

Hub

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British Fantasy Society Open Night in York – October 2007

On Saturday October 13th, *Hub* is playing host to an Open Night for the *British Fantasy Society*. Held at York Brewery, the Open Night welcomes both members and non-members alike – if you're interested in Fantasy or Horror, feel free to come along! We just need to know how many of you are coming so we can make appropriate arrangements with the brewery.

As well as socialising with like-minded people, there is also the option to be part of a private tour of the brewery (a small charge will apply for this).

Full details over at www.hub-mag.co.uk/bfs
York's a great place to visit. We hope to see you there!

About Hub

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 over at www.hub-mag.co.uk.



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Every Odalisque Knows

by Dominae Petrosini



People saw that. *People did?* Alban saw it like it smoldered in a limelight, like it was dead and dyed in a scanning microscope, like it was the only thing on television. *Remember television?* The soldiers in the street

rustled around something Alban couldn't quite see, but knew was a woman. A moment ago she had been standing, but she wasn't standing anymore. The soldiers were holding buckets. One of the soldiers looked back over his shoulder and Alban recognized Larker, the pilot. Even the strongest strands were snapping. Alban decided to go out there before things got scenic. Impose some lattice of discipline. The woman stood up on her own and Alban recognized her too. A local woman, the scientist named Vinca. And now somebody was calling on the telephone. *Alban called it a telephone.* He unhooked the device from his belt and handed its query to his communications officer, who let it ring twice more, gaping at the scene before him. *Turn that off.* The communications officer disappeared into the belly of the ship, out of the forest of instant rooms and tents that made up their camp. Alban walked to his office door, to call something out to the street. Because he had moved, after an afternoon of abeyance, the medals on his chest jingled like wind chimes. *Alban remembered wind.*

It was a still world they were on. Maybe it was just a still season. The half-platoon had only been there for days. Two suns passed above, one near and nearly normal, the other far away, pensive, and dim. Their hosts had so far offered little hospitality and less information. They were not invited, but nevertheless, such rudeness confused. Space was large and lonesome. Protocols existed. His men were weary from the journey and eager to begin their mission, their big barter or smash and grab. But negotiations had never begun. The locals were all but conversationally inert and the landscape was strange. The soldiers were tired of waiting. And there had an accident, a soldier drowned. Alban didn't make it outside before Larker threw the contents of the bucket on the woman. He began to move faster.

"Stand down," he said.

Larker stood back but his shoulders didn't drop.

"We don't have time for their games," Larker said, and narrowed his eyes at the drenched woman. Alban was shocked that Larker's face was capable of making that expression. He had known him for fifteen years.

Larker said to her, "I think you'll tell us what's going on here. Or else we'll find some other way to make you useful."

She did not expect that threat. She hoped she misunderstood.

"I'm not a prostitute," she said.

"Oh yeah? You sure?"

She thought for a moment of unhinging for him, one way or another. Her mind was a collection of many dangerous things. Science and stories and distaff wonders and fears. Women had dissolved before, in their manners and in their minds. But time was short and there were

larger concerns than this large man. She absorbed the coolness of his shadow covering her, mustered her sodden, piebald scraps of dignity and replied, "I hope I would have noticed."

The woman seemed unharmed. The men had been there less than 100 hours and already one soldier had succumbed to the potent ocean. He meant to swim. He had stripped off his regulation boots and rolled up his regulation pants. He had gingerly removed the wooly, sturdy socks that his girlfriend hand-knitted for him and rolled them into a neat ball, careful not to stretch out their elastic necks. Then he took three balletic leaps into the unstirred sea, pitched forward, and silently died. The touch of the water brutally stung the soldiers' skin when they tried to pull him out. They were madly waiting for one of their numbers to return from the ship with a sturdy pole when a local man, hearing their shouts from a nearby building, roused himself from his pondering, waded into the sea, and retrieved the body. He looked them over, exasperatedly, and said only, "Don't go in the ocean." He wandered back to his building and disappeared from sight. He had not been injured at all. The soldiers were very angry. The locals said nothing more. The soldiers were getting nervous. They came from a planet at dire war. They had been drafted and assigned like a hand scooping up sand and carelessly tossing it. They wanted this woman Vinca to give them the Saffron Project. Now.

