions share an uneasy peace. The met'Oc are rich in pride and poor on material goods, so they raid the outlying farms for the essentials of life. The colonists tolerate the met'Oc because they're believed to be the first line of defense against the Savages. Besides, they're nobles – raiding and depravity are what they do, right? And the Savages actually don't believe in anyone else. This isn't stupidity, but a sort of wilful ignorance brought on by their view of the world: the colonists and met'Oc don't make sense to them, so the Savages simply refuse to acknowledge their existence.

Gignomai, through the course of the book, upsets this delicate status quo. For his own private reasons he sets in motion an elaborate and terrible plan that will change the lives of everyone around him.

Again, readers familiar with Parker's work will see this coming – virtually all of his/her books focus around exceptional individuals and their complicated schemes. Often, as in *The Engineer Trilogy*, the scheme itself is the focus of the book, with the motivating force taking a backseat. In Parker's latest-but-one, *The Folding Knife*, the balance is shifted and the book focuses more on the motivation than the execution. *The Hammer* falls into the latter category – Gignomai's scheme is interesting to see unveiled, but the focus is more on uncovering his motivation and, once learnt, deliberating over the "rightness" of his actions.

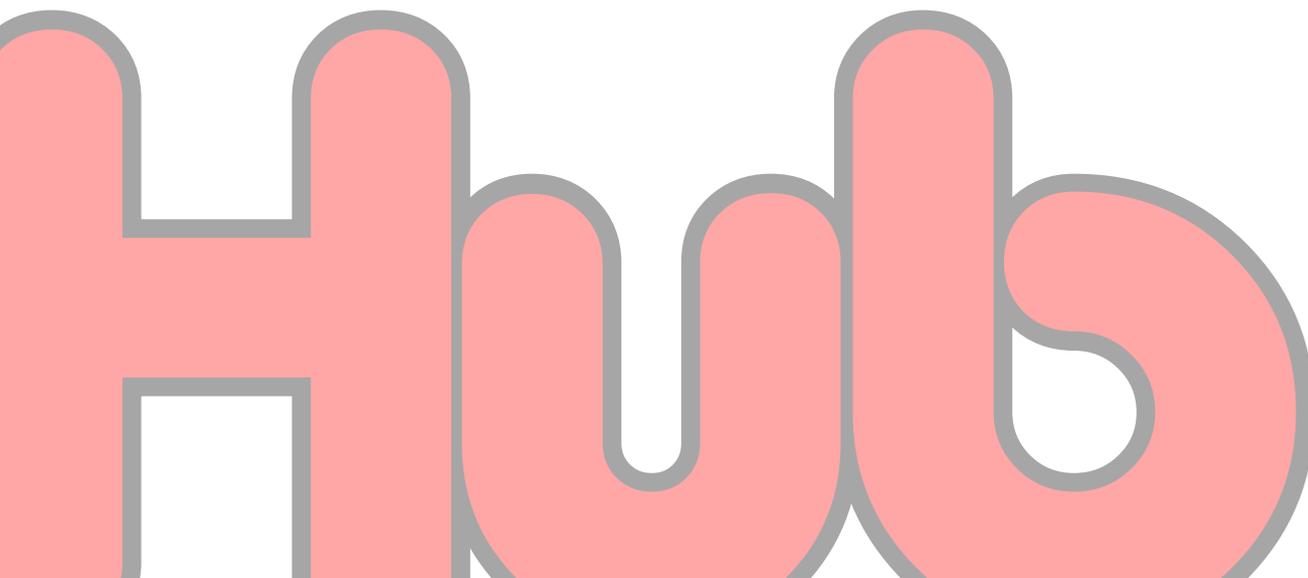
Adding a further veil of complication is the recurring discussion of belief. The met'Oc are nobles because they believe they are genuinely superior – a notion that Gignomai ostensibly eschews but still embraces in his every action. The colony members also believe in met'Oc nobility – the only thing that prevents them from lynching them with pitchforks. The Savages are believed to be a threat, but then, their own belief prevents them from ever being a danger. This isn't a matter of perception, but a deeply engrained system of faith that keeps the cogs turning. Gignomai is the first person in the colony willing to challenge these beliefs (because he's driven by another, false set of beliefs that override them), which is what gives him the strength to overturn the whole apple cart.

