



Hub

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Lee's Diary

I spent last Saturday (April 28th) in Derby, at the second alt.fiction. It's a one-day genre event, covering all that is good and great in genre literature. The guest list was impressive, with the old stalwarts such as Harry Harrison rubbing shoulders with the young pretenders (Tony Ballantyne), while other giants (Ian M Banks, Mike Carey) offered words of wisdom to audiences hungry for advice. How to get a publisher, how to structure your writing day, how to make a career in comics. There were workshops (in one we learned that it is, indeed, possible to make cheese scary), panel events (publishers vs agents: bring it on!), and authors reading from their latest works.

Of the many things I learned at the event, three will stay with me:

- 1) Mike Carey is one of the nicest guys you could hope to meet
(and I'm not just saying that because he's giving us an exclusive Felix Castor story later in the year).
- 2) Tony Ballantyne has really dull dreams.
(In his most memorable dream he was standing in a supermarket, looking at fish fingers. One packet was priced at £1.75, the other at £1.85. He bought the £1.75 packet).
- 3) People are starting to talk about *Hub*.
(One writer of renown had been advised by another of even greater renown to submit a story to *Hub*. It's nice when writers say nice things about us. It makes us happy.)

alt.fiction 3 is a year away. Make sure you get there.

What if I don't like reading while sat at my PC?

If you have a PDA or other device capable of displaying eBooks, you will soon be able to download a special eBook version of this issue from our website. In future weeks we'll also be experimenting with versions for iPod. Failing that, hit the PRINT button.

How Frequent is Hub?

Hub is published 52 times a year! No, that wasn't a typo. *Hub* is also now free to read! (Neither was that).

Every week we will be publishing a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review (book, DVD, film, audio, or TV series) and we'll also have the occasional feature, too. We can afford to do this largely due to the generosity of the people over at Orbit, who have sponsored this electronic version of the magazine, and partly by the generosity displayed by your good selves. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation. Donations of all sizes are welcome. £1/\$1/1Euro is good, more is (naturally) better. Orbit helps *Hub* survive, donations help us thrive. You can donate using the PayPal button on the front page of our website.

Lenny and the Travel Ninja

by Alasdair Stuart



Lenny Satler had never been lucky, nor did he look it. However, even by his own standards, he had never been quite as unlucky as this before. He was standing in the departure lounge of Upward Station watching his holiday slowly boost away and head out to a safe distance. In this case, his holiday took the form of the space liner Hedonist, which was setting off for the outer worlds with one empty seat and almost all his luggage.

He watched until it vanished then slowly turned and slumped against the window. All around him people were bustling to and fro, buying the utterly unnecessary socks, magazines and accoutrements that they needed to take on holiday with them. He closed his eyes and reviewed his to do list, knowing instinctively that there would be no shuttles home for hours, his credit cards were probably in his other bag and if he dared to buy a coffee, it would be the special, geo-thermally heated kind that burnt the roof of his mouth off. Sometimes, it was very difficult being Lenny Satler and this was one of those times.

Then he saw Ivy, sitting directly opposite him. She was wearing trousers, chunky boots, a leather jacket and a t-shirt with a large, grinning skull on it. She was reading *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*. She was absolutely still, absolutely focussed on the book and when she looked up, caught Lenny's eye and smiled, she was absolutely the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. On impulse, he got up and walked over.

'Excuse me.'

She didn't look up. 'Yep?'

'Miss your flight?'

She looked up then, nodding. 'If the bloody taxi had turned up when it was supposed to-'

Lenny smiled, part of him aware that he was talking to her like a normal human, and even better that she was talking back.

'You too huh?. I'm Lenny.'

She extended a hand. 'Ivy.'

Lenny took it and she pulled herself to her feet. She was shorter than him and he could see now her long black hair was tied in a tight braid. Her eyes, now she was actually looking around were the most piercing green he'd ever seen and seemed to view everything with the same combination of energy and amusement. She nodded in the direction of the coffee shop.

'Want one? I'm buying.'

Lenny thought about mouth burns. Lenny thought about the last time a woman had noticed him. Lenny ran after her.

'So I find myself here, again, trying to work out what to do.'

Lenny had poured the whole pathetic story out to her, every single thing that had ever gone wrong. He knew it was whiny, knew it was self-indulgent but couldn't help himself. Ivy for her part had just sat there and listened, nodding from time to time. She looked at him over her coffee then spoke.

'Ever been to Blake's World?'

Lenny shook his head. 'The literary planet?'

She nodded. 'Yeah. Want to?'

'What?'

'Go to Blake's World.'

'When?'

'Now.'

'Why?'

She smiled. 'When is a holiday not a holiday. Come on, Lenny, it'll be FUN. Life's handed us lemons so let's make vodka.'

He smiled, feeling a tingle at the back of his neck. 'Why...um...would you.'

'Want to go somewhere with you? Because I've never done it before and we could both do with a break. Now, if you're looking a gift horse in the mouth?'

Lenny shook his head vigorously. 'No ma'am, not all.'

Ivy stared at him. 'Ma'am?'

Oh God. 'I'm sorry, I-'

She grinned. 'You are a very sweet man Mr Satler.'

#

One day later, Lenny was standing on the side of Marvell's Folly, a mountain five times higher than the highest one on Earth, learning how to breathe again. He'd spent most of the climb with a lungsquid wrapped around his face and had found the sensation disturbingly close to making out with it. The squid, for his part, seemed quite pleased with matters but nonetheless, Lenny had taken advantage of the pressurised dome at the top of the mountain. He was also taking advantage of the first opportunity he'd had in several hours to sit down and take in the view.

