

Hub

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Editors: Lee Harris and Alasdair Stuart.
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A Confession from one of our editors

My name is Lee Harris, and I am a DVD-aholic.

It is clear from my lifestyle (I have a young family, I run a weekly genre magazine, I'm soon to be the editor for another bi-monthly title, and I'm a regular reviewer for one of the UK's premier genre magazines) that I have time to watch exactly 2 x 45-minute programmes every week – and one of those is currently airing on terrestrial TV

Why, then, of why have I just bought/ordered:

Heroes season 1	Dexter season 1
Babylon 5 season 1	Stargate SG1 season 1
Scrubs season 4	Beasts (Nigel Kneale)
2 x daft Hollywood comedy-type things	The Pursuit of Happiness
RENT	The first two Bourne Films
Buffy seasons 2, 4, 6 (to replace my old videos and (re)complete my collection)	

There's no chance that I'll get around to watching most of these this year (or perhaps even next!)
There's a very good chance that I'll be buying more before the month is out.
Still - the first part of dealing with a problem is the acknowledgement...

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.

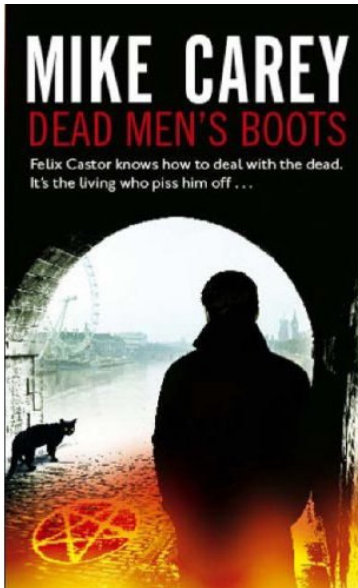


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Takes a Lot of Hate

by Mike Carey
with an introduction by the author.



*In the third Castor novel, *Dead Men's Boots* (Orbit, released 6 Sept 2007), Felix Castor, the exorcist hero of the series, finds himself investigating a murder. Not exactly business as usual for an exorcist, you might think, but the killer in this case seems to have been a woman who is herself already dead – Myriam Kale, “the hot tomato”, an American gangster’s moll who is variously described as either a psychopathic serial slayer or the most ruthless and efficient of contract killers.*

Castor gets involved when someone else is arrested for a murder that Kale’s vengeful ghost may have carried out – an appallingly brutal torture-killing in a sleazy hotel somewhere off behind King’s Cross station.

In the novel as published, there are no witnesses to the crime but there are two men – Christopher Merrill and Joseph Onugeta, the hotel’s desk clerk and cleaner – who were on the scene very shortly afterwards. Castor interviews them both in the early chapters, and gets a number of small but ultimately significant leads from what they say. In the first draft, though, he takes a lot longer to run Onugeta to ground, eventually tricking his address out of Merrill and visiting him at home.

I like this scene a lot because it makes the point that there’s more than one kind of fallout from any act of violence, and a lot more than one victim. It seemed to add to the gathering mood of threat and unease I was trying to generate as we started to build towards the climax.

*Numbers are numbers, however, and life is tough. We were looking to bring *Dead Men's Boots* in at roughly the same length as *Vicious Circle*, rather than allowing each novel to be longer than the one before it and eventually ending up in J.K.Rowlings territory (only without the encumbering wealth and embarrassing adulation).*

But in the internet age, nothing is ever lost. Here’s the missing chapter, lovingly and painstakingly restored by the expedient of dragging and dropping from the Windows waste bin to a folder marked Hub...

“Is there any chance you could let me have Mister Onugeta’s home address?” I asked Merrill.

He shook his head again, more emphatically. I wasn’t expecting anything else, since I had no business asking for that kind of information and he had even less business giving it out.

“Okay,” I said. “Well could you call him and ask him if he’s coming in tomorrow.”

The desk clerk quirked his upper lip in a barely perceptible sneer. “How is he going to know tonight if he’s going to be well enough to work tomorrow?”

“Please,” I pressed. “I really need to talk to him. Maybe he’ll let you put me on the phone, and then I can get what I need without bothering either of you again.”

“It doesn’t bother me,” Merrill said equably. “Stop by any time you’re passing.”