The sole flaw in *The Hammer* is a tacked-on denouement that spells out the karmic resolutions that had, previously, been only implied. It is an unworthy footnote to an otherwise exceptional text. One of Parker's strengths is the ability to write ambiguous endings, and the closing pages of *The Hammer* are an airy wave of the hand to readers expecting a satisfying resolution - and a rude gesture to those that aren't.

I would also, and this is a purely selfish criticism, prefer a return to trilogies. The space of three volumes let Parker raise more elaborate narrative questions and then dive deeper into exploring exploring them. Although I appreciate the rigorous regularity of the recent stand-alones, I'd happily trade them for more trilogies.

Parker knows how to tell a story and how to keep it trotting along. Even whilst tackling the Big Questions, *The Hammer* is glued together by an unadorned writing style that makes the book seductively readable. Parker is one of the most challenging and courageous authors in genre fiction, using abstracted settings and streamlined narratives to address complicated, difficult questions. He or she is doing exactly what fantasy *could* do, and so maddeningly rarely does.

This review first appeared on www.pornokitsch.com



FEATURES

Coming to Terms with the End of Stephen King's *The Dark Tower Part I – King and the Modernists*

by ro smith

There was a time when I would have unreservedly named Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* as my all time favourite story. I say 'story' rather than 'novel' or 'series', because it really is better regarded as one story, too long for a single novel, unfurled over seven volumes. This story, I would have said, and King's execution of it, was as close to perfection as any work of literature was likely to get.

Would that I was still possessed of such sweeping enthusiasms.

I was fortunate enough to stumble upon Roland and his *ka-tet* some time in the mid-90s, when Michael Whelan's haunting artwork still graced *The Dark Tower's* covers, and only three of this seven volume colossus were in existence. I know many a person for whom this would have been a cause of immense frustration. Many's the warning I've had against starting *The Wheel of Time*, and other such tales that 'grew in the telling'. But I don't think I'm alone, as one of *The Dark Tower's* 'Constant Readers', in saying that there was a sort of savour of anticipation in the long wait between *The Waste Lands* and *Wizard and Glass*, or *Wizard and Glass*, and *Wolves of the Calla*. Especially when it was worth the wait.

We felt somewhat cheated, then, when the last three books came out at predictable intervals, in quick succession. It didn't help to quash the feeling that maybe, just maybe, these books had been a little bit rushed.

That they should have been is, of course, completely understandable. Well do I remember the jolt of fear that, to my shame, coloured the pity, sympathy, and shock with which I heard the news that Stephen King had been run over, and was in critical condition. I couldn't help but think: what if he had died, and left *The Dark Tower* unfinished? How must King, himself, have felt? It's no secret that he was every bit as invested in his masterpiece as his fans. Add to that his growing blindness... who could blame the man for feeling that mortality was knocking, and the time to procrastinate was over.

Nonetheless, the last three books did feel rushed, and I don't think it was just the sudden, unsettling regularity of the publishing schedule. What was it, then? Well, let's examine some of the complaints (from here on in, spoilers are most definitely ahoy):

First bone, so often picked: writing yourself into your own story as a character – maybe even as God – is jumping the shark, egomania, and a whole world of 'no'.

Second bone: we've spent the last six books awaiting the hauntingly described moment when Roland reaches the Tower, winds his horn, and the ghosts of all his companions – the heroes of the past – rise from the dead and sing, rejoicing that, finally, the childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came¹, and all the worlds were saved. None of this happened. It couldn't have been more anti-climatic.

Third bone: everyone else (effectively) died. *Everyone*. It seems a trifle unfair.

Fourth bone: the sinister Crimson King, so often heard of, but never before seen, turned out to be a

¹ *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* is a poem by Robert Browning and, King tells us, the original inspiration for *The Dark Tower*. The poem is quoted in full at the end of the last book. Like Eliot's gesture towards *The Golden Bow* in his endnotes to *The Waste Land*, this poem is beyond doubt a great influence, yet it is one amongst so many that there is something almost ironic in singling it out. I'm sure the similarity is not coincidence.

deranged and somewhat pathetic clown.

Fifth bone: the Tower itself was disappointing, squat, and not nearly so exciting as we were led to believe. What happened to the epic battle of medieval-futuristic glory we were promised?

And finally, bone number six: the ending is a cop-out rinse and repeat. We are robbed of everything for which we had so patiently waited – some people for longer than I've been alive. Of course, we would have had none of it without Stephen King, and we should be grateful... but it's hard not to feel cheated.