Marvell's Folly was the largest mountain discovered so far, anywhere, and that alone had been enough to convince Ivy they needed to come to Blake's World. Lenny, who dealt with adversity the same way jugglers deal with performing heart surgery, hadn't been happy about the fact but when he'd got there had been pleased to see that Marvell's Folly was in fact, an incredibly gentle slope. So gentle, that its caldera took up a third of Blake's World and they'd actually come into land at a space port halfway up its side. Ivy had been vaguely put out by not being able to start from the beginning. Lenny had bought some socks.

Now, he was standing at the highest point and marvelling at the black and blue sky around him. They were so high up that most of the atmosphere was beneath them and a doughnut of blue wound around his head with a neatly punched black circle of void in the middle. He was reasonably sure it was constructed but nonetheless, the effect was lovely.

Ivy, for her part, was in heaven. She'd run full tilt around the entire summit twice, whooping with joy and was now starting her third lap. It was when she was halfway through it that Lenny noticed something a little unusual. On the edge of the horizon, itself ludicrously close and raised above the horizontal due to the vast bulk of the mountain, something odd was happening at the space port. It was such a simple thing that it took him a full minute to work out exactly what was going on.

'Why are all the ships leaving?'

Ivy stopped, blinked, folded her arms behind her back. 'Oh that.'

Lenny had the first hint of it then, that slight tickle you get when you realise that the meal you've just been presented with may be advertised as duck but looks suspiciously like cat.

'What do you mean oh that?'

Ivy folded her arms and walked over, looking straight at him. She looked strangely intimidating and it took Lenny a moment to realise why. Ivy looked deadly serious and even worse, vaguely apologetic. By the time she crouched in front of him and put her hands on his knees, he was reasonably convinced she was either a contract killer sent to murder him or had a terminal disease and had come here to die.

'Lenny, we came here for a reason.'

Contract killer. Had to be. He managed a weak smile.

'Okay.'

'That reason may not make you happy.'

Body dumped in a lake. Death by accidental tourism. He'd be famous. Stupid and dead but famous. Somehow he managed to keep the smile.

'I'm beginning to suspect that. What is it?'

Ivy looked back at the space port where the flock of ships were still hurtling skywards. 'The thing is, Blake's World is closing.'

Lenny felt like she'd just said something in Sanskrit.

'Closed? The world? The whole world? Why?'

'Low attendance. No one lives here, the place is pretty and all but it's just sort of, here, really. Nice countryside and land-

marks named after our favourite poet do not a successful tourist industry make. Most people want excitement, adventure, a little danger in their holidays these days.'

'I don't.'

She squeezed his hands. 'I know, sweetie, that's why I picked you.'

'You picked me?' The animal part of his brain began muttering about repopulating the planet, casting images of bearskins, spears and him heroically fighting off mammoths across the back of his eyes. He told it to shut up.

'I picked you. You see, the thing is...I'm a professional traveller. I'm paid to travel various to places and find new and interesting things to do there.'

'So people pay you to go on holiday.'

'Yeah basically. I go places, find out interesting things then recommend them to the travel companies. The technical term is leisure consultant.'

She grinned. 'I prefer travel ninja.'

'So you're a professional traveller?'

'Yeah.'

'THEN WHY ARE WE UP HERE AND NOT DOWN THERE?!'

Ivy blinked, taking in his uncharacteristic outburst without comment. 'I was getting to that. You see, one or two of the shipping companies are looking for some different holiday breaks, different styles of holiday. One of them came up with an idea for a new brand and asked me to check it out.'

She was warming to her subject now, still looking straight at him but with a more animated tone than before. 'The idea's really cool actually. You see, they wanted a holiday that didn't feel like a holiday, that felt like a constant struggle for survival against overwhelming odds. The idea is that you work so hard on the holiday that when you get back to work you relax, you're calmer, more focussed, more relieved to be, you know, alive and you work harder.'

Lenny had a sense of it now and really, really didn't want one

'And an empty world would be the perfect place to do that.'

She smiled and pointed at him. 'Damn right. But, the thing is, being a travel ninja means that I'm used to this sort of thing.'

'So you needed a normal person.'

'I needed a normal person.'

'And that was me.'

'Yeah.'

'Why?'

She smiled, standing up. 'You seemed nice and you were having a bad day. Besides, Lenny, this will be an ADVENTURE!'

And with that she stood, turned and walked into the information centre.

#

By the time Lenny had finished crying and followed her, she was happily in conversation with a hologram sitting behind the information desk. For some reason, someone had decided that '50s bus boy was the look to go for at the top of the highest mountain in settled space but had clearly not done their research quite right. The young man in question, all Jimmy Olsen freckles and golly gee attitude was wearing a name tag that clearly read: CHLOOE.

Chlooe looked up as Lenny came in and grinned. 'Morning sir! Want a muffin? I have cappuccino, coconut and Stilton.'

Lenny blinked. 'Stilton?'

'Stilton.'

'The English cheese that smells like something died in it and then got trodden on?'

Chlooe punched the air in front of his chest with absolutely genuine jauntiness. 'You betcha.'

Lenny blinked. 'Sure why not?'

He sat down and with a perfectly timed flourish, Chlooe gestured at the desk in front of him. A hatch opened and the Stilton muffin rose with a faint, hydraulic hiss. Ivy leaned over and watched as he began to eat.

'You okay?'

'I'm sitting on a planet which has been entirely deserted with only a travel ninja and a gender confused hologram for company, eating a blue cheese muffin. I've had more normal days.'

She grinned. 'And worse ones?'

'A few. So I'm your test subject?'

'Yeah.'

'Which would imply that there is a route of sorts off world? After all, what's the fun in an adventure if you can't get past the first stage?'

She grinned. 'Now you're getting it. Noticed anything else yet?'