The communications officer charged out of the ship.

"Lieutenant!" he cried. Alban furrowed his brow at the man's loss of composure and guided him back into the darkness of the ship with a hand lightly pressing his shoulder. When he returned moments later, Alban looked ashy, as though he'd been closely present as a volcano erupted, transfixed on the narrowest edge of survivability.

Vinca turned to Alban.

"I think it is possibly time we spoke," she said.

"Possibly?" scoffed Larker.

Vinca met his gaze.

She said, "Perhaps 'possibly' is not the right word," and she began walking in the direction of the rocky shore, where the main road ended in a half mile's distance. Alban followed. He still had a mission, sadly superfluous as it had just become. Maybe Vinca was about to offer hospitality or parlay. He would buy their mysterious technology from them, if they were willing. No need for violence. They were going to need to become compatriots, now. But there was no need to give that away. Try for gently diplomacy, judicious trade. He tried not to look up at the sky and think of home. Besides, Alban had no reason to believe that the circumstances of his group's desperate departure and abrupt arrival were known to the colony on Baux. He was, of course, wrong.

Alban had a wife, and she was a soldier too. She had been ordered to stay behind to help organize the final defense. She was educated in tactics. They had an afternoon together before he left. That morning it had snowed and the pipes in their house had frozen and burst. A mean slush formed on the floor of their bedroom. The windows were already cracked from the mobs of people who rioted at night, throwing and burning, terrified at what was coming. The bedding was wet and the walls were slick and cold so they laid on the tiny balcony that overlooked their naked trees and felt the wind rattle through the sticks of their bones. Sylvia bit through her lip and it was hard to make the bleeding stop. When Alban finally walked away, she was still blotting it with a pinkening cloth. There had been disasters of every scale. Sometimes he missed his cat. Alban's group in their tiny ship looped three times around the planet and was gone.

Things homeward were in chaos, but they'd been sent to Baux. Baux was a research colony bathed in a strange religion. They were regarded as a perplexing faith, antique and untraceable or newborn and sly. They separated the sexes, but did not seem to prize one over the other. They craved knowledge and traveled widely. They studied everything. After they discovered saffron on Baux, they had summoned their faithful home. After the exodus, they fell silent. They kept their new insight to themselves. They were called the Scri'ibe. What was

saffron? Alban's leaders believed it was a weapon. The planet skeptics believed it was a dream. Believe what you like, but it was the last loose hope to win the Chaser War. Alban's men were a final arrow launched by a faltering Bowman whose second-to-last breath was bubbling redly out. They pursued an obscure and owned colony, left alone to do science and to spin a solitary society and to practice their inscrutable faith until they discovered something essential. Perhaps essential. Perhaps discovered. It had been a long time since anyone had spoken with the colonists on Baux.

They were supposed to retrieve them. They were supposed to hurry. The orders were given by a sharp leader whose voice teetered on the edge of hysteria. Bring back the women or the men, and bring back the technology. Use the technology. But here was Vinca, sitting on a rock, gazing out at a watery horizon watching the small sun set. Alban noticed that her clothes were worn and disheveled and he chalked it up to her cult's mendicant ways. She saw him looking and ran a hand over the front of her skirt. She gazed at the small thread pulls and tears and touched them thoughtfully, as though she were reading the world in Braille.

"I'm sorry you're meeting us like this," she said. "Usually we are cheerier, and friendlier, and better kept. And of course, there are many more of us. You've even come at a bad cycle of the ocean."

Alban had wondered at their dreariness and sparseness. When seen, the women blew around the town like skilled tumbleweed. The soldiers watched them going from building to building, moving items and bringing them to the parked escape shuttle where they all seemed to live. The men were firmly rooted and sharply tined. They sat together and didn't talk, and they glared at the soldiers with something like ire. But to business.

"We've come to trade," Alban said. "Are you a good person for me to speak with about trading?"

Vinca looked at him as though he were very, very young.

"Would it be better to talk to one of the men?" he ventured.

Vinca laughed through her nose and then stood up, drawing herself into a more official posture.

"You are aware that I am the head of this expedition?" she asked.