But were we? Was the ending really such a dreadful cop-out? I'm not going to argue that this piece of fiction is unflawed and utterly unproblematic. But I've come to terms with at least some of these issues, thanks to a few realisations, which I'd now like to share with anyone else who had difficulty finding closure with the end of *The Dark Tower*.

The Modernists

Let's start with something that's lying on the surface of *The Dark Tower*, something even the casual reader might notice. The mark of the modernists runs deep in this work. Many's the Eliot or Yeatsian quotation you can find wandering the pages of a Stephen King book, especially those linked to *The Dark Tower*². *The Stand*, the book King himself concedes to be his most popular work, can be read with no knowledge of *The Dark Tower* whatsoever, even though its main villain, Randal Flagg, has stepped right out of Roland's world, in the service of the Crimson King. Thematically, though, and in terms of literary reference, it is probably the most heavily connected. Thus we see General Stuckey quote Yeats's *The Second Coming*, in describing the apocalyptic horror brought on by the super-flu:

And what beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Echoes of this line feed through to the anti-Christ-like figure of Mordred Deschain – son of Roland and Susannah by means of a succubus, and agent of the Crimson King.

The Second Coming is but one poem from a series, which Yeats named 'The Tower'. The series is deeply concerned with cyclical patterns and the repetition of history, as is *The Dark Tower* itself. Yeats has a whole metaphysics of history; he was obsessed with its repetition. It is significant that it is the *second* coming with which the poem is concerned. History is 'turning and turning in the widening gyre' (line 1) – it moves in cycles, but widening, disintegrating ones.

'Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold' (line 3) is concisely emblematic of the central enigma of the *Dark Tower* novels. What's at the centre of Roland's world? Why, the Dark Tower, of course. And it's falling apart. But that's OK, in Yeatsian metaphysics everything is cyclical: things fall apart, but history repeats, and they come back together again. It is short-lived, small-minded humans who get lost in the chaos, trying to build linear structures in the darkness, to hold it all together.

Within the series of poems 'The Tower' there is a tower, and like the literary monument that is its namesake, the tower is crumbling. King's literary monument is *The Dark Tower*; and within it is Roland's Dark Tower. They are futile human efforts – weapons to forge linear histories to pass down the generations and bind them together, as symbolised by the heirloom artefact of Sato's sword, in 'The Tower'; and by Roland's

² The broader canon of *The Dark Tower* is not limited to the seven volumes that follow the main tale, which start's with the gunslinger chasing the man in black across a desert, and ends with Roland reaching his Dark Tower, and returning to that desert to begin the chase again. I won't try and enumerate all the Dark Tower related works – there's an article on Wikipedia, for anyone who's interested – but major works include *The Stand*, *It*, *The Talisman*, *Black House*, 'Salem's Lot', and *The Eyes of the Dragon*. *Hearts in Atlantis*, in particular, doesn't make a great deal of sense if you haven't read *The Dark Tower*.

guns, in *The Dark Tower*. The sandalwood gripped .45s that a gunslinger passes down to his son - that Stephen Deschain³ passed down to Roland, and Roland, symbolically, passes down to the new gunslingers, whom he trains in *The Drawing of the Three* and *The Waste Lands*.

As closely tied as it is to Yeats, *The Dark Tower* is inextricably linked to the writings of Eliot, also. The chilling line 'I will show you fear in a handful of dust', from Eliot's *The Waste Land* has surely been quoted more times than can be counted, but I met it first in the pages of *The Dark Tower*. The title of Volume Three: *The Waste Lands* is a literary sledgehammer. In Eliot's poem we see the fear that Yeats is expressing: that our deep, rich culture fragments, becomes 'A heap of broken images, where the sun beats' (*The Waste Land*, 'The Burial of the Dead', line 22). Our monuments are broken down into sand, by the harsh sun of the dry land; they become the desert. *The Dark Tower* is a heap of broken images itself: *Hey Jude*, *The Wizard of Oz*, Homeric and Arthurian mythology – even Harry Potter and Star Wars bleed into this world and colour its landscape.