Lenny looked around at the information centre, taking in everything from the brook that babbled quietly to itself as it dissected the room in two to the way Ivy was sitting. Then finally, he shook his head.

'Only Chlooe.'

Ivy nodded. 'Exactly'

Lenny blinked. 'What are you talking about?'

Ivy sighed, boosting herself up onto the counter. 'Look at his name plate.'

'It says Chloe spelt wrong.'

'What does that make you think?'

'That maybe he decided what he wanted to be late in life.'

Ivy sighed. 'Say it aloud.'

'Chlo-oh. Cluey.'

Ivy pointed at him, smiled and swung her legs over the counter. 'Cluey. Come with me good sir.'

Ivy was kneeling on the floor, busily working a maintenance cover off Cindy's projector. When she did so, she yelled in triumph and held up a small piece of paper for Lenny to take. He did so, opened it and read aloud:

'The quickest way between two points is a straight line..' He looked up. Ivy clapped her hands. 'THAT'S why I went for you sunbeam! Good thinking. What do you see?'

'A chariot.'

And Lenny was indeed looking at a chariot. It was a large red metal box with two pylons sticking out from the front and meeting in a point directly beneath the top of the roof cone. It was clearly sealed and written across the door was:

TIME'S WING'D CHARIOT: MARVELL INDUSTRIES ESCAPE VEHICLE.

Lenny smiled. 'I read about these! There's about a dozen of them scattered across the mountaintop in case of asteroid strike. You just get in one, it boosts out of the atmosphere then...you're not serious.'

Ivy grinned. 'Told you, an adventure.'

'Ivy these things hit face down!'

'They're padded!'

'I'M not!'

She stood and folded her arms. 'We either take the chariot or we stay here and start trying to survive off bark, grubs and Stilton muffins.'

Lenny looked up at the chariot, then down at the muffin. 'I've got shotgun.'

#

An elephant was sitting on Lenny's chest. No, actually every elephant ever born was sitting on Lenny's chest. He felt like he was being pushed inside out as the Chariot punched them in the spine and hurled itself spinning wildly up into the sky. The first few seconds, he wanted to cry but didn't have the breath, the next few consisted of him saying his final prayers and then the pressure lifted and he shot forward and-

'Oh.'

There was a crescent of blue and black outside the window. They were so high that the world was curved beneath them and as he watched, he could see it turn. It was a sparkling blue and green jewel, a verdant, beautiful little marble of a place and Lenny suddenly had no idea why anyone wouldn't want to come here. He didn't notice Ivy smiling at him as he stared out of the window.

He did notice the vertigo, which began to build as the little ship's nose rocked forward. It was exactly like the moment at the top of a roller coaster where you see the car before you go over, know what's coming and have absolutely no ability to stop it. Only from a hundred miles up.

'Ivy how do these things slow down?'

'Usually right after major impacts from high orbit.'

They were hanging forward in their seats now. 'Not quite what I meant but comforting nonetheless. No, I meant how do they slow down.'

Ivy grinned. 'Usually just before major impacts from high orbit.'

He opened his mouth to speak but the engines fired again at the same moment and suddenly they were over the top of the roller coaster and punching down through the atmosphere. Ivy laughed as they broke through clouds and began hurtling downwards towards what looked, to Lenny, a lot like solid ground.

'Why...is...it...accelerating?'

'Don't worry...about it.'

Then, two things happened very quickly. The first was that Lenny realised he didn't have a will and the second was the Chariot's nose came off. Lenny watched, horror struck as the nose cone fell away from them, leaving a clear plastic window behind it. His hands convulsed on the armrests and he was building up what he thought would be a pretty solid death scream when the nose cone...blossomed.

One minute it was a hard piece of glowing white hot metal and the next it was, as far as Lenny could see, a very very large puddle falling through the air in front of them. It hit the ground and somehow bounced and then they were in it, the window broke and all Lenny could taste was sickly, sticky and white.

He forced himself upright, pushed for what he thought was the surface and broke out into sunshine. Just visible behind them and going up a hundred miles was the fading exhaust trail of the chariot and as he looked up he felt, not the familiar queasiness of fear but total joy. He laughed louder and longer than he had in a year and slapped the surface of the cushion with one hand.

Just in time for Ivy to break the surface next to him and get a face full of it. She coughed and spluttered and Lenny felt his good mood evaporate. 'Oh God sorry.'

She grinned. 'Not a problem, I like marshmallow.'

Lenny gaped. 'That's what this is?'

She nodded. 'Of course. There are a couple of other compounds mixed in but for the most part we're swimming in egg, sugar and fat. I feel rather like a piece of cake filling. Of course, there is a downside to all this.'

'Which is?'

She looked down at her artfully weathered leather jacket, now completely covered in marshmallow goop. 'I could REALLY do with a change of clothes.'

#

A few remarkably gloopy minutes later, the pair of them were making their way across the main concourse of the Hotel Coleridge. Lenny had already remarked how fantastic it was that the Chariot had dropped them just outside the hotel and Ivy was still failing to get the marshmallow off her jacket.

'So how much do you know, about all this?'

Ivy shrugged and some mallow fell off her shoulders, looking for all the world like steroid-enhanced dandruff. 'Only that there's a route we follow off world that's designed to test our deductive skills, improvisation, physical fitness and sense of danger.'

'But it's not actually dangerous, right?'

She looked at him and smiled, and just for a second Lenny got a look at exactly how much trouble he was in. 'There's a reason why people work as professional travellers Lenny.'

He blanched and was about to ask her why he'd been brought along if the danger was real when they reached reception. When they'd left that morning, it had been full of bustling tourists and guides and, Lenny realised, every single one of them had been checking out. Now it was deserted and something was clearly very, very wrong.