"That's what my paperwork said, but the situation on the ground seems otherwise. Nobody seems in charge. And I need to deal with the person in charge. So tell me, have you been replaced as the leader?"

"I have not."

"It seemed...well, maybe there was a conflict?" He decided to get to the heart of the matter. "Your women seem to be running around, doing all the manual labor, like slaves. I can understand how something like the Saffron Project could cause a conflict."

Vinca didn't move, but Alban had a ghost of feeling that she had almost hit him. She swallowed hard.

"We are not slaves. We are just very sad. And you," she said, "have killed us all. So try to keep a civil tongue." She began walking down the beach. He followed her with an uneasy stride.

He noticed that she was drying off from Larker's weird attack. Little scraps of moist but crumbling debris littered her hair, and she pulled them out, one by one.

"It precipitates out of the ocean," she said. "The ocean undergoes complex chemical cycles, and during one of its stages, it produces these little...leaves. The water can hurt you badly if you haven't ingested enough of it to become habitualized. That's what happened to your man."

Alban did not want a botany lesson. He interrupted.

"My men are very serious. They're going to start killing."

Vinca was unmoved. Alban thumped his fist against his thigh in frustration. Vinca remained unmoved.

"I am sorry I cannot be more afraid of you. I am sure under other circumstances you are stern and terrifying." She continued walking.

"It's funny....," she began dreamily.

"It's *not* funny."

She sighed. "Maybe funny isn't the right word. It's...I'm sorry your friend died. And I'm sorry that nobody will ever know that he died before and not later."

"Give us the Saffron Project. Please. The worlds of ours, where I'm from...where all of you were from, are at war and losing. The Chasers....well, you can't imagine. They're ending us. And your discovery is all that's left. So much....," he remembered the message given to him by the communications officer. It was a relaying of news from a neutral party, a trading convoy who seldom passed through the system. They had gone to Alban's world to sell their wares and had found it gone. Everything for a vast distance was a dust so fine that the traders checked and rechecked their maps before they issued a notifying communication to save other traders from making the wasted trip.

"So much," he finished. "Has already been lost."

Vinca put the pieces of leaves in a small pile in the palm of her hand. When she absently rubbed one between her fingers, a scent like jasmine filled the air.

"Were you hoping it would smell of sulfur?"

He gaped at her.

"Our saffron won't help you win your war and it won't make you live forever. Did you read somewhere that it would? In fact..." They both looked up and noticed ships patrolling the skies, just at the threshold of visibility.

Alban felt shredded, like he had thrust his hands into a nest of quickly spinning gears and they had taught him better. The equipment they used now had few moving parts. Solid state. But the people who ran them could still be flattened and torn.

"Don't you wonder what it does?" She brushed her hands clean.

Alban had hoped to find something lovely and wish-granting, like a mermaid. But what did mermaids turn out to be? Narwhals and giant squid. The type of obscure creatures that were not properly studied until people began to leave the planet. He had left his planet and his wife and a million mundane things that he was already forgetting. He was forgetting already. His soldiers began forgetting while they were still in the air. They forgot in the vacuum of space. What were we?

Alban was shocked out of his miserable reverie by a crack that split the sky and knocked them both to the ground.

Vinca made such a shocked face that Alban laughed idiotically.

"That was a loud noise!" she shouted. "Your Chasers are fast!"

Alban thumped on the sides of his head until his hearing came back and he realized what she'd said.

"We were followed?"

"Yes. You knew that was a possibility."

"How did you know?"

"It's no great wonder. We monitored your communications, as well as those of your enemies. Who you've made our enemies."

"But you haven't communicated with the outside world in decades."

"We may not send, but we receive. With," she said, "sublime sensitivity."

"The ship! We have to get to the ship! We may be able to –"

"Your ship was disabled almost the instant you landed. Your enemies are sophisticated and determined."

Alban looked panicked and then very, very sad. He could see his ship off in the distance, and just make out the members of his half-platoon scurrying around it like jostled ants. Vinca put her hand on his arm. She took pity.

"It seems wrong to come all this way, and to not even find out what it is. Saffron is not, for you, I think, entirely useless."