Sometimes the images have meaning, sometimes they seem almost entirely divorced and set adrift as the tattered remains of something barely understood. Thus we see that the reference of the ruby slippers is lost on Roland, as a set of shoes is left for each of his *ka-tet* when they encounter a replica of the Emerald City in an alternate Kansas. He asks: 'What is it... What do they mean, these shoes?' and Susannah replies: 'I don't think any of us know *that*, exactly'. Or, perhaps more tellingly (the shoes still perform a function in the tale, retaining some symbolic vestige of Dorothy's slippers' original power) when they encounter a replica of that strange, sign: 'BELL OUT OF ORDER, PLEASE KNOCK' and Susannah says to Roland: 'Don't bother... It's from the story, that's all'. This is a sign (both to us, and within the story) that has literally lost its meaning. It is just a reference towards something familiar – a powerful one, I remember that sign, and it resonates with me to see it again, but I'm not sure that it *means* anything beyond a sort of communal recognition.

The question prompted by these fragments, which have slipped out of our world into Roland's, half to evoke associations, and half as simple debris, is: How soon before *our* monuments are nothing but dust, just as these literary references have become warped, fragmented mirrors of the familiar as they ripple out across the worlds of *The Dark Tower*? And, of course, the literal deserts of Roland's world present the bleakness of the eventual outcome for all cultures: endless miles of meaningless dust.

But for Eliot, it's all part of the cycle of life. April may be the cruellest month⁴, but it is the month in which spring returns, and new things grow from the dust. Eliot was heavily influenced by *The Golden Bough*, a cross-cultural anthropological study of traditions of magic and religion, which connects many ancient rituals with an archetype of the sacrificial god-king who rises from his grave, following his yearly murder at harvest. He dies, and his body is broken up and ploughed into the fields to fertilise them for the next year. Similarly, today's art is built on the fragments of older cultures, and it is richer for it. Like King's, Eliot's waste land is a mess of plundered, fractured symbolism – but one you should be able to enjoy, even if you don't get the reference. In Eliot, you just let the language wash over you; with King, it is the story that carries us away over modernist dinosaurs and emerald cities.

Here's the thing: viewed under the light of these overt modernist references, it's really not that surprising that the ending becomes a rinse and repeat. *Of course* Roland goes back to the beginning, when he reaches the end. Like the god-king, he is resurrected as he was when we first met him, having served his time in End World, the land of the dead. The cyclone of history sweeps him back through time, just as Dorothy is swept back to Kansas after her long journey through Oz. (Although, I always wished she could have stayed in Oz.)

And yet it is *not* true that nothing has changed. This time, Roland has the horn. The tool to break
3 It is surely no coincidence that Roland's father is called 'Stephen'. In a sense, these are the weapons that King gives him, also. And they are not enough, by themselves, to save the tower...

4 See Eliot, line 1 of 'The Burial of the Dead', Book 1 of *The Waste Land*. Contrast with Chaucer: 'Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote', line 1 of the 'General Prologue' to *The Canterbury Tales*. The former line is surely intended to express a tension and an irony in evoking the latter.

free of the cycle. Yeats has a samurai sword – a family heirloom – as a symbol of human endeavours to forge continuity through time; but, like Roland's guns (or Dorothy's ruby slippers) its power, though not inconsiderable, is limited. Like all human monuments, they can be destroyed. Like bullets whose powder is wetted by the ocean foam at the point of pointless ending - as Roland's are as he falls asleep on the beach, following the night that lasts ten years.

The horn is different, though. It has more of Eliot than of Yeats. It has more of hope. Horns are the instruments of art, not art in themselves, and new tunes can be made on them when the old tune is played out. Because Roland has the horn, King seems to intimate, everything could be different this time. From whence does the horn gain this power? Well, from us; we, the readers, get to decide what happens when the horn is blown; we get to forge new monuments out of the dust. If we saw the horn blown, it would just be like all those other frozen human monuments. King would have fixed it for us, ready to crumble as the years progressed, and the zeitgeist moved further and further away from how it was when King set finger to keyboard.

Here, also, I think we can see why King made that highly controversial move to introduce himself into the text. Without reference to any modernist poetry, any reader of *The Dark Tower* who also read *On Writing*, or who was alert whilst reading King's letters to the 'Constant Reader', could have worked out that part of his decision to leave the end so open was rooted in a recognition that somewhere in those two and a half decades, this story had ceased to be purely his own. And, really, it had done so when he first set pen to bright green paper in 1970.

In *On Writing* King discusses how he regards writing as a form of telepathy: it cannot be accomplished by one person alone. There must be a writer, and a reader, and the story is formed of both their efforts, and what happens in the reader's mind is only due in part to what the writer sets down on the page. Have you ever read a book and formed an image of a character as being one way, then found out at page 100, or upon rereading, that he was meant to be another? The image in your mind belongs to you. The writer gives you the bones, and the more he fleshes them out, the more closely he will determine what the character looks like, but, ultimately, the details are always yours.