The first clue they had to this was that the reception desk had been rendered down into matchwood. There were huge paw prints running along the corridors and several doors had been torn off their hinges. The place looked for all the world as though a herd of Rhino had been driven through it at some speed. Lenny was just opening his mouth to speak when Ivy put a hand on his chest and gently shook her head, her eyes not meeting his.

Very, very slowly, she crouched and indicated that he should do the same. They dropped down onto all fours and very slowly Ivy edged forwards to the nearest paw print. Lenny followed. Ivy crouched over it. Lenny did the same. Ivy smelt it, Lenny did the same and realised it smelt remarkably like dirt. Ivy licked it, Lenny stood up, making a face.

'Ohhh!'

And then stopped. Standing at the entrance to one of the central corridors was what appeared to be a shaved cow. It was eight feet long, four wide and stood on four obscenely muscled legs. It was headless, a tiny pair of piggy eyes built into its front. Someone had written SPARKY underneath them.

‘What the hell is that?’

Very slowly, Ivy got up, eyes not leaving the dozer for a second. ‘It’s a dozer.’

‘I thought they wanted the hotel kept for guests.’

‘Maybe they’re using a different hotel.’

‘But why would they drop us here.’

‘Ability to work under pressure?’

The dozer shifted its weight from foot to foot like some large cubist boxer.

‘Why is it looking at us?’

Ivy still hadn’t moved. ‘Because we’re not part of the program. They run these things as a basic pattern recognition device. Load them up with what the owner wants, usually flat ground and tell them to destroy everything which doesn’t fit what they see.’

‘What should we-’

The dozer opened its mouth, which Lenny realised was circular, roared and barrelled towards them. Ivy yelled something Lenny couldn’t hear then turned and ran straight at it. He watched, horror struck as she reached the box and vaulted neatly over it, slamming her hands into a lump on its back as she soared overhead to land in a messy heap by the remains of the reception desk. The dozer veered sideways, stopped and turned to look at her.

‘Lenny run!’

She’d hurt her ankle going over the thing and was trying to get up without actually putting any weight on it.

‘I’m not leaving you!’

‘Lenny if you don’t run it’ll keep coming at me!’

‘Oh, sorry! Hey ugly!’

He jumped up and down waving his hands in the air and shouting to attract the dozer’s attention. As it stood, he needn’t have bothered as, to his horror, a second set of eyes opened on its back and glared at him. It started forward and he turned and set off at a dead sprint, diving through the doorway they’d just come through. The dozer punched through the wall nearby.

He was going flat out and knew he didn’t have long. The ground was flat apart from the marshmallow which he knew the dozer would tear through in a second and the only other feature he could see was-

It nudged him then, just briefly, just on the back of the legs and enough to make him realise it was toying with him. Lenny made a mental note to send an extremely strong-worded letter to the construction company if he actually lived and redoubled his speed, dodging left and right to try and throw the dozer off. Finally, he saw his chance and with his lungs burning, picked up his legs and sprinted flat out towards the edge of the hotel grounds.

At the edge of the Hotel Coleridge’s grounds was a very large hill with a single tree at its crest. Lenny ran flat out, lungs burning, up the hill, feeling the dozer’s hooves thud into the ground behind him with every step.

Twenty metres. God he hoped he didn’t die.

Fifteen metres. He had to time this right.

Ten metres. This was supposed to be a holiday?

Five metres. When was the last time he’d done this?

One meter. Never.

With more enthusiasm than actual grace, Lenny Satler launched his entire frame upwards, wrapping one hand around a branch on the tree as he did so. He dangled for a moment and felt a sickening rush of air as the dozer, hot on his heels and unable to stop, plummeted over the side of the hill. There was dead silence for a moment. Then, distantly, Lenny heard a splash.

He dropped to the ground, sat down heavily against the tree and closed his eyes. When his breathing slowed down, he considered his options, then, having decided on the best course of action rolled over and was quietly and discreetly sick.

‘Lenny! Are you okay?!’

He wiped his mouth and stood up shakily. ‘Um, I beat it. Can they swim?’

She checked him over for any injuries, noticing with concern the wince when she touched his ribs.

'I beat it.'

'Yes you said, now is anything broken?'

'No. Are you okay?'

She smiled. 'All in a day's work.' But when they walked back to the hotel, Lenny noticed she wasn't placing much weight on her left foot.

So we're looking for clues?'

They'd been looking through the lobby for fifteen minutes and Lenny's euphoria had started to fade into good, solid tired irritability. He stood up straight, after moving one pile of wood from one side of him to the other and looked around to where Ivy was desultorily checking under tables.

'Yes. They told me it would be a combination of set pieces and clues. We find our way to the end of the trail by following clues and solving the problems.'

'And it's likely to be here because?'

'We met the dozer here, therefore the clue must be here. Unless.'

'Unless what?'

'Unless it was on the dozer.'

Lenny snapped. 'That thing was trying to kill you! And me!'

Ivy scowled at him. 'The off switch is halfway down the back, under the ganglion, you could have thumped it as it ran past.'

Lenny smiled thinly. 'Of course, because you did such a good job of that.'

Ivy stood and with all the dignity a bad ankle allowed her, stalked off. Lenny watched her go, kicked a pile of debris and sat down. He was tired, he was hungry, he'd been attacked by a dozer and he smelt like marshmallow.

'Lenny.'

He stood, drafting his apology as he did so. He was an apologetic young man by nature and he had it drafted and redrafted it in the time it took him to turn the corner and find her standing looking at something on the ground.

'What is it?'

She knelt, carefully, and handed it to him. It was a small laminated card that read:

HEAVY DECONSTRUCTION

DESTROYING THE PAST, SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO LOOK AT IT ANYMORE

CALL 088888 888888

Lenny blinked. 'We just call them?'