She had some in her pocket. Eat it, steep it, toss it in the air and disappear in a cloud of it. Put it in a sauce. Make your eldritch wishes under its petaled influence and the strange skies that encourage it. Take it raw when there are only moments left. They had traveled ever so far and here were the flowers that greeted them.

"It's a mild intoxicant." She held out a small envelope.

"Perhaps mild is the wrong word." Everything in her smile told him. He took a pinch of the powdery leaves and put them on his tongue and swallowed. Vinca was pleased and relieved to be able to do at least one last kind deed. The Scri'ibe believed in souls. Now he would recall and he would not be alone.

For a moment Alban looked confused, and his hands made a motion as if they were leafing through a stack of papers. He kept looking down at the papers and then looking up quizzically at Vinca.

"None of this matches the information I was given," he said.

Vinca smiled wryly.

"Welcome to outer space," she said.

She told him the story of the beginning and the end.

There is saffron in this story. That is what we call it. Saffron. It is dear, but it does not redeem. It only draws out of you the notes already present. Still, it is a gift. We have found it so.

The first colonists came to mine bauxite. They leached it up and pounded it into stripes and shipped it off-world as trade. They discovered the strange floating organism that wasn't algae or animal. Some of the miners were Scri'ibe, and experimented, and took note of what they had found. They didn't tell the others of their discovery. When the others left to find new mines, they stayed behind, and soon other Scri'ibe came to join them. A mining company still technically owns this world, perhaps you knew that, but there is nothing else here they want and we live here freely and until today, far enough away to be safe.

We are a scholar people and our inquiries often peer backwards. Discovering our origins was like skipping stones across the galaxy. From our studies and our ancestors, we knew back to one world. Someplace with water and trees and then neither. Probably our journey (Your journey too. We are the same species, of course.) had started farther back in time and space. Even with all our research, the archaeology and the anthropology, that was as far back as we were able to trace with our eager, dusty fingers.

Saffron changed our focus, softened us, and gave our studies a new, more personal glow. It made us remember. It is a sylvan hand smoothing the wrinkled map of your memory. Perfect recall of all you have read and seen and felt and known. This was a humbling gift for a small colony of avid students. We were surprised we had forgotten so much, and we welcomed our lost thoughts like they were a herd of plump sheep come home just before winter fell.

All sorts of things turned out to be useful. All sorts of memories. We cooked long-forgotten recipes and put on lost plays. The ones who could paint and draw were especially busy, summoning in oils and charcoal their returning memories and the memories of others. We studied the ocean and the spice. The

ocean is thickly inhabited, but we still can not determine which creature, or combination of creatures, creates saffron. We have studied it for decades and we would have studied it for decades more.

Then we heard the attention of two empires turn in our direction.

We've tried to decipher the origins of your war, but with few results. Perhaps you have dipped your toes into a pool that was already claimed, and so began the Chaser War. You are like two men yawning and stretching on a train, both sleepily going in the same direction but irate when your arms inadvertently cross, so one of you punches the other until he is pulp. I told you we didn't make much sense of it. But we could see you losing, and flailing, and hoping, and we could see you heading this way. We had to prepare. Would you have believed us if we told you we had nothing? Would you have stayed away? I didn't think so.

We loaded our ships with our children and our belongings. Most of our adults were able to fit on the ships as well. We saved as many as we could. And saffron. Some has been sent forward, with the refugees. But so much remained and more will now never be created. Salty spice. Like its namesake, the dried stigma of a crocus, crushed between your fingers and lost to the wind. Now it is a sweet thing that none will taste.

They've gone ahead. We've stayed behind. Except for me (I am the leader), we are an even number of men and women, married couples, though I doubt you could detect this. We are reserved and our rules are obscure but they do not dull our passions. The connections between us had sizzled and burned. They gave off light and they kept everybody warm. But we all know what it meant to stay here, and your presence, though expected, has unnerved us. Our thoughts of time stretch out in both directions, forward and back. Our love stretches the small measured gap that electricity can jump across. The women are gathering favorite things to bring to the quarters where we all huddle close together. The men have had to be persuaded not to kill you. Perhaps you deserve it. We spend our days browsing through our memories like you'd thumb through an old filing cabinet. All the marvelous little discoveries that we brought with us in bundles and crates. It makes us very sad.