I fished a twenty pound note out of my pocket. He looked at it, sighing deeply as though the offered bribe wounded him beyond healing. He took the twenty, then he reached under the desk, rummaged around for a moment or two, and came up with a grey plastic card index box.

There was room for a couple of hundred cards in the box, but it was less than a quarter full. It didn’t take Merrill more than a moment to find the card he needed and fish it out. Holding the card close to his chest so I couldn’t peek, he hooked the receiver off the phone and dialed one-handed.

I waited patiently.

“It’s ringing,” Merrill said, “but nobody’s picking up.” After a few moments, he muttered, “Which is kind of funny, if he’s too sick to get out of bed.”

“Maybe the phone is in a different room,” I suggested blandly.

Merrill stared at me with cold dislike. “Maybe,” he allowed.

He waited a while longer, then put the phone down again and slid the card back into its place in the box. “He’s not answering,” he said. “Sorry.” He shrugged with massive indifference. “I tried.”

“I know,” I said. “I know you tried. But I’d hate to feel you’d left any stone unturned. Could you try again?”

“Could you come up with another twenty?” Merrill counter-offered.

Well, fuck this, I thought. Time was wasting and I had other places to be. I delved deeply into my trouser pocket, swivelling from the shoulder as though I was probing every last corner of the fabric. By an unhappy accident, that brought my elbow into contact with the card index box, which was still sitting on the counter top. I caught the edge of the box with enough force so that it toppled off the counter onto the floor, spilling half its contents across a pleasingly wide area.

“Oh shit,” I said. “I’m sorry. Let me - - ”

I bent to pick up the box, while Merrill sprinted around the counter with unexpected agility to head me off. There was a slightly unseemly scuffle as we both grabbed hold of the box at the same time. I let Merrill win that tug of war, letting go of the box when he was leaning back hard to pull it out of my grasp. He staggered and almost fell, so I was able to squat down and get to the spilled cards before he did: I scooped up most of them in two handfuls, combined them into one and then, straightening again, tapped them on the counter to make them into a neat, regular stack.

I offered them back to Merrill and he took them with a huge amount of resentment and suspicion. He was nearly certain I’d taken Onugeta’s card, so when he’d collected up the few that were still on the floor he checked through the whole pile to make sure that that particular one was still there.

“I don’t have another twenty on me,” I said apologetically. “But I could owe you one...”

“Sorry,” said Merrill, between clenched teeth. “You’ll just have to come back another time.”

I gave a shrug and a pained smile, and left without making any further fuss. I could have palmed the card if I'd wanted to, of course: I did a close-up magic act in my mis-spent youth, so stuff like that isn't even hard. But there's no point letting a guy know you've picked his pocket if you can leave him happy and contented and convinced that his wallet is right where it belongs. I'd just read Onugeta's address backwards in the mirror behind the counter while Merrill was checking that his card was still there. That particular trick doesn't come from my stage magician days, though: it comes from playing poker.

~

Onugeta lived in Stockwell, which was a bit of a trek, but I still had some time before Juliet and Susan were expecting me: more to the point, I still had a burning sense that I was getting nowhere fast both with the Doug Hunter business and with my more personal researches into John Gittings' death. I wouldn't be able to relax tonight if I hadn't at least ticked a few boxes on my things-to-do list.

I found the house easily enough. It was in a pre-war block even more bleak and dilapidated than Ropy Doyle's, with patches of brickwork showing like dark sweatstains through gaps in the buttermilk stucco. I climbed up a flight of stairs that smelled of geological strata of piss. The closed doors had dozens of milk bottles stacked outside them, waiting for a delivery that seemed indefinitely postponed. Some of them also had new-ish copies of the South London Yellow Pages propped up against the lintel, still robed in dusty shrink-wrap. Obviously the unseen occupants felt no urgent need for a directory of local goods and services. Maybe they had their own, private lines of supply.

Number 16, the flat I was aiming for, was on the top floor. It had a door with a central pane of frosted glass running from top to bottom, but someone had tacked up paper or card over the glass on the inside to preserve their privacy. There was also a postcard from Jamaica pinned to the outside of the door frame, which had the look of a homemade ward against the dead. Turning one corner with my thumb, I found some flamboyantly scrawled runic symbols on the back of the card. It wasn't a style I recognised but yeah, it was definitely a stay-not of some kind.