She nodded.

'Why?'

'Just seems a little anticlimactic is all.'

Ivy smiled. 'I'll remind you you said that.'

Lenny frowned. 'Why?'

'Because if I don't have a phone card, I'm damn sure you don't.'

#

Lenny insisted on checking every vehicle and building they could find but, of course, there weren't any. Blake's World had been shut and shut definitively and anything which could be sold or moved to a more profitable world had been. Finally, with the sun setting and throwing the vast shadow of Marvell's Folly out across the valley, he admitted defeat.

'Okay, I give, where can we find a phone card.'

Ivy was sitting in the shade of the tree Lenny had dangled from a couple of hours previously. Without getting up she pointed over the crest of the hill. Lenny walked over, looked across, then looked down.

'You are kidding.'

'Deductive skills, improvisation, physical fitness and sense of danger.'

'I shouldn't have said it was anti-climactic should I?'

'No.'

On the other side of the hill, the ground fell away for over three hundred feet. The canyon was over a mile wide and a lake glistened serenely in the setting sun. Just over a hundred feet down, there was a path leading down to the lake shore which stopped at a small wooden shack nestled against the cliff side. That in itself wasn't the problem.

The problem was that when the path stopped at the small shack, it stopped. There was no way down to it from the top of the hill other than climbing. Which, as far as Lenny was concerned, meant there was no way to do it at all.

'You sure you don't want to do this?'

'I'll be right behind you.'

'So not in front of me then?'

'Lenny, just close your eyes and don't look down, it'll be easy.'

'But I can't climb!'

'You won't have to.'

She hauled herself upright and looked up at the tree. It was huge, a good hundred feet tall with each branch the width of a man's arm. 'We'll lower you.'

Lenny blinked and looked at her darkly. 'What do you mean 'we'?'

'Your friend's back.'

She pointed at the far shore of the lake, where something large was bullying its way through the water. Lenny swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry.

'That's the dozer.'

It was out of the water now, its massive hooves were already kicking up dirt.

'Yep.'

'But we have to run, we have to hide we...'

She was shaking her head, gently but definitively.

'No, we don't. Here's what we're going to do.'

#

The dozer crested the hill just as the last hint of light fell behind Marvell's Folly. It was soaking wet, its body one pure lump of muscle as it pounded across the flat ground towards Lenny. He was standing in the open, a hundred metres away from the tree, the hotel, Ivy and the rest of his life.

'Straight into its eyes, Lenny!'

'I know.'

'You'll be fine Lenny!'

'I know.'

The dozer stopped fifty feet away from him. It pawed at the ground and snorted. Lenny was impressed, on some level, by the ability of a creature with no discernible head to look angry. It took a step forward and it was all Lenny could do to not run. It roared, and Lenny began to turn,

'DON'T YOU MOVE! DON'T YOU BLOODY MOVE LENNY SATLER!'

He snapped back into place, meeting the dozer's eyes. It was ten feet away now and Lenny was sure it was working out which bit of him to crush first. He hoped it was his left arm. He'd never liked it.

Five feet and it sniffed him, its nose two tiny little holes recessed into the wall of muscle. He stifled a sob and forced himself to watch as the dozer moved closer. He could feel its breath on his hands now, smell its rich, raw scent like sausage just a little overcooked. He would have liked to eat sausage and mash one more time. He was going to miss sausage and mash.

Then the dozer was licking his hand. Its tongue was long and warm and rasped across his skin making him laugh. He looked down just in time to see the big creature half jump forward and playfully barge him in the ribs. The playful barge, of course, knocked him off his feet but the terror was quickly offset by the dozer licking his face. Laughing, and slightly winded, he got to his feet and turned to see Ivy drop down out of the tree she'd been sitting in. She was still favouring her ankle but half ran over, hugging Lenny when she got to him.

'I am SO proud of you!'

Lenny laughed again, a little too loudly, his heart hammering against his chest. 'Um, why aren't I dead?'

She smiled. 'Dozers have a pack mentality that they test all the time. You beat this one, quite soundly in fact, therefore it's decided you're its new pack leader.'

'But what about all the demolition?'

'Done. Sparky here's in a holding pattern until he gets new orders. Until then, he's with us. Or you.'

Lenny looked at the dozer, rolling around on the floor like a cross between a dog and a playful tank.

'I'm really hungry.'

'Me too, let's go raid some vending machines.'

#

An hour later, they'd ingested far more chocolate than could possibly be considered healthy and the fire was roaring away, Lenny ran a hand through his hair, took a breath and asked the question that had been on his mind all day.

'Why me?'

Ivy was wrapping a large piece of silver foil around her finger. She looked up and smiled broadly. 'You deserved the break. I got the opportunity to choose my test subject for this thing and I took a look at you, and I knew. It was you.'

Lenny nodded. 'I don't believe you.'

'Why not?'

'Because you were reading when I saw you, a book I happen to love and which is directly connected to Blake's World. You'd been sitting there for a while and you were reading. You'd picked me before I ever sat down.'

She looked at him for a long time without saying anything. Then, finally, she nodded.

'Yes I had. I'm sorry. But this has got to be more fun than singles night in the outer worlds huh?'

Lenny scowled. 'I thought I might meet someone.'

'You did.'

They locked eyes for a moment. Lenny looked away first.

'So what brings someone to this line of work?'

'Why, are you interested?'

'Maybe.'

She stared at him and this time the look was harder. 'A pathological inability to work anywhere else, a fondness for travel and endless patience.'

'Well, what did you do before this?'

'Something worse.'

'Want to talk about it?'

'Do I look like I want to talk about it?'

'Yes.'