I think, in King's introduction of himself as a character, we see his *anxiety* at the thought that the reader might see him as somehow the god of his text. The trope of author as god is an old one, and we see King systematically deconstruct his own authority over the last three books. His characters think critically of him, and reject him as god.

There are good intentions, here, but I think they backfire. They are over-thought. *The Dark Tower's* beauty always lay in the un-intrusive nature of the themes. No matter how rich the symbolism and imagery was, *The Dark Tower* could always be read as a story first. The self-analysis clutters up the text with something that cannot help but draw the reader outside of the story, rebuilding the fourth wall. It jars because the first four books sat so well within Eliot's ideal of minimal authorial influence. Sure, you could chase down the references if you wanted – and it could be fun – but nobody was making you extract yourself from what you wanted the story to be. Thus, King, in trying to distance himself from the god-figure, artificially emphasises his own authority as creator, and undermines his intent.

You may be reading this wondering why on Earth it *matters* what King intended to do. There is still a widespread literary taboo that holds that one should not talk about authorial intent in literary analysis. Roland Barthes killed the author in 1967, and that is the truth. It's all supposed to be about what you got out of it, or how the reader *might* interpret it. I don't care. I think you can get yourself into a muddle by caring too much about such things. And when the author directly injects himself into the text (even as an untrustworthy representation) it would be a flawed analysis that didn't deal with the question of what this says about authorship, and *this author's* authorship in particular.

Still, although I think perhaps this move of King's was a mistake (or, at least, that his handling of it was over-wrought), there is something to the concession that a work, of this magnitude in particular, becomes less solely the work of just one man. In all those letters to the Constant Reader, I am sure King knew what he was about; and the unresolved ending is supposed to set us free, as well as Roland.

To put the question more simply, devoid of literary solemnity: would we have been entirely satisfied with *anything* King could have said about the Dark Tower, and what happened when Roland got there? Is it his fault that Michael Whelan painted an elusive, futuristic, turreted tower that captured our imagination more than a decade before King had the chance to tell us that in his head it was short and squat all along? How much worse could it have been if he told us *exactly* what happened inside the tower once and for all?

You cannot satisfy all of the people all of the time; and when you let fans stew in their juices, allow their minds to roam rampant with the possibilities for more than a score of years; steep them in a rich and provocative mythology for which you refuse to fill in all the details... George Lucas learned the hard way what happens when you try to tell fans what The Truth is after that.

Moreover, in a very real sense, the only way for Roland to save the tower is for him to *keep on saving it* – keep on renewing the work of art in the minds of new generations. Something odd is revealed in the last book. It is suggested that Roland was never *really* on a quest to save the tower; rather, he merely wanted to see it, before the end. But that doesn't mesh well with six books worth of characterisation, nor with the visionary dreams and the lines of fate that have drawn our heroes together. That Roland is obsessed with the tower to the point of madness is certainly there, but that *all* he wants to do is see it before the whole world collapses... no. I can't help but feel that he wouldn't want it this badly if that were all it was. The forces of light wouldn't be working to put him and his companions in the path of destruction. The forces of the Crimson King would not have worked so hard to stop him.

Is this simple inconsistency, then? Did King get lost in all the years and through all the convolutions of plot? Again: I don't think so. He couldn't be so confused about such major issues as his main character's motivation, and why his antagonists oppose him. There's a deeper point, and I think the point is this: all Roland *needs* to do, when he reaches the tower, *this time*, is climb to the top, having progressed through a psychological journey that has brought him to the realisation that he cannot save the tower without the horn. The result of this realisation is that *this* quest for the tower can only be a quest to see it, gain entrance, and climb to its top. Thus, it becomes *both* fruitless *and* vital, both within the story, and thematically, metaphorically. It is through this that *The Dark Tower* becomes the kind of literary monument that can provide stability across fluctuating worlds – the real one, and the infinite ones of our imagination – by becoming the vehicle for the story that we tell ourselves, after Roland reaches the top, and starts again. Just as the horn is not a work of art in itself, but an instrument through which art is created.

That's how Roland wins.

But there are other problems, for which I think we must address ourselves to other sources to understand. I hope you'll return to Hub for part two: 'King and the Epic: Homer, Virgil, and Tolkien' to hear me out again.