Regardless, we stayed, mostly to hope you would not arrive. We hoped we would one day call our ships to say the coast was clear, and they could return. We stayed because this is our home. We stayed because there was no room on the departing ships. We stayed to negotiate. We couldn't bear to leave the ocean. A million fractured reasons. No reason. Who exactly are these killers you've led to us? What is your war called again? Are you even a little bit sorry?

Vinca felt bad. That was no way to end. She was happy to see that Alban's attention had drifted off halfway through. Saffron could be very absorbing. He smiled and his memories were happy. The process was hard to focus at first. He tuned through static and strife. Then a private, beloved day mistily emerged. He squinted, and like seeing a photograph taken through the poorest of telescopes, he remembered.

Everything went quiet and the silence brought him back. They could hear the creatures in the ocean breathe through their avid openings. Alban pointed back toward the town.

"Go to the capsule. Escape."

"The capsule doesn't work. The Chasers disabled that too. We thought they might miss it, but they didn't." Vinca appreciated the thought.

"Is that how the story ends? We all die?"

"Dying is mandatory. Our research suggests it's like that on all worlds. Law of nature."

She laughed and continued, "Is that why you're here? To make it less so?"

"I thought so," he said. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

First came projectiles. They roared down and turned metal into crumbs.

"Oh no, look! Part of a building. The bauxite miners built that. It's all native aluminum."

Alban grabbed her arm and pulled her down behind a boulder. She couldn't see what was happening to the town, but the noise was terrible. Even when it stopped, he held her down and wouldn't let her look. Everything was silent for long minutes. Then a far-off keening filled the

air and their eyes met. Despite the uniform, Alban didn't look like a soldier anymore. He smiled shyly with half his mouth and his sandy hair tousled into his eyes. Vinca thought they could have been friends.

"So," Alban said, "Tell me a little about this religion of yours."

Vinca decided they were friends.

"They didn't give you a pamphlet? Armies love pamphlets." Together they laughed.

Everything became very loud. Vinca cried a little.

"We're going to die now, aren't we?" she said. "We're really going to die." Alban and Vinca held hands. The keening arrived.

And there they were, at the finish of the world. A little thing, dying. It was a big push to go a small distance. The unmet enemy's weapons were strong. The sea resisted, but even the deepest and smartest ocean had limits. If it had had shoulders it would have shrugged them. Its surface knew tranquility for so many eons, until something landed on it and then another something followed. The homeward war had ended and the Chasers chased and caught. The soldiers and the Scribe had earnestly served their various masters, generals and scholars and wayward kings, but every odalisque knows that when the palace catches fire, everybody burns.

The ocean lifted, maybe there was a wave. *Goodbye Alban. The end of Vinca.* They were pressed like flowers, forgotten in a heavy book that contained many words but little information. Our friends made their last grasps at sensing. They tasted curry and ice and a seldom known spice and then everything got too warm to touch or smell. *Alban would try.* Nothing left. Skin and a shaving of bone and the inexplicably sturdy cells of pancreas and a sere twist of brain. Abrupt extinction, as if they were dinosaurs or dodos or the last snowy tiger shot for the medicine it did not contain. Their refugees monitored their radios and mourned and voyaged on. They split up to avoid the grasping of the hapless and the many shooting wars. They kept their secrets close and their vehicles well-maintained, speeding free in all directions. They seek a place to pause and remember. They are running yet, with their peculiar plant and their origami memories, serious and fast, like shooting stars.

About the Author

Dominae Petrosini has studied fiction and playwriting in the United States and Russia. She is currently finishing her first science fiction novel and writing sketch comedy for the stage, which she sometimes performs with the strange accent that comes from being born in Brooklyn, New York and then living for many years in Austin, Texas.