She stared evenly at him, then smiled. 'Get some sleep Lenny.'

#

The following day they were up with the dawn, Sparky capering around them as they looked for a length of strong enough rope and a harness. By the time the sun had appeared over Marvell's Folly, Lenny was tied into a makeshift but sturdy harness that went over the branch and around Sparky's colossal frame.

'You sure you don't want to do this?'

Ivy smiled and slapped Sparky lightly on the side. He began to walk forward and Lenny promptly vanished over the side of the canyon. His feet slipped off the wall and he bounced painfully against it, forcing himself back into position as he continued to descend. He slipped again and turned all the way around, his back facing the canyon wall.

The lake sparkled in the morning light, waves lapping softly against its shore. Beneath him, a flock of birds broke free from the cliff, wheeled and dived in perfect formation into the water. They emerged a few seconds later, all carrying a fish and all still in formation. As they climbed past him, he realised what they were and laughed, the sound echoing off the walls of the canyon. The albatrosses banked hard right and, still keeping perfect formation, began a long turn towards their nests.

His feet touched the roof of the shack and he scabbled sideways, landing softly and tugging on the rope twice to show he'd arrived. He got out of the harness and stood for a moment, taking in the view. Beneath him, Blake's World unfolded in silent, open beauty and he realised, distantly, that he'd retire here if they'd let him. Smiling, he turned and stepped into the shack. His good mood vanished a few seconds later.

Ten minutes after Lenny had descended, there were two tugs on the rope and Sparky hauled him back up. He climbed over the edge and handed Ivy a small envelope. Inside was a phone card and a small, typed card. On it was the message:

THE BEGINNING IS THE END.

She looked down at the card, then at Lenny, then up at the vast wall of Marvell's Folly.

'Oh you are kidding.'

Lenny got up, untied the harness and smiled grimly. 'What's the problem, it'll be an ADVENTURE.'

#

'Hey guys! Want a muffin?'

Chlooe looked genuinely pleased to see them as they staggered into the visitor's centre two full days later. Lenny had two days growth of beard and was wearing every single layer of his clothing, all of which was covered in snow. Ivy was just visible herself beneath four hats, and another five layers of coats. Behind them, snorting desultorily and stamping his front hooves was Sparky.

'Oh dear God no. Chlooe, PLEASE tell me that you're able to place a phone call.'

'Absolutely, who do you need?'

Lenny forced himself to walk over and handed the laminate to the hologram who, of course, dropped it as it passed through his hand. 'Sorry about that, long climb.'

Chlooe nodded appreciatively. 'You guys walked here?'

Ivy had got a boot off and was rubbing feeling back into her right foot. 'Every bloody step.'

Chlooe smiled. 'Good, it's the best way to see the world. Connecting-'

His eyes blanked, his head cocked to one side and he opened his mouth. A dial tone emerged from it followed a few seconds later by a gruff male voice. 'Heavy Deconstruction, Destroying the Past So You Don't Have To Look At It Any More.'

'Hi, my name's Lenny Satler, I'm on Blake's World with Ivy...'

He turned round and looked at his companion. 'What is your last name?'

'Flowers.'

Lenny blinked. 'Ivy Flowers?'

'Kill you with my shoes.'

He raised his hands in mock surrender. 'With Ivy Flowers. We're at the information centre at the top of Marvell's Folly and we could really, really do with a pick-up.'

The voice on the other end relaxed slightly. 'Of course, we're in orbit, be with you inside the hour Mr Satler.'

'Thank you.'

Cindy's eyes rolled back into his head and Lenny grinned at him. 'And thank you Cindy, I'd love a muffin and so would my companion.'

'Give me the Stilton one and it's the last thing you'll ever see Satler.'

Lenny grinned. 'She's just...tired.'

An hour later, there was the sound of engines from outside and the owner of the gruff voice walked in. His name was Donald Marshall and he was a short, stocky man who looked not unlike his dozers. He walked over to them, helped them to their feet with disgusting ease and smiled. 'Good to see you both, ready to go home?'

Lenny grinned. 'You have no idea. Umm, how do I go about adopting a dozer?'

#

'You HAD to ask him.'

'It was the right thing to do!'

'Of course, I pick a BOYSCOUT.'

'I didn't ask to come!'

'Don't yell.'

'Why?'

'You move when you yell.'

They were standing in the middle of the HEAVY DECONSTRUCTION shuttles' hold, surrounded by nineteen dozers.

Donald had been very understanding about the situation with Sparky and had told Lenny that the best way to adopt Sparky was to spend some time with the entire herd. Sparky would imprint fully on him, severing the final few ties he had with the herd and would, in turn, ensure that they didn't hurt Lenny. This was why the pair of them were standing next to Sparky, in a large hold filled with dozers, none of whom seemed especially happy to see them.

'I can't feel my bum.'

'Shut up Lenny.'

Finally, they arrived at Wordsworth Station. It was an old, battered affair and Lenny was surprised to see most of the sections were powered down. As they checked Sparky into a cargo pen, Lenny glanced around, frowning.

'I thought you said they were keeping this place going as a viable holiday destination?'

'They are, but the first trips don't start for a month. They're powering Wordsworth down to save money. And stop moving!'

Stepping out of the HD ship and onto the station, Lenny felt a great weight lift from his shoulders. He dumped his bags, looked around at Ivy, still a bedraggled bulky figure under her multiple coats and smiled.

'So this is it?'

Ivy looked around and nodded. 'This is it, we get to go home. Which means there's only one thing left to ask?'

Lenny frowned. 'Which is?'

Ivy grinned. 'Did you have a good holiday?'

Lenny looked at her for a long time without saying anything. When he finally did, his voice was more certain than he'd ever heard it before. 'I had the time of my life'

Ivy grinned. 'Then I've done my job. Flight's at 9 tomorrow.'