I rang the bell, and since I didn't hear any sound to indicate that it had worked, I knocked as well. Nothing happened for a longish while, so I tried again. This time there was the creak of a floorboard from inside, then after a few moments of silence I heard the unmistakable sound of bolts being pulled and chains being slipped.

The door opened a crack, and an elderly black man peered out at me. I was seeing Onugeta as an East African name, but his skin was the rich, near-violet black of the Orissa Dalits. He had a frizz of ash-grey hair, so tightly curled that it almost looked sheer, which came down to a widow's peak above intense, brown-black eyes with heavy lids. His mouth was set in the dour line of someone who's seen a lot of shit and expects to see a lot more.

"Yeah?" he said. He made the sound way back in his throat, so that it sounded like a sigh.

"I'm sorry to bother you," I said. "I'm looking for Joseph Onugeta."

"He's my son," said the old man, with heavy, ringing emphasis. "You police?"

"No, sir. I'm not."

"You loan him money?"

"Not that either."

"He know you?"

"No."

"Then what?"

“I want to ask him some questions about the Paragon Hotel murder.”

The old man grimaced. “About that thing? He’s sick of that thing. But you’re not police?”

“No. I’m kind of a - - ” I tasted the lie – “private investigator – on my tongue, but at the last moment it got wedged in my throat and wouldn’t come out. “I’m an exorcist.”

The old man’s eyes widened, and he nodded with what looked like approval.

“I’ll tell him,” he said at last. “You wait here.”

He closed the door on me, and I stood idling on the mat for a while, listening to the emotional resonances of the building. There’s background emotion in old stones everywhere: some exorcists reckon it’s the same sort of stuff that ghosts are made of, but nobody really knows. It’s just that those of us who can bind the dead are usually sensitive to this other stuff, too.

This block was full of a stale mix of old insecurities, old fears, old desires. I knew the major harmonics well enough to tune them out. Wherever you go, people are people: what they feel is powerful and varied enough when it’s fresh, but it all fades out to the same grey wash when it’s old.

There were highlights here, though: a strong thread of some kind of keening, wounded sorrow – a mix of unhappiness and fear so intense it was like the growl of an idling car engine. It was coming from close by, but I couldn’t get a directional fix on it. It was unnerving: emotion that strong, in that mix, couldn’t be healthy. But there was nothing I could do about it, even assuming I could pin down the source. Emotion is like water: it finds its level, no matter what barriers you throw up in front of it.

A cat yowled somewhere nearby, startling me out of my train of thought: it was the scary, near-human yowl of protest that precedes a fight, and it was immediately followed by the shrieking spit-storm of the fight itself. The accompanying waves of psychic fury – no less strong because their owners were small, smelly and probably neutered – washed away the emotional stains I’d been reading so intently.

At that moment the door opened again, all the way this time, and the old man beckoned me in. “Joseph will see you,” he said, as though it was my turn with the doctor.

Inside the flat there was a sort of stubby, sawn-off end of an entrance hall barely a yard across, with three doors off it. One gave onto a kitchen, almost the same width as the hall; the second was closed, and could have led anywhere; the third, through which the old man ushered me, took us into the living room.

Joseph Onugeta was watching Coronation Street with the sound turned off, which struck me as being a pretty sound strategy, overall. He gave me a glance so fleeting it had to count as subliminal, then returned his eyes to the screen.

“What can I do for you?” he asked, in a distant tone. The accent was pure Thames estuary. Was it me, or was there a slight slur to the words? Joseph looked a lot like his father, except that he was broader, more solidly built. In fact he had the physique of a fighter. Or maybe it was the hollows under his eyes that made me think in those terms: they were so black, and so wide, he looked as though someone had punched him twice in the face with clinical precision and ram-raider force. His head was shaved, and since he had nothing on but jeans and an open, short-sleeved shirt, the barbed wire tattooed around his upper arms was shown off to good advantage. His right foot was tattooed, too, with a single black line that wound in a broad spiral around his ankle.

He had a shot glass in his hand, and there was a bottle of Bundaberg rum on the floor between his feet. Both were three-quarters empty. Okay, that explained the slur.

“Man come to see you, Joe,” the old man said, as gently as if he was talking to a child.

“Yeah,” Joseph replied. “You told me. You’re the bloke who was asking after me at the whore-house?”