REVIEWS

Mammoth reviewed by Paul Kane

Blaze reviewed by Scott Harrison

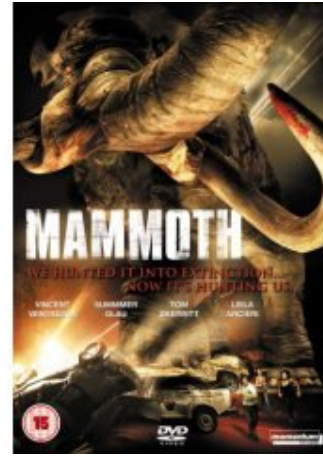
MAMMOTH

Directed by Tom Cox

Starring Tom Skerrit, Vincent Ventresca, Summer Glau

Momentum, £12.99

'It's gonna be Mammoth!'



With the announcement of yet another instalment in the **Jurassic Park** series and ITV's *Primeval* drawing in viewers on both sides of the Atlantic, prepare yourself for more prehistoric creature features that Ray Harryhausen could shake a miniature stick at. The first of these to jump on the bandwagon is **Mammoth**, but is it a hip and knowing reworking of the tired subject matter, or a story not even the 50s B-Movie makers would have touched with a cave-man's spear?

The setting for our little romp is initially a Pleistocene museum – no, not the kind you used to play with as a kid and mould into any shape... This one houses relics from Earth's past, including the skeletons of mammoths. But, as a couple of curious scouts discover, the museum is also home to a partially frozen 40,000-year-old mammoth which the curator, Dr Frank Abernathy (erstwhile Invisible Man Ventresca), is conducting experiments on. He goes too far, though, when he extracts a tiny capsule embedded in the beast and triggers a pulse signal. Cut to outer space, where a probe is dispatched from a flying saucer (in a thinly disguised 'homage' to **The Thing**). This crash lands in the museum, spilling an alien goo that melts the ice and brings the mammoth back as monster that sucks the life out of its victims by using its trunk. Yes, really.

It brings the place to the attention of the sheriff – “This is *my* museum,” says Abernathy. “This is *my* town,” replies the bearded man wearing sunglasses. Ultimately, though, they both have to answer to Special Agents Powers (Leila Arcieri from **xXx**) and Whitaker from the NRO, whose jurisdiction is simply ‘The Earth’. They only have 17 hours to take out the threat before their superiors order the entire area to be nuked. Now Abernathy has to try and juggle his work with his home life, and make up for the fact that he's forgotten daughter Jack's (**Serenity's** Summer Glau) birthday. “You're never around,” chides Frank's father (Skerrit from **Alien**), “you're always sticking your head up some elephant's ass!” All the threads come together though, when Jack sneaks off with her boyfriend to a teenage party in the woods that the mammoth gatecrashes, and it's revealed that this isn't the first time aliens have made contact with the town... Everything's gearing up for a finale where they have to try and re-freeze the animal before they all run out of time.

One of the characters in **Mammoth** mentions that this is all very much like **The Blob**, or even **Invasion of the Body Snatchers**, but you'll no doubt be able to spot influences from many other movies. Powers and Whitaker look and act like they've wandered into the film from **Men in Black**, complete with hand-held scanning equipment and futuristic pistols. The guard getting offed in the museum is out and out **The Relic**, while the investigation into the alien invasion smacks very much of **Evolution**. Even a pretty original sequence where an alien-possessed frozen hand is brought to life in a microwave only to tap out the message, “We will kill you all,” relies heavily on a mixture of riffs from **Re-Animator** and **Evil Dead II**.

A film with a plot as ludicrous as this one has to plant its tongue firmly in its cheek to survive, and to its credit this is where one of **Mammoth's** strengths lies. From the groovy meteorite credits, which show a cave painting of stick men chasing and capturing a mammoth, to the epilogue itself, you will certainly find yourself giggling. Some of it won't be intentional, of course... But the cast don't exactly help, with Skerrit and Glau sleepwalking through their parts (the former even admits in an extras featurette that when people ask him about his character, he tells them, “I don't know...”). Arcieri is there to pout and fill out her blouse in an able Angelina Jolie way, while only Ventresca seems to ‘get it’, hamming it up in true Bruce Campbell style.

Ironically, **Mammoth's** major failing is the title creature itself: a badly rendered CGI brute that only barely looks credible in the shadows, let alone in the daylight. You see loads of these kinds of movies on Sky and The Sci-Fi Channel with titles like **Huge Snake!** and **Run from the Giant Ants!**; low budget

movies that have taken advantage of the cut-price CGI packages that you can use on your home computers. Sadly, this looks just like those in places. Jokingly, Ventresca comments that director Tom Cox was only paid \$150 for his services, and you seriously wish that some of his pay-packet had gone on the mammoth. Or, better yet, that the 'big name' headliners had been ditched in favour of ploughing money into a decent and, more importantly, scary monster. Little wonder that there are large chunks where the mammoth doesn't even appear at all.

Mammoth is a film that had so much potential, but fell foul of the Hollywood appetite for half-baked genre material. It's a shame, because there is some real creative talent on display. Final verdict: not so much mammoth as mammiss.

BLAZE

By Stephen King – A Richard Bachman book
Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99



Between 1977 and 1984 author Richard Bachman published five novels before his sudden and unexpected death in 1985 of cancer of the pseudonym. Dicky (as he was known to his friends) was never a major player in the world of literature, he never made the best-sellers list (his final novel *Thinner* sold around 28,000 copies) but during his brief seven year career he managed to build up a sturdy and somewhat faithful cult following, before being 'outed' as best-selling novelist Stephen King by a Washington book clerk and writer, Steve Brown. Rather tellingly after that *Thinner* went on to sell over 280,000 copies! Who said you should never judge a book by it's cover... or author?!

Written in late 1972 – early 1973 during his 'Bachman' writing era King soon lost confidence in the novel *Blaze*, considering it to be "crap" and, although it was briefly considered as a follow up to his debut novel *Carrie* (it would lose out to the vampire infested book *Second Coming*, soon to be re-titled as '*Salem's Lot*') he abandoned it without showing it to a single publisher. Instead it languished for thirty-four years as an infamous 'trunk' novel, packed away in a cardboard box, pushed into the corner of a cupboard before being dusted off in 2006, extensively revised and rewritten and released as Bachman's (until now undiscovered) seventh, and final, novel.

Blaze, like Bachman's 1981 novel *Roadwork*, is an attempt at what King himself calls a "serious novel"; all supernatural, horror or Sci-Fi elements ejected in favour of gritty realism and bare-bones storytelling. Clayton (Blaze) Blaisdell Jr, thrown down the stairs by an abusive alcoholic father when he was only six years old, stumbles through life as a semi-retarded giant, friendless save for the weasely, manipulative con-artist George Rackley. As the novel opens George is dead and the clueless Blaze finds himself alone once again; frightened and confused, yet resolutely determined to put George's final plan into action – kidnapping a baby and ransoming it back to it's rich parents for a million dollars. Things start to get a bit complicated however when Blaze finds himself unexpectedly falling in love with the little ankle-snapper and gradually becomes reluctant about giving him back.

There is no doubting that this is classic King at his yarn-spinning best. Following hot on the heels of the wonderfully apocalyptic *Cell* and the poignantly touching *Lisey's Story*, *Blaze* is a ruthless and unflinching study of child abuse, mental cruelty and social ignorance in small town America. Original conceived as a follow up to his novel *The Colorado Kid* for **Hard Case Crime** publishers its flat, disconnected tones brilliantly hark back to the pulpy noir fiction of the 1950s creating a stark, unrelenting tale of pain, rejection and, ultimately, crime. Rewritten by King at a furious pace the narrative rattles along at breakneck speed hardly giving the reader time to catch their collective breaths, and although it lacks some of the warmth and familiarity often associated with the author's longer novels (at a mere 291 pages little time is given for any real in depth character development) *Blaze* still fails to disappoint and contains everything we've come to expect and love from a Stephen King novel. It's just a pity that we've had to wait thirty-four years for this little gem to finally hit our local book shops!

Interestingly, all proceeds from *Blaze* go to The Haven Foundation, an organization specially created to help down on their luck freelance writers, so if you buy this book not only will you be getting a thumping good read but you'll also be doing your bit for the odd struggling artiste! Now, doesn't that give you a lovely warm glow inside!

Coming Next Week: Fiction: *New Skin for the Old Ceremony* by David Tallerman

If you have enjoyed this week's issue, please consider throwing some of your hard-earned shekles at us. We pay our writers, and your support is appreciated.