On impulse, she reached up and kissed him on the cheek. 'Goodnight Lenny. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Then she stood, opened his door and left.

#

That night Lenny dreamt long, warm dreams filled with immense marshmallows that chased him through the tallest hotel in known space, as Ivy's laughter echoed over the tannoy. When he woke up, he felt perfectly warm and safe and...

Late. Their flight was at 9 and it was already 8.50.

'SHIT!'

He threw himself out of bed, threw his clothes together and hammered on Ivy's door only for it to swing open to reveal a perfectly made bed and an utterly deserted room. Lenny swore and set off at a dead sprint down to the central terminal. He was going to get there, he was going to make it, after all he was Lenny Satler, hero of Blake's World. Lenny Satler, fearless tourist, Lenny Satler...

'Oh you are KIDDING me!'

Man who'd missed his flight. The concourse was deserted and there was no sign of any ships docked or any sign of life. He ran its entire length twice before he noticed the envelope.

It was taped to the main airlock and was marked FOR LENNY. He opened it, and took out another laminated card. It read:

I'M REALLY REALLY SOREE. SPARKY'S FINE BY THE WAY. IVY.

Further down the corridor, the lights began to switch themselves off. Lenny closed his eyes, feeling the familiar depression fall over him. His bad luck, it made perfect sense. Maybe they'd find him here when they started running the holidays in a couple of months, pale and skinny and mad and...

'I don't think so'. He looked up, talking to himself as much as anyone else. The departure lounge was now entirely black apart from the light on above him. It cast a precise square of light over a section of corridor about five metres across and on either side of it was complete blackness. He paused at the boundary between the two, then stepped over.

The blackness lit up. The light behind him faded.

He stepped back. The process reversed. Forward, the same. He jumped between the two and the lights turned themselves on and off. Grinning, Lenny walked up to the nearest terminal and stuck his finger in the credit slot.

'Mr Lenny Satler, how are you?'

'I'm really really sorree.'

'Password accepted Mr Satler. Would you like your clue now?'

Lenny grinned. 'You betcha.'

REVIEWS

THE EXECUTION CHANNEL reviewed by
Scott Harrison

DARK SPACE reviewed by Paul Raven

DOCTOR WHO: EXOTRON & URBAN
MYTH reviewed by Lee Harris

THE EXECUTION CHANNEL

by Ken MacLeod

Published in hardback by Orbit

RRP: £17.99



Let's face it, the political thriller is a predictable breed, its greatest strength of pure readability is derived from the very conventions we have come to expect and – dare we say it – demand from such a genre; conspiracies, misinformation, skulduggery, underhanded political

machinations, and so on. So many novelists in recent years have profited so handsomely in this field; Tom Clancy, Dan Brown and Fredrick Forsyth, being at the very tip of this humungous and ship-threatening iceberg.

Odd, then, that it should be these very conventions that are, arguably, *The Execution Channel's* greatest downfall, the latest offering from Scottish Sci-Fi powerhouse Ken MacLeod. Such a pity as, on the surface, this novel has so much more going for it than the clumsily written novels of Dan Brown or the heavy technobabble of Mr Clancy.

The plot takes those tried-and-tested thriller favourites – terrorist attacks on military and civilian targets, the world pushed to the brink of World War III, conspiracy theories, spies – and gives them a refreshing little Sci-Fi spin. Set in a Britain of the near future where the internet and 24 hour news channels are uploaded directly to our mobile phones; a constant wall of white noise that shapes, controls and dominates our lives. Add to this mix a group of peace demonstrators trying to prevent the world from plunging into nuclear Armageddon, secret government organisations with hidden agendas, a French spy and a conspiracy theorist computer nerd and there you have your plot.

The trouble is, after all this is set up in the

first few dozen pages of the novel pretty much nothing else happens for the next 200-odd pages. MacLeod liberally shuffles his characters around the story's landscape, utilising a vast array of transportation (planes, trains and automobiles of various description) as the cast meet up in various remote locations throughout the UK to spend 10 pages dumping vast chunks of exposition upon the reader, before moving them on to begin the whole process again several pages later. To make matters worse each of the principal players (of which there are a fair amount) have several theories concerning the unfolding crisis, which they all too enthusiastically, and at great length, continually choose to explain, before rejecting and then (frustratingly) deciding to revisit again. So many varied and conflicting theories are flying about back and forth between each character in the course of the story that it leaves the reader feeling dazed, confused and more than a little annoyed. It feels as though the characters are merely speaking their minds, thinking out loud, rather than actually trying to imply to the reader that their explanation might, in fact, be the truth behind the attacks. It's not until the final 30 pages or so from the end of the book that the truth is finally revealed. Sadly, by this time you either find yourself not caring or waiting for one of the other characters to shoot it down with yet another theory of their own!

However, having said all this, there is still much enjoyment to be had from reading *The Execution Channel*. As usual MacLeod's prose is sharp, incisive and refreshingly crisp – something we have come to expect and admire from the author since his debut novel *The Star Fraction* some 12 years ago. The characters which populate this terror-stricken future world are wonderfully detailed and breathtaking in their complexity (like novelist Stephen King, one of MacLeod's greatest strengths lies in his characters), and, at just a little over the 300 page mark, the novel never threatens to outstay its welcome, but rattles along at a satisfying, attention-friendly pace.