“The Paragon Hotel?” I said. “Yeah, that’d be me.”

He shot me another look. “It isn’t any hotel, mister detective. A hotel is where you go to sleep.”

“I’m not a detective,” I said.

“You sure about that? Maybe you need to look again.” He drained the rum that was in the glass, and poured himself another. It was a laborious, drawn out process because his movements were clumsy and unco-ordinated. When he put the bottle back down on the floor, it almost fell over and spilled. He just about managed to save it by bringing his legs together and trapping it: it was the first sign of animation I’d seen from him, but as soon as the crisis was over his attention went back to Coronation Street. It had to be a DVD, because it was Mike Baldwin’s death scene. Probably he already knew it well enough to do without the words.

“Do you mind if I sit down?” I asked.

“You go ahead and make yourself at home,” Joseph murmured.

There was a chair halfway between him and the TV. I took it.

“You want a glass?” the old man asked, waking up to his duties as host.

“No thanks,” I said, and he left us to it, retiring into the hall and closing the door behind him. He didn’t close it all the way, though, and I could see that he was standing just outside the door, his eye pressed to the crack.

“Joseph,” I said, “I’d really like to know what happened at the Paragon that day. The day of the murder. Would you be okay talking about it?”

He frowned, slowly and ponderously. “I’ve already told you everything I can remember,” he said.

“I’m not the police,” I reminded him. I waited for him to reply to this, but either he didn’t believe me or he didn’t think it merited an answer. “I’m an exorcist. Doug Hunter’s wife hired me, because she thinks her husband is innocent. She thinks somebody else killed Alastair Barnard. The woman. The woman whose voice you heard in the room.”

This time I got a response. At the word “woman”, a tremor went through Joseph Onugeta, which he seemed to still with some difficulty, clenching his free hand into a tight fist.

“Can you tell me anything about her?” I asked. “You didn’t see her go into the room?”

Silently, he shook his head. He picked up a remote from the seat beside him, pointed at the TV. The on-screen image froze. He threw the remote down again, and it bounced away end-over-end.

“Can you remember anything she said?”

Another jerk of the head, which I took to be a negative, but before I could throw another question at him he was speaking, in a tense, urgent monotone. “I hate you,” he muttered. “I fucking hate all of you. If I could kill every rat bastard of you, one after another after another, I’d do it.” It took me a second to realise that he wasn’t talking to me but quoting from memory. His eyes glazed over as he spoke, and the corners of his mouth tugged down. “I want it to fucking hurt you so bad, so bad. I want to see in your eyes how much it hurts. And when you’re dead, I wish I could bring you back and make it hurt some more.”

He fell silent, took another slug of the rum, then waved the glass in an eloquent gesture that slopped some of the spirits over the floor. “Like that. On and on like that. And the one man,

right, the younger one? He was saying you don't mean that, you don't mean that. And the other man was all like where is she? Where is she? Scared. Really scared."

I had to be careful with the next question: careful not to let it sound like an accusation. "You didn't think of going in?" I asked.

Joseph shot me a bitter look. "No," he agreed. "Didn't cross my mind for a moment. You know why, detective inspector? Because I hear worse than that every day. Much worse than that. The I-love-you-I-hate-you-I'll-fuck-you thing is the oldest shit in the book at the Paragon. I kept on walking. None of my business. All I do is change the sheets, and that's nightmare enough for anyone right there.

"But then when we turned the key and looked into that room..." He was staring at nothing, and his face was set hard. "It wasn't any kind of love that did that," he muttered. "Love can turn into a lot of things, but fuck! There wasn't a square inch of him that hadn't been - - " He gave up on that sentence, shaking his head rapidly like a dog trying to get itself dry. "It takes a lot of hate to do that. To keep on hating someone after he's already dead."

He didn't say anything more, and I let the silence stretch for a long time – long enough to feel uncomfortable to me, although Joseph Onugeta didn't seem to notice it. His eyes were on the ground, and they were narrowed to slits. He was trapped in the past, I realised: reliving the day of the murder in his mind, even before I arrived. And seeing that, I saw that the potent mix of unhappiness and fear that I'd been sensing as I waited at the flat's front door had come from this room. They were Joseph's. He was telling Merrill the truth when he said that he was too sick to go to work: he'd just been less than candid about what was making him that way.

"Joseph," I said, although I wanted to stop now and get the hell out into the fresh air. "You didn't see her? You never got a glimpse of her, going into the room or coming out?" It was a question I'd already asked, but given his state of mind it was worth one more throw of the dice. Since he couldn't get away from these memories, maybe if I kept hovering around the edges of them some kind of enlightenment, some kind of clue, would come to me.

"I'll know her if I see her," Joseph said, tapping his glass – now empty again – against his right temple. "Because I saw her in here, afterwards. I've been dreaming about her. She's not a woman, though. Not a real woman. It sounds stupid, but I don't care. I'll say it anyway. She's got a devil face. Long red hair. Tall as a man, strong as a man. And a circle, here, over her eye, like a crater. Like a little bomb hit her and left a crater. Or like someone shot her and the bullet bounced off."

The hairs rose on the nape of my neck as he talked. He was describing Myriam Kale: he'd even got the chickenpox scar. I knew better than to mention her name at this point: working with Gary Coldwood had left me chary enough of police procedures not to pollute the evidence.

So I changed the subject, but not by very much. I was starting to feel a little scummy for walking Joseph through these horrors, even though it was clear that these visions and revisions were what his days chiefly consisted of right now. I wanted to finish what I'd come for and get out of there.

"Joseph," I said, "the desk clerk, Merrill, said something to me that didn't get a mention in the police evidence. He said another man came into the Paragon, a little later than Barnard and Hunter. An old man. By himself. Does that ring any bells with you?"

"Yeah." Joseph nodded, filling his glass again. "I bumped into him, on the corridor. I was coming out of a room, with an armload of sheets and stuff. Next thing I know, I'm going backwards instead of forwards. I hit him and bounced off." He sipped at the rum, swilled it around his teeth and gums. "He wasn't an old man, though. I don't know where Popeye got that idea from. I didn't get a good look at him, but he was solid. Like me. And he walked like - - you know - - like a big strong guy walks. All swaggering. That wasn't any old man."

I'd got what I came for. More than, in fact: I had the beginnings of the case that Jan Hunter was paying me to make. Whether it would be enough to raise a path instead of reasonable doubt in a jury was another thing entirely, though.

I stood up. "Thanks, Joseph," I said. "I really appreciate you talking to me. It's helped me a lot."

Joseph didn't answer. He found the remote again, unfroze the TV image and went back to staring at the silent morality play. Meanwhile his father came back into the room as if on cue, holding the door wide for me as a signal that my audience was over. I stepped back out into the claustrophobic hallway, leaving Joseph staring at Mike Baldwin's last moments with no obvious emotion.

"You see what he's like," the old man said, looking at me with mournful appeal.

"Yeah," I said. "I do."

"He doesn't go into work, he won't get paid."

I took what was left of Jan Hunter's stash out of my back pocket. Two twenties. I gave one to the old man, then after a moment's internal struggle I gave him the other one too.

"He needs to sleep," I said lamely.

"Yeah," said the old man, pocketing the notes, "but if he sleep, he dream. If he dream, he see her. Then he wake up and he punching holes in the walls. Maybe you kill her, mister detective?"

"She's already dead," I pointed out.

"Yeah. But maybe you kill her again?"

"Maybe," I said.

It seemed easier than saying that I didn't really do that stuff any more. And that even if I did, I was starting to wonder whether Myriam Kale might be too big for me.

About the Author

Mike Carey is a prolific writer of comics for DC, Marvel and a number of independents. He currently writes *X-Men*, *Crossing Midnight*, *Ultimate Vision*, *Ultimate Fantastic Four*, and *Faker*, among others. His first Felix Castor book – *The Devil You Know* – is shortlisted for the British Fantasy Award for Best Novel, and his screenplay *Frost Flowers* (starring Holly Hunter) is currently in pre-production. He can be found at www.mikecarey.net.

Dead Men's Boots (from which *Takes a Lot of Hate* is taken) will be reviewed in *Hub* next week. If you can't wait that long, pick up issue 5 of *DeathRay* Magazine (out now) and read all about it, along with an interview with Mike.

REVIEW

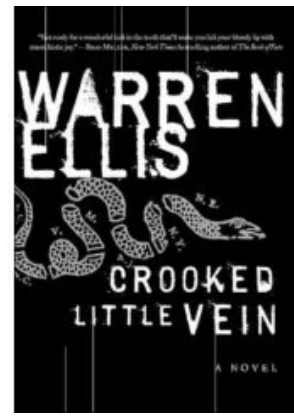
by Alasdair Stuart

CROOKED LITTLE VEIN

By Warren Ellis

Published by Morrow / Avon

\$21.95



One of the most successful writers working in comics today, Warren Ellis' books are defined by their strong sense of social justice, willingness to play with the conventions of the genre and moments of tremendously raw, honest, emotion. His ten volume political science fiction series *Transmetropolitan* is amongst the finest comics published in English in the last twenty five years. Similarly, his contemporary take on *Thunderbirds*-style 'rescue fiction', *Global Frequency* stands head and shoulders above many modern thrillers as an intelligent and original take on the genre. He's a stylistic polyglot, shifting gear from comedy to horror to science fiction to thriller and back again without pausing for breath.

Which is both the greatest strength, and most crippling weakness of his debut novel *Crooked Little Vein*. It follows Mike McGill, an ex-Pinkerton detective who has never been what you could call lucky. If the case is filthy, twisted, depraved or nine times out of ten, all of the above, Mike will catch it. He deals with lunatics, he's a physical wreck and he's losing a war with the rat in his office. Mike is not having a good day. His day isn't improved when the White House Chief of Staff (Who to Mike's disappointment is not Leo from The West Wing but a demented old man who likes doing unspeakable things with monkey bi-products) hires him to find the other Constitution of the United States. The one bound in alien skin.

This is bad, even by Mike's standards. Aided by a polyamorous sex researcher named Trix, Mike dives into the crooked little veins of America, searching for its black and twisted heart. What works in *Crooked Little Vein* are the same things that always work with Ellis; the main character. Mike is a splendidly down at heel, perpetually horrified innocent abroad in a world which cheerfully disgusts him more with every passing day. He's an oddly endearing figure, a man gentle enough to be horrified and hard enough to try and push back against what he's seeing. He has the same rage that many of Ellis' other heroes, ranging from Spider Jerusalem to Richard Fell, have at the world but he's a rabbit caught in headlights, unable to turn away. His relationship with Trix only brings this to the fore. Ellis writes banter like very few authors can and the easy, back and forth between the two is completely natural and often very sweet. Unfortunately, especially for an author who normally excels at female characters, Trix fares a little worse. Using her polyamory as much as a means to punish Mike as to try and educate him, she sails suspiciously close to stereotype, a hard as nails Goth girl with a heart of gold and a kinky streak a mile wide.

However, it gets far, far worse from there. The people Mike and Trix meet along the way never rise above the stereotype, from the gay bodybuilding cop who invites them to a very unusual party to an incredibly thinly veiled Bush family analogue. Where each one should have been well rounded and defined, each instead is a more hysterical caricature than the next, a blood and fluid soaked pantomime that instead of emphasising the central conflict of the book only trivialises it. This isn't helped by the fact that Ellis wheels out the 'old, mad, powerful, scared of women' villain type not once but twice in the novel, with the White House Chief of Staff arguably the biggest offender in the novel. There's a moment early on where he delivers a line of dialogue so terrible that it takes a conscious effort of will to get past it. It's worth that effort, but the novel spends a lot of time recovering from that moment.

Crooked Little Vein has moments of brilliance. Mike's conversation with a serial killer high above Nevada, the most unsettling Godzilla movie you'll ever see and an oddly poignant interlude about a pirate radio station are all amongst Ellis' best work. However, he can never maintain the tone, at times almost seeming self-conscious about working in prose for the first time. No easy shot is left untaken, no cheap gag is left unused and the end result is just that; a cheapening of what could have been a fantastic novel.

Warren Ellis has a huge future in prose but unfortunately *Crooked Little Vein* never quite works. Dedicated fans, odds are, will love it. Everyone else may find themselves less than impressed.

Coming Next Week:

Fiction: *The Mechanism* by **Ian Johnson**

Interview: Shaun Hutson

Along with the latest fantasy DVD reviews, and a feature on the graphic novels of 2000AD.

If you have enjoyed this week's issue, please consider making a small donation at **www.hub-mag.co.uk**. We pay our writers, and your support is appreciated.