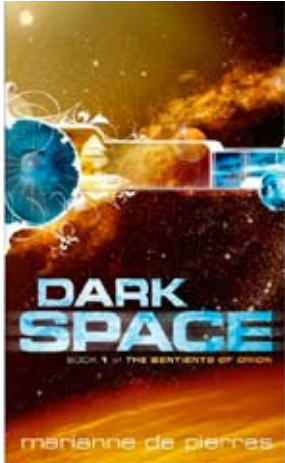
Although not quite this reviewer's cup of tea, *The Execution Channel* is without doubt an interesting (if somewhat flawed) exercise into hitherto unexplored territory by a writer who has over the past 12 years, quite deservedly, carved himself an important and well respected little niche in the Sci-Fi genre. No doubt if you are a hardened enthusiast you'll love it, if on the other hand you're a Ken MacLeod virgin then you'd probably do better starting with *The Star Fraction* or *Cosmonaut Keep* and work your way up from there!

DARK SPACE

by Marianne de Pierres

Published in paperback by Orbit

RRP: £6.99



It's a big galaxy; anything can happen. And so it falls to Jo-Jo Rasterovich, a minerals scout of dubious repute, to be the first person in the Nations of Orion Sentients to discover God.

At least, God is one name for what he discovers; it's also known as the Sole Entity, but 'God' is a pretty good moniker for an incorporeal, theoretically eternal and

utterly capricious dark space being. And with the way the ruthless academic establishments of the Sentients react to its arrival, the Sole Entity could be forgiven for thinking of itself as a God; everyone wants a piece of the arcane knowledge that the Entity has offered to all and sundry – so long as they can supply it with exceptional 'feats of cleverness' in exchange.

Baronessa Mira Fedor knows nothing of the Sole Entity. What she does know is that she has a genetic birthright that makes her the only person on the hot and dusty mining planet of Araldis who can fly the semi-sentient spacecraft of the Cipriani royal family. So it's a severe shock to her when the Principe of the planet announces that the honour of being First Pilot will go to his son, Trinder – just as soon as he can get the genetic code transplanted from Mira by whatever means necessary. Mira has a feeling that her well-being won't feature highly among the outcomes of the process, and makes good her escape.

Trinder's life isn't exactly a rose-garden – not from where he's standing, anyway. He doesn't want to be First Pilot, he just wants to be Principe after his father, and to do as little as possible in the process. From an outsider's perspective, he's a spoiled aristo weasel with a drug problem and poor impulse control, and his thoughtless antics earn his father's disapproval in the form of being assigned as aide to a security chief in the boon-docks.

And it's all uphill from there, for our characters at least. For the reader, it's a frantic rollercoaster of Machiavellian intrigue and planetary invasion on Araldis, threaded through with sly hubris and backstabbing among those who would have the Sole Entity's secrets for themselves.

de Pierres has created a galaxy rife with conflict on many levels: the class and gender politics of Araldis; the corruption of the Orion League of Sentient Species; the ruthless competitive maelstrom of the

academic institutions. Her characters are almost all driven by real human flaws – greed, vanity, lust, the will to power, and plain old-fashioned ignorance. Even Mira, our essentially good-hearted heroine, has to shake off a lot of the preconceptions that came with her aristocratic upbringing to simply survive the anarchic state of affairs that comes to prevail over her home planet. The feudal system on Araldis provides a framework within which exploitation and wilful brutality are so commonplace as to be accepted parts of the social order, and the political scene of the Orion League is little better. There are no paragons in this novel; no one is innocent, everyone is culpable.

This enables de Pierres to cover lots of thematic ground while still providing an exciting narrative. However, *Dark Space* is not a book that you'd describe as having much of a 'feel-good' factor – the characterisation alone casts a less than flattering light on human behaviour, and the plotting leaves little room for comfortable escapism. This is serious modern space opera, grappling with big themes and painting on a broad canvas with a great eye for detail, and readers of simple spaceship adventure stories may wish to pass this title by. On the other hand, readers who hunger for perceptive, intelligent and unflinching literary science fiction should seek this book out as soon as possible. If the sequels to *Dark Space* live up to the promise of this opening salvo, de Pierres will become a serious challenge to the big boys of the genre.

DOCTOR WHO: EXOTRON & URBAN MYTH

Fifth Doctor Audio Adventure

Produced by Big Finish (www.bigfinish.com)

Written by Paul Sutton

Directed by Barnaby Edwards

Starring: Peter Davison, Nicola Bryant, John Duttine, Isla Blair, and others

RRP: £14.99



Big Finish are arguably the producers of the highest quality audio fiction available on the High Street today. Also, the most prolific.

Their latest Fifth Doctor offering is, in fact, two stories – a three-parter (*Exotron*) and a standalone episode (*Urban Myth*).

Exotron's strength lies in the characters and in the depth of performances – particularly by the regular cast, but that isn't enough to help this production rise above the mediocre. Where it fails, is in its reliance on stereotypical bad guys (the evil politician out to exploit a new technology for financial gain, the spurned lover doing the wrong thing for the right reason), and in the creation of the Exotron themselves. It

would be too spoilerific to go into too much detail, but the Exotron (giant though they are) are revealed to be so much like our beloved Cybermen, that it would be a simple matter to transpose the two races and rename the drama - the differences between these creation and traditional Cybermen would be enough to make this an interesting take on the Cyberman mythos.

Urban Myth feels like a filler episode. It has much to recommend it, and unlike the rather po-faced *Exotron* which precedes it, it never takes itself too seriously. Davison and Bryant evidently have a ball playing against type, but it comes across like a student review sketch rather than a professionally produced piece of audio fiction.

If you're a Doctor Who completist, you'll no doubt want to buy this 2-CD set. It's not a bad set - it just doesn't set the world alight. If you're looking for an audio drama to spend your £15 on, there are plenty of better choices in the Big Finish stable.

NEXT WEEK:

Fiction:

Career Change by John Stevens

Reviews: Spiderman 3, Grudge 2,
The Homeless Channel

Feature: The First Doctor